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**Essay Title:**

Shop Girl: How does one protect their spirit within the confines of consumer capitalism?

## **Notes of a Shop Girl I:**

### **Does the Shop Girl dream?**

When the shop is closed and the lights are off and the Shop Girl is asleep in her bed, what does she dream of?

When the shop is closed does the Shop Girl dream her dreams of freedom?

Do her dreams consist of another work day? No freedom from capitalism in those dreams. Not when she is serving the same customers who exist in her daytime.

What does the shop dream of when the Shop Girl is not there to fill its space?

Can one exist without the other? The shop needs the girl as the girl needs the shop.

No girl without shop/no shop without girl/girl shop/Shop Girl.

Does the Shop Girl dream when the shop doors are open, when there is no whisper of a customer and the rain is pouring? Music plays as she stares out to freedom.

Eyes glazed, muscle memory dictating her every move.

Does she hold back the tears from a hypothetical fight? Perhaps the echo of last night's argument? Abject feelings safely contained under a cheery smile.

To serve a customer is to burst that bubble.

And as the bubble bursts she is suddenly brought back into the shop. To sell another item, another "that will be \$120 please. Thank you, enjoy your items. Have a lovely day." She takes the money. She earns her money. She spends her money. But her dreams will always be free.

A customer fawns over a jumper. "\$300 is just too expensive, hun."

"Yes but dreams are free, right?"

Wrong. Not funny. Maybe an insult. The Shop Girl shrugs her shoulders, she doesn't make the rules, she isn't paid enough to care. She turns around and is back in her carefully constructed daydream. In here she knows her dreams will always be free.

## Introduction

Work in retail has been described as “emotionally draining work that is undervalued, underpaid and brought up in public discourse very little.”<sup>1</sup> The Shop Girl is the girl behind the counter. The girl “...whose wares shall be always tempting, whose manners shall be always charming, and who shall...stand all the day willing to do the bidding of the hundred-and-one customers which fate may bring her.”<sup>2</sup> I have been the Shop Girl most of my adult life, by now experienced in this “malleable and fluid”<sup>3</sup> identity.

“The Shop Girl exists to serve you, she will listen to your needs but when she offers you your prescription, you do not quite trust it is the right one.”<sup>4</sup> I have been well trained in serving the customer, making sure they feel as though they are the only one in the shop. The customer will only ever know me - a limited, truncated, temporary me - within the confines of the shop. The Shop Girl only exists in this space; alive within the opening hours and disappearing after the cash is counted. She is discarded by the customer when they no longer need her. The customer thinks they know the Shop Girl like the Shop Girl knows the customer, but they never will. At some point a line of distinction is drawn between the Shop Girl and who (or what) she protects. Her identity shifts and her performance is dropped as it is no longer needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, “Introduction.”

<sup>2</sup> Belloc, “The Shop Girl,” 12.

<sup>3</sup> Respini, *Cindy Sherman*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, “Shop Girl.”

This leads to my research question: how does one protect their spirit within the confines of consumer capitalism? I will explore this question through discussing how my performance of the Shop Girl can be protective and how my artistic practice aids this protection too.

I begin by discussing the concept of autotheory and its development in feminist writing. I write this essay from the first-person perspective - my perspective. I write about my own experiences working as a Shop Girl and my art practice to create my narrative.

Next, I discuss gender as a performance (as outlined in Judith Butler's essay on the same topic), how this influences me and my performance as the Shop Girl and in other aspects of my life, and how this performance is protective. I also discuss the apotropaic influences of both the performance of the Shop Girl and of my creative process.

I then look at the idea of capitalism as both a mental and a physical constraint, how we as a society are bound to and by capitalism, and how one (I) might find some sense of freedom from it. Throughout the essay I take note from experiences as a worker within a feminine body. I discuss how the idealisations of capitalism force us to work all the time and how these idealisations encourage the idea that there is nothing better than "working" to serve someone before yourself.

Finally, I discuss how the carnivalesque aligns with my artmaking process using Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas to analyse my relationship with the Shop Girl. I also discuss Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject in relation to myself, the Shop Girl and my art. This leads into my conclusion and a reassessment of my relationship with the Shop Girl.

## Part One: Autotheory

In his essay “Becoming Autotheory”, Ralph Clare quotes author Chris Kraus’ statement that our experiences are what make our “...body embody...”<sup>5</sup> and that these experiences with emotions and feelings “...are immaterial, messy, and liable to shift from moment to moment - their reality is not stable - but they are intensely experienced...”<sup>6</sup> The Shop Girl’s experience is not unique, but my experience as the Shop Girl is. I have experienced each moment within my body from my perspective and it is through the relatively new approach of autotheory that I discuss this experience.

Autotheory enables the author to bring themselves into the text in order to get closer to their subject. It is a theory based on lived experiences, the idea “...that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.”<sup>7</sup> It is a style of theoretical writing that has picked up traction through the works of Chris Kraus and Maggie Nelson. Autotheory enables the first person, *I*, creating a space that personalises theory, giving the reader the chance to relate to more than theory’s “...disembodied brain, a neutral voice.”<sup>8</sup> The example of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* appears in Robyn Weigman’s essay, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory”. Weigman says, “...*The Argonauts* stages autotheory as an

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<sup>5</sup> Clare, “Becoming Autotheory,” 94.

<sup>6</sup> Clare, 94.

<sup>7</sup> Wiegman, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory”, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Zwartjes, “Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies.”

encounter between first person narration and theory as an established contemporary academic thought.”<sup>9</sup> This is also seen in the writing of Luce Irigaray, often written from the first person perspective, inviting the reader “...to more fully assume her/his...perspective...to participate more fully in the process of the constitution of the sense of human existence.”<sup>10</sup> Irigaray was not, initially, associated with autotheory, but as Lauren Fournier observed, theorising from first person is an established aspect of feminist writing<sup>11</sup>. Irigaray’s work features phenomenology: the study of “structures of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view.”<sup>12</sup> First-person point of view, phenomenology and autotheory bring me to a place where I can write about my experiences of being a Shop Girl. It legitimises my experiences and allows me to contextualise them through a theoretical frame. By doing this I can also work through some of the damages I have sustained through being the Shop Girl.

Autotheory can enable people who have not had the privilege of higher education to engage with theoretical concepts. It helps to bring these concepts out of the academic sphere (and an academic style) which can be difficult to both read and relate to. An 18-year-old girl from 2021 working at minimum wage is arguably unlikely to relate easily to the writing of a well-resourced middle-aged man writing literary theory. She is more likely to want to read about those who have had similar experiences to her, to know she is not alone in her current life stage. As Virpi Lehtinen notes, Irigaray observed that the

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<sup>9</sup> Wiegman, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory”, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Lehtinen, *Luce Irigaray’s Phenomenology of Feminine Being*, Preface ix.

<sup>11</sup> Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Self Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice,” 644.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, “Phenomenology.”

female perspective has not always been a part of “...philosophical investigations of the sense of being...”<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, the lives of women, the phenomenology of feminine being, have not been taken seriously and less well explored. It has also been observed by (Ralph) Clare that “...a de-academicized, personalized use of theory is often antithetical or incomprehensible to the male theorist whose intellectual cynicism can lead to isolation and mistrust...”<sup>14</sup>. This brings autotheory into an intersectional feminist realm, creating a space in which women and gender-diverse people are able to write on their lived experiences, including experiences of trauma and grief. Fournier writes that these experiences are able to connect to “...political, social and structural issues of concern to feminists, including the delegitimization of women’s pain...”<sup>15</sup> Fournier uses the example of feminist memes as a format that brings theory outside of the academic institution while also using humour as a way to cope with some of these traumatic events.

Academic critical theory can be alienating, mostly in its use of vocabulary and syntax. I sometimes feel that I am not the intended reader of the text - or rather the author when writing did not have someone like me in mind. More frustratingly, when it is on a subject I am interested in and want to read more about, the academic style makes it nearly impossible for me to comprehend the writing. It should be more accessible but unless you have studied in that particular field then accessibility is limited. Even if the Shop Girl

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<sup>13</sup> Lehtinen, *Luce Irigaray’s Phenomenology of Feminine Being*, Preface ix.

<sup>14</sup> Clare, “Becoming Autotheory,” 96.

<sup>15</sup> Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Self Theory...” 648-649

can relate her experience to a text, it remains inaccessible to her if it is written in a way that makes her not the intended audience. This alienation is something the Shop Girl is all too familiar with. She experiences alienation from her customers regularly. Knowing them so well, knowing the clothes they like, the colours, the fit, the style, whether this person is a regular or a new customer. But the customer will never know the Shop Girl that well; there is a disconnect between the two.

Financial and class differences enhance this alienation. I have seen customers not bat an eyelid at spending \$500 on clothes every weekend, whereas that constitutes my whole weekly pay (when I work full time) and two weeks' worth of rent. An article in a 19th century magazine, *The Idler*, included this: "... the Shop Girl was a type that embodied the liminal position of the independent modern woman and servant to the middle and upper classes."<sup>16</sup> It would seem that since 1894, when that article was written, the narrative has not changed. Both the servant and the Shop Girl, though earning money and nominally independent, have a liminal existence, a life on the margins. It might not be possible to move forward in life because one's wage does not allow it, and so the Shop Girl is stuck as a Shop Girl, neither able nor allowed to exist in spheres different to that of the wage slave.

The experience of the Shop Girl involves putting on a smiling happy facade for the customers, feeling trapped, knowing that she may never earn a living any other way -

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<sup>16</sup> Belloc, "The Shop Girl," 10.

fear of not working a “real job”. It can be a tedious, boring job - speaking from the same script every day, bouts of limited human interaction. However, the Shop Girl’s experiences are important. Arianne Zwartjes writes in her essay on autotheory that there is “...political power...in electing to show the...mundane details of a life, in conjunction with the thinking...”<sup>17</sup>. The Shop Girl’s “mundane” work is what builds up the consumer society we live in: everyone wears clothes, all of the shops within a mall have someone, a real physical person (not artificial intelligence<sup>18</sup>) in her real job, selling those items. Someone has to sell you your Lululemon puffer jacket or something as mundane but necessary as laundry detergent, so why not the Shop Girl?

“Autotheory steps in and intentionally contaminates all that theoretical purity with the messy, the wet, the dank of the hidden: of sex and of body.”<sup>19</sup> There is not much purity in the Shop Girl’s experience. There is frequent breaking down of personal boundaries from her customers both physically and mentally. The customer assumes that the Shop Girl is mother, therapist, and close friend when she is none of those things - as Johnson puts it, the “bind of simultaneous emotional investment and disassociation,”<sup>20</sup>.

The free emotional labour that the Shop Girl does for her customers is exhausting, although over time the Shop Girl becomes less affected by some of the more distressing “trauma dumps” that customers burden her with. It is worth “...exploring the

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<sup>17</sup> Zwartjes, “Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies.”

<sup>18</sup> Although it is becoming more common online with customer service “chatbots.”

<sup>19</sup> Zwartjes, “Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies.”

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, “Introduction.”

way in which trauma becomes “lodged” in the brain and in the body over the long term.”

<sup>21</sup>The Shop Girl learns exactly when to time her sympathetic smiles, becoming a, “...a smiling shell,”<sup>22</sup> not really listening to the customer at all. Often I have to protect myself by mentally removing myself and going into a daydream while the customer goes on their rant; otherwise it is too upsetting, frustrating, or boring. I am never allowed to communicate my own trauma back; there is no shared counselling between the Shop Girl and the customer. Generally, the customer does not care about the Shop Girl, who is treated as merely a sounding board. The Shop Girl may only smile through it all, offering an occasional word of sympathy, listening and sometimes even absorbing the customer’s pain as if it was her own, then trying to forget it as soon as she steps out of the threshold of the shop. A recent example of this was at work post-lockdown when a customer, who told me she was a dentist, asked if it was weird being back in the shop. I told her I was surprised at how normal it was. I soon came to realise that she did not ask the question out of any interest in my answer but as a springboard for a disturbing, racist and fat-phobic rant about how disgusting anti-vaxxers are.

The Shop Girl is exposed to both the trauma experienced by customers and the trauma of an unpleasant customer. Granted, not *all* of these are traumatic experiences for the Shop Girl. Sometimes the trauma exists in remembering while in the shop, a bad experience that happened outside the shop. Sometimes it is experiences that do not feel immediately traumatic but over time become “lodged”<sup>23</sup> in the brain. Once I was

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<sup>21</sup> Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Self Theory...” 650.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, “Shop Girl.”

<sup>23</sup> Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Self Theory...” 650.

servicing a Russian woman who was strikingly similar in appearance and attitude to a toxic boss from a previous job. I had not realised the negative impact that previous job and its owner had had on me until hearing her Russian accent and impatient tone. I passed her over to my co-worker and hid out the back until she left. Another time I was cornered inside a changing room by a customer going into great detail about her dying mother. I did not ask this woman to dump her trauma onto me, giving me information that forced me to think about my own mother's mortality while at work. But the nature of the Shop Girl's role means that often, customers, including this one, imagine that I was asking her to do exactly that. More likely, such customers simply do not care at all: they need to vent, and if that means dumping on a young woman earning minimum wage, so be it.

These experiences are not limited to the Shop Girl in her shop. Most women have experiences like this. The question then to be asked is: "...how can autotheory lay claim to a practical, everyday usefulness of theory, including in the most private and domestic of arrangements and intersubjective moments."<sup>24</sup> The experience of the Shop Girl is both public and private. She is a public figure and once she leaves the shop for the day her position becomes private all the while dealing with these "traumas". Do the traumatic moments the Shop Girl experiences with customers remain in the shop when she leaves for the day? Does she take them with her? Once she has retired from her

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<sup>24</sup> Clare, "Becoming Autotheory," 99.

performance and the makeup is off, what does the Shop Girl do? This is the experience of the Shop Girl.

But it is not all bad, ugly, emotionally deforming. Some experiences with customers and co-workers are fun. More so between co-workers: sharing retail-related memes, usually making fun of customers, sharing stories. This is part of the Shop Girl's therapy: talking about customers with her co-workers; making fun of customers and laughing behind their backs; sharing horror stories; a knowing glance at each other in the presence of a rude customer. There is a bond between all customer service staff. Our experience, while unique to each of us, is a shared one and there is power in that. It is a well-known battle between the shop assistant and the customer. We hate them as much as we need them, and there is humour in that. Maybe humour is the best protection from them - it is our in-joke, and it unites us against the customer. As Judith Butler writes in her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory",

"Indeed, the feminist impulse...has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 522.

There is safety and understanding in recognising that the Shop Girl's experience is not her's alone. Recognising this is a way one can protect oneself under consumer capitalism.

## **Part Two: Gender Performance**

In her essay: “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution...” Judith Butler suggests that gender is performance, and that often, this performance involving gender-enforcing acts is not realised. Sarah Manley breaks this down further in her summary of Butler’s essay by writing that we are commonly unaware of our beliefs in gender and that we see it, “...as natural, and forget that it is naturalised through performative acts.”<sup>26</sup> The Shop Girl is a mask of carefully constructed expectations from the society her wearer is in. She is performing for the customer, for the shop owner, for her pay cheque. Once she understands this is a performance, maybe she will find freedom. Maybe she has already found freedom and knows that her performance is protective.

While my performance of femininity grew stronger as I got older, even as an adult I do not feel obliged to perform it; but I *have* been performing it, according to Butler - whether aware of it or not. Butler claims, “we are under duress to give the gendered performance expected from us.”<sup>27</sup> It is as the Shop Girl that I experience this duress. I see the same duress in middle-aged women who seem anxious to be perceived as women, as if something terrible will happen to them if they are not immediately recognised as female.

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<sup>26</sup> Em, “A Succinct Summary of Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.”

<sup>27</sup> Em, “A Succinct Summary...”

I question the construct of gender. Butler suggests that “..gender is not a fact...”<sup>28</sup>, reminding us that gender is a social construct that keeps people penned into their places. I question the Shop Girl’s gender and believe she can be all gender inclusive; there could be a Shop Boy or a Shop They. Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* is an example of a gendered title but not a gendered concept,

“...the Young-Girl is obviously not a gendered concept...The resplendent corporate advertising retiree...is no less a Young-Girl than the urban single woman too obsessed with her consulting career to notice she's lost fifteen years of her life to it...In reality, the Young-Girl is simply the model citizen as redefined by consumer society since World War I, in explicit response to the revolutionary menace. As such, the Young-Girl is a polar figure, orienting, rather than dominating, outcomes.”<sup>29</sup>

I believe this excerpt reads true for the Shop Girl too. She stands for the idea of the retail worker who is always working, on their feet all day, behind counters everywhere. A gender-inclusive or even neutral title seems more necessary. “Retail Assistant” is depersonalising corporate speak. It is a translation of “shop” and “helper” into “help” into “servant”: The Shop Servant. Retail Assistant is nameless, identity-less, another brick in the wall. What makes “Shop Girl” work so well for me is that people who have

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” 522.

<sup>29</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, 14-15.

had this experience immediately understand me when I say it. The Shop Girl is outside the capitalist corporate identity.

I write from my experiences as a Shop Girl working in a clothing shop, historically something that has been female dominated. My experience is through working and presenting as the female gender, where I have had to consider the "...stylization of the body...bodily gestures, movements, and enactments..."<sup>30</sup> I am keeping it within the feminine as my experiences working in retail have been gendered ones - working as a woman in a women's clothing shop with an all-female staff. This is not demanding a feminine identity from the idea of the Shop Girl, it has just been my experience performing her.

My time as a Shop Girl has encompassed an all-female gender performance, one where I have to create "...the illusion of an abiding gendered self."<sup>31</sup> I try not to take up too much space, my voice is soft and never too loud, I strive not to be blunt - or sharp - in my responses, both verbal and gestural. This part of the performance I find exhausting. There is so much hard work the Shop Girl must do not to offend a customer. I must dress "nicely" and have on just enough makeup to reinforce an ideal of femininity (too much makeup and then I look inappropriate, "this is a clothes shop not a nightclub"). The Shop Girl must epitomise the safest example of a woman there can be, charming yet docile, and comforting when called to action. I perform more when I am

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<sup>30</sup> Butler, 519.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, 519.

the Shop Girl because it makes my job easier and more enjoyable if I choose not to fight it. That said, I have never really felt the urge to fight it. I do not think I feel this obligation to perform my gender outside of the Shop Girl but I am likely still performing whether I am aware of it or not. Every morning I rise and I put on my gender like I put on my clothes, never giving it much thought. As Butler puts it "...the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all."<sup>32</sup> It is these acts, this performance of gender that also makes up the Shop Girl's performance.

But who decides on what femininity is? Butler says, "discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."<sup>33</sup> I see how uncomfortable some men get within the confines of the female clothing shop. My place of work where I am the Shop Girl is a gendered space. Some men – perhaps most men – may feel they are interlopers in this space reserved for women. My father says he gets bored, that all he can do is sit or stand around, that he cannot voice an honest opinion if his opinion is even asked for. In the women's clothing shop he feels that he is useless. Most men, perhaps anticipating a similarly disempowering experience, simply wait outside the shop. Yet I have also seen men shopping with their wives, apparently unconcerned about the space they are in, seemingly happy to be able to help and spend time with their partner.

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<sup>32</sup> Butler, 522.

<sup>33</sup> Butler, 522.

Artmaking for me takes place outside of gender. However, it might still be considered feminine in style, in the sense that Irigaray writes about it. She discusses a concept called “feminine style”, recognisable by features that include “...contact, proximity, fluidity, tactility, contiguity, and simultaneity, but still it forms a unity, ... which, in phenomenology of the body, is considered as structurally similar to the lived body.”<sup>34</sup>

While Irigaray is referring to a writing style, I believe this concept can also be applied to my experience with making art. I feel like a “...spiritual-embodied unity...”<sup>35</sup> when I am in the depth of making. When I sculpt my ugly, impractical ceramic pieces, I wonder how both performances can exist in the same place - within the same body: on the one hand, this delicate, carefully curated performance of femininity through the Shop Girl, and on the other my messy, unclean artistic practice. I realise that both can exist in the same space because *I* exist in that space - I am both the Shop Girl and the artist.

The Belgian painter James Ensor, whose work has been of great inspiration to and influence on me, enjoyed putting on a persona and dressing up, “his fascination with his own image and his taste for disguise and changes of identity...”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it is a consequence of capitalism, or even a necessary reconciliation if I am to survive capitalism, that I can manifest different identities/personae/performances. That these manifestations somehow can protect my spirit in an apotropaic way - my spirit being the non-physical part of myself that is present in all of these iterations of me, “..the seat of

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<sup>34</sup> Lehtinen, *Luce Irigaray's Phenomenology of Feminine Being*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Lehtinen, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Tricot, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Skeleton,” 82.

my emotions and character...<sup>37</sup>. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines apotropaic as “designed to avert evil.”<sup>38</sup> Perhaps my art is apotropaic because I am warding off the evil and harmful influence of capitalism. I hate aspects of capitalism, but I still benefit from it – again, both things can exist. Making art is a safe place away from it. My devils (sculptures and paintings) are manifestations of this protection and the physical act of creating is another mode of apotropaic influence. The Shop Girl is apotropaic because she is also protecting me. I am protecting myself by putting on the Shop Girl performance.

I have found that through gender expression - specifically makeup - and through my ceramic art practice, I can take back control of my identity independent of the Shop Girl. I have the same artistic response using makeup that I do in sculpting. This may be another apotropaic influence. Perhaps “...the Artist is home to a soul seeking its deliverance via the flesh and the roles that keep it prisoner.”<sup>39</sup> Jan Verwoert writes that “...cosmology and cosmetics share the same linguistic root”<sup>40</sup>, and that “Mimetic relations enable energy transfers: blue eye shadow boosts your looks with the force of the heavens...”<sup>41</sup> I transfer energy across performances through creative expression. This transfer enables independence and unification back into the same body.

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<sup>37</sup> Oxford Languages on Google, “Spirit.”

<sup>38</sup> Merriam-Webster, “Apotropaic.”

<sup>39</sup> Tricot, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Skeleton,” 82.

<sup>40</sup> Verwoert, “Spellbound.”

<sup>41</sup> Verwoert, “Spellbound.”

The objects I sculpt are the inner workings of my mind laid bare for the viewer to see (in an abstract sense) - not a translation of my thoughts and feelings but a representation, an interpretation, of how my mind works conveyed through the movements of my hands. Donna Haraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto" proposed the question, "why should our bodies end at the skin...?"<sup>42</sup> While Haraway is writing on the subject of integration of technology with humans and cyborgs, I consider the question in terms of art as an extension of myself. Antony Gormley in conversation with Martin Gayford in the book *Shaping the World* adds to my point in saying:

"Clay can become an extension of the flesh in a way that no other material can....  
Allowing a one-to-one relationship between my body and the body of the clay.  
The forms arose naturally from the space between my hands; clay was another way of dealing with the flesh."<sup>43</sup>

Renee Vara describes Tracey Emin's art practice as Emin being the message and "...her medium is herself"<sup>44</sup>. When I sculpt, I let my hands take over my subconscious. I can exist in a space that is outside of gender performance. There is no Shop Girl, there are no expectations, just me and the clay. My spirit, my emotions, myself beyond/outside of the Shop Girl are expressed through my art practice. My art practice helps me work through what the Shop Girl could not protect me from. The soothing act of working with the clay or applying paint to the page allows me to enter into a space

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<sup>42</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 61.

<sup>43</sup> Gormley and Gayford, *Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now*, 111.

<sup>44</sup> Vara, "Chapter 6: Another Dimension," 172.

similar to the daydream space of the Shop Girl. Art creation is my escape from gender performance and furthers my escape from capitalism. Butler recognises Carol Hansich's 1969 essay title, "...the personal is political..."<sup>45</sup> In recognition of this statement I must then consider, if art is therapeutic it is personal and therefore it opens itself to being political. How much of an escape from gender performance can art be? Can we ever really escape a performance when our bodies are part of an "...active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities..."<sup>46</sup>?

In her article "Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space", Chantal Mouffe writes, "...there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art...". She adds "...it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art."<sup>47</sup> I believe that art is political whether the creator intends it to be or not. Art does not exist in a vacuum where only the art and the artist exists. At the very least, the artist is making art in space and time. If the art is experienced by others, then those others bring their own perspective to the art work. Even if the creator has made work they do not view as political, the viewer might; just as some customers bring their emotional baggage to the counter and expect the Shop Girl who is likely unequipped for the task to help them sort through it.

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<sup>45</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 522.

<sup>46</sup> Butler, 521.

<sup>47</sup> Mouffe, "Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space," 11.

When I apply makeup, this is another way of dealing with flesh. Makeup allows women to make themselves “prettier” (as determined by consumer society) for the (predominantly) male gaze, but using makeup is also part of my artistic expression. I find it as therapeutic as sculpting. Is my enjoyment of makeup entirely my own or is it what capitalism wants? Makeup is also a “mask” I wear - in itself, it is a gender performance that sustains capitalist modes of production. Verwoert writes, “To put on make-up is to ask the world to respond to you via your appearance.”<sup>48</sup> We live in an aesthetics-based society that tells women their imperfections are monstrosities. According to an article from the Guardian, the “...global beauty industry was valued at \$511bn...”<sup>49</sup> This multibillion-dollar industry profits from these so-called imperfections: “imperfection become deformities, and efforts to live with one’s disorderly body become delusions”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps my ceramic practice is an argument against this, handling a disorderly medium as a means to challenge my disorderly body. Perhaps my response to makeup is also my way of challenging my disorderly body: by putting on a mask I am hiding my imperfections. One medium allows me to accept these imperfections whereas the other one allows me to hide them. Audrey Lorde wrote on her notion of the Erotic, “...but that strength [the erotic] is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.”<sup>51</sup> Am I merely engaging in a culturally-sanctioned personal beautification project?

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<sup>48</sup> Verwoert, “Spellbound.”

<sup>49</sup> Dacre, “This is Pleasing: Harry Styles sets out to ‘dispel the myth of a binary existence’.”

<sup>50</sup> Caslav, “Amending the Abject Body,” 42.

<sup>51</sup> Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 88.

Perhaps I am responding to my own fear of being perceived as anything other than the Shop Girl. What could I possibly be perceived as if not the Shop Girl? Perhaps the monstrous woman? Does the Shop Girl become the monstrous woman once she is considered too old to work? Becoming the monstrous woman might be the Shop Girl's greatest fear. The monstrous woman is described as a being of strength and power in Joyoti Wylie's Master's thesis. I believe the monstrous woman embodies things that the Shop Girl is not allowed to be, "a woman of strength and power..held in high regard...not timid...the creator, the mother..."<sup>52</sup> The Shop Girl may also embody those qualities, but I see it more that the monstrous woman was once the Shop Girl and after years of refining her craft and dealing with the actions of other people this is what she has turned into. Wylie uses the example of Medusa, who was punished twice: first for her beauty by being raped and secondly when Athena jealousy turned her into a Gorgon<sup>53</sup>. Medusa was not initially evil. She reacted to cruelties she did not deserve—by protecting herself and, as punishment for her self-defence, was turned into a Gorgon. Medusa turned people to stone with her gaze. I also work with a form of stone. Maybe I am closer to the monstrous woman that I had first thought.

The monstrous woman could also represent the Shop Girl's fear of growing old. (Emphasis on "Girl", never a woman, never allowed to be too old, that would give her too much authority.) *The Idler* stated, "...in small shops a girl will be taken on when only fifteen or sixteen...and general providers do not care to engage a young lady before she

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<sup>52</sup> Wylie, "The Monstrous Woman: The Apotropaic in Women's Body-Art," 13.

<sup>53</sup> Wylie, 14.

is twenty or after she is thirty.”<sup>54</sup> In her age she loses her charm, a certain element of innocence that is found in her youth. But also this is capitalism’s power; it places tremendous emphasis on aesthetics in order to get more money from consumers (that multi-billion dollar beauty industry). Under capitalism we are taught that beauty is our number one priority and that women have no beauty in old age.

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<sup>54</sup> Belloc, “The Shop Girl,” 12.

## Notes of a Shop Girl II

Trying to juggle a 4-day work week with full time university work is not easy<sup>55</sup>. Always at work thinking about everything else I could be doing. Wasted energy, inspiration, time. The cold of winter is seeping into the shop, so I close both doors. I look closed from the outside (closed to customers/closed to myself).

But still they come in, pushing the doors that say "Pull". Damaging the property that is not mine but I so carefully look after. One lady comes in declaring how cold it is and that I simply must feel her hands to see how cold she is. Already I am uncomfortable with this exchange. In one swift movement she places the back of her hand to my cheek. She laughs shrilly. I laugh too but I am stunned by the breakdown of the boundary. My personal space is not mine anymore. My cheek stings for the rest of the day not letting go of the coldness of her hand. I am reminded of a time when my mother slapped me across the face after I had pushed her to breaking point as a teenager. The memory sits with me like a stain. My boss says, "Why is it always you who gets these kinds of people? Of course that would happen to you!" It is a joke to her. I try to see the funny side, but I did not ask the woman to touch my face, I did not invite her, I never asked her in.

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<sup>55</sup> Shortly after writing this I went down to working two days a week.

Another uninvited customer remarks on how many nice clothes I must own working at the shop. As she speaks, she reaches out to stroke the cloth of my skirt, gently touching my upper thigh. Another boundary crossed.

This body is not mine. I give it up as soon as I step through the threshold of the shop. I am a walking mannequin. I am the Shop Girl.

And yet.

I have a regular customer who knows my roster and that every Sunday I will be at work, just as a devout Catholic attends Mass. She has known me for over 2 years now. She leaves me with a hug and a kind word. This exchange I am comfortable with. I have given my consent through conduct. We have built up a relationship. I am quite fond of this customer; she is warm and kind. She asks me about myself, and I ask her about herself. I am aware of the power dynamic but in this instance I do not resent it. There is safety in this version of the Shop Girl.

### **Part Three: Capitalist Discussion**

I want to be “successful” on my own terms. I refuse the capitalist notion of continual work expressed by continually “advancing” career “success”. I want to let myself be more open to life's experiences and focus on my passions. I have the time I can put into making my life enjoyable which to me in the long run is more important. I do not want to look back on my twenties and realise that I spent most of it working. Tiqqun’s ... *Theory of the Young-Girl* states, “The Young-Girl lives in the illusion that liberty is found at the end of total submission to market "Advertising." But at the end of servitude there is nothing but old age and death.”<sup>56</sup> I believe the Shop Girl is taught to believe in this submission like the Young-Girl and I agree with what lies at the end of the servitude. I do not want to waste my life solely working only to find death on the other side, having done nothing to better my life in between. I hope that by living my life for life and not for work I will be able to live inside my mind better - less from the outside looking in and therefore better able to use “... bodily experience to gather knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> I know that I get to write this from a place of privilege. I am aware that being able to say I want to be successful on my own terms and by my own definition is a privilege, that even being aware of these systems is a privilege. I do not have siblings that I am working to help raise. I am not my family’s only hope for a better life. But that is what I argue: that this should not be the case for anyone. Everyone should be able to live their life for themselves first and their jobs second.

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<sup>56</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*, 101.

<sup>57</sup> Zwartjes, “Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies.”

I have previously written about the trauma that the Shop Girl may experience. These experiences are of course not all bad and it does not always help to wallow in the self-pity of a retail job. Finding joyous moments can make the job that much more bearable. Yet whenever I have a positive customer interaction, I am still very much aware of the power imbalance. In her essay “Don’t Smile Organise”, Nina Power suggests that we of course may enjoy our work but we should also question what causes this joy. That you get the idea of “...an increase in...power through interaction...”<sup>58</sup> but that power is never yours: “...at the end of the day, your work is not your own, your body is hired out to generate profits for someone else, your smile does not belong to you.”<sup>59</sup> I know my smile does not belong to me, that while I’m performing the Shop Girl it belongs to my boss. I am fully aware of this part of the performance. We are constantly performing because our jobs require us to. Power adds, “The more we are asked to exploit our basic human cognitive functions (language, communication, sociability), the more our bodies come to play a central role in the work we do.”<sup>60</sup> I spend many workdays on auto-pilot, allowing my body to do the work it knows so well while my mind wanders. But when our bodies are exploited, we stop being able to do the things we enjoy because our bodies are being used to make money for someone or something else.

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<sup>58</sup> Power, “Don’t Smile Organise,” 36.

<sup>59</sup> Power, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Power, 32.

Being productive is expected of us under capitalism. Covid-19 has affected the way we view working and work. Being in lockdown means having significantly reduced engagement with people in general. Perhaps being the Shop Girl is not so bad? I would rather be able to talk and engage with customers than be sitting at home by myself trying to find things to do. Of course, lockdown would be much less stressful if I were not studying. The feelings of guilt caused by reduced productivity are hard for me to shake - and yet instead of doing things that will make me feel better like getting on with my work I avoid it, making myself feel worse. How does one manage these feelings? What do I do and who am I if I am neither the Shop Girl nor the artist? I am just me, sitting at home, staring at the walls. The small creative things I can do at home, drawings perhaps, are harder to do when they are not part of my practice. Covid-19 has forced the world to reconsider working. For example, many people can work from home, and so they can retain vital capitalist organising principles - a basic reason to get out of bed and get dressed. But the Shop Girl cannot work from home. Her job relies on interaction with people in a physical space, the shop. When the shop is busy it can be stressful and overwhelming but that is always better than the awful quiet moments. When the shop is quiet it is difficult not to think of all the things I could be accomplishing outside of the shop. The day is then defined by "before work" and "after work" with a huge stretch of nothing in between. This expanse of nothing can be depressing if one allows it to be so - especially in full time retail work, it feels as if your spirit and soul are slowly being crushed. The shop becomes the Shop Girl's whole world, her space, despite her having no ownership over it.

At my work, the shop is our carefully curated space. We, the Shop Girls, are the ones vacuuming, dusting, putting items away, selecting clothes for the shop, delinting jumpers, polishing shoes, dressing mannequins, and so much more. The care that goes into this maintenance is part of what gives agency to the Shop Girl. In her article about the painter Elizabeth Sparhawk Jones for *Panorama*, Elizabeth Carlson notes how in 1909 the writer, Rheta Childe Dorr, went undercover as a Shop Girl to write a report for *Everybody's Magazine*. Carlson says, "Dorr recalls the frustration of folding and tidying the merchandise, only for her neat stack to be disrupted minutes later."<sup>61</sup> It is pleasing to be told that the shop looks good and to have the customer recognise the labour that goes into it achieving that. What is not pleasing is cleaning the shop only to have a customer walk in and trash the changing room and even worse if they do not buy anything, ignore you and leave again. A purchase makes their behaviour almost acceptable, as though they are buying a pass to be rude.

In her early twentieth century paintings of Shop Girls in their element, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones was giving them back agency but only through the canvas.

"Sparhawk-Jones depicts the shop girl and shopper equally and challenges the middle class to identify not only with the consumer but also with the shop girl."<sup>62</sup> Shop Girls of the early twentieth century had limited agency. Part of my experience being a Shop Girl is being able to stand up for myself in the face of difficult customers. I am lucky that my

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<sup>61</sup> Carlson, "The Girl Behind the Counter: Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones and the Modern Shop Girl."

<sup>62</sup> Carlson, "The Girl Behind the Counter: Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones and the Modern Shop Girl."

boss trusts us enough to be able to defend ourselves should conflict arise. This is another way I am able to exercise the limited agency of the Shop Girl. While Sparhawk-Jones' paintings give *some* agency back to the Shop Girl, I question how much agency the Shop Girl actually has. How much agency can we have in a society that is built on making a profit and pleasing the male gaze? Carlson writes about the Shop Girl being on display for the male voyeur in the works of James Tissot and Edgar Degas<sup>63</sup>. "If not sexualizing her, Degas still objectifies and detaches her from the scene. Sparhawk-Jones portrays both the Shop Girl and the consumer as anonymous, bringing them together in an intimate space."<sup>64</sup> Even though I work in an all-female clothing shop I still have to deal with objectification from both female and male customers. I have been grabbed around the waist by a man in front of his wife. Women comment on my weight/body/tattoos/any aspect of my physical appearance as if they have the right, but the Shop Girl just laughs and shrugs her shoulders getting back to the task she was doing. It is not the Shop Girl's place to rise to that. These experiences of the Shop Girl are very much based on the performance that capitalism expects from her.

I thought going into my Masters that I would be able to avoid taking a political standpoint in my work. I thought that I could avoid a critique of capitalism because all I wanted to do was create, and I believed that would be enough, given that part of my practice is using art as therapy and as a means to give myself some solace. But even then, the idea of art as therapy is political. It is a critique of capitalism, not to mention a privilege,

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<sup>63</sup> Carlson, "The Girl Behind the Counter: Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones and the Modern Shop Girl."

<sup>64</sup> Carlson, "The Girl Behind the Counter: Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones and the Modern Shop Girl."

that I use art as a way to better myself, to soothe my spirit and not (or not necessarily) as a means to make money.

In the introduction to *Work Work Work: A Reader on Art and Labour* the editors tell us how “...concepts like ‘creativity’ have become hard currency...companies use creativity to profile themselves and citizens are urged to be a part of ‘creative processes’ that are equated with potential job opportunities.”<sup>65</sup> I find as the Shop Girl I have to perform creativity. Sometimes my creativity is called upon as though it is a gimmick, a trick that I can just pull out of a hat. This feels inauthentic to the artistic side of myself. I enjoy any opportunity to be creative but forcing the creative process for profit does not sit well with me. Monetisation should be an afterthought, a by-product of the creative process but not a cause for it. Mouffe claims some people believe art loses critical power “...because any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralised by capitalism....artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity.”

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I once believed that in order to be a successful artist I needed to make profitable art, that capitalist productivity was important, and that the amount of money I made from my work signified my success as an artist. When I changed this way of thinking and started making art for myself first and foremost, I found that I was making art I was truly happy with. Making art helps me to repair the damage caused to me by the hand of capitalism.

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<sup>65</sup> Widenheim et al., *Work, Work, Work a Reader on Art and Labour*, “Introduction,”

<sup>66</sup> Mouffe, “Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space.” 7.

It also acts as an emotional output. Making art is a therapeutic experience for me, like a subconscious clearing house. Audrey Lorde's notion of the erotic comes to my mind when I talk about my artistic expression. In her essay "The Uses of the Erotic", Lorde defines her concept of the erotic being a "...resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."<sup>67</sup> She believes that a system which "...defines the good in terms of profit..."<sup>68</sup> is likely to be robbing "...our work of its erotic value...life appeal and fulfilment."<sup>69</sup> I believe Lorde's idea of the erotic is similar to my idea that my performance of the Shop Girl is protective of my spirit. Lorde defines the erotic as being female whereas I do not perceive my need to protect my spirit as having any gender - the Shop Girl already performs gender. I do not define my art practice in terms of profit. I make art for myself (and if profit follows then I will take it).

However, we exist and create within a capitalist society, so is our work ever out of its realm? How much agency can the Shop Girl have within the limits of the patriarchy? Tiqqun writes, "The Young-Girl wallows in the limbo of time."<sup>70</sup> As does the Shop Girl: she is constantly replaceable; there will always be another one right around the corner, a consequence of capitalism and its need for constant productivity. Mouffe puts forward the words of Andre Gorz telling us that, "...resistance to this power [capitalism] is...possible."<sup>71</sup> But this resistance may only be possible by recognising "...new practices

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<sup>67</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 87.

<sup>68</sup> Lorde, 88.

<sup>69</sup> Lorde, 89.

<sup>70</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Mouffe, "Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space," 7.

of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture.”<sup>72</sup>

Being trapped in the mental constraints of capitalism can feel hellish. Sometimes the Shop Girl feels she is in Hell (not always the worst place to be) on a busy day and imagines that the slow days are like purgatory. At least in this idea of Hell there are people to interact. On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that Hell is other people in his play *No Exit*. Again, we project, whether intentionally or not, the baggage of our lives onto other people. The Shop Girl receives the baggage of customers' lives creating a space akin to Hell at times. Hell takes the form of a busy customer service job where the Devil is an entitled middle-aged woman. In the particular moment, the Shop Girl takes her mind out of the shop and daydreams about alternate realities/conversations/spaces/anywhere but there. Later, outside the shop, I make art as a way to escape from this Hell. I draw on the image of the Devil because it is an image I enjoy. There is no deeper meaning to it than that. However, I like to think that my Devils protect me, like the Roman Lares.

Sartre suggests eternal torment can be mental torment as much as physical. It is easy to imagine dying, getting up and going to work without realising that it is actually Hell. Maybe at least in Hell the Shop Girl would get a union. During full time work the shop infiltrates my dreams: I know I am falling asleep when I am back at work serving

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<sup>72</sup> Mouffe, 7.

customers again. God does not exist but perhaps Hell does, in emotionally laborious and yet simultaneously boring retail work. I understand the impulse behind Tracey Emin's works like *I Need Art Like I Need God*<sup>73</sup>: "...Emin consciously pursues it with the devotion demanded by religion."<sup>74</sup> Devotion to creating is similar to that of someone who goes to church every weekend or the Shop Girl being at work every Sunday, rain or shine. It is a commitment almost external to oneself. The religious person carries out the rituals of their religion because the rules of their religion require them to do so. The artist creates because their creative impulse requires them to create - capitalism cannot take this away from me, this part of me, of my spirit. Just as it is distressing for the artist who is prevented from creating, it is distressing for the religious person who is prevented from carrying out their rituals. Full time retail work eliminates the artist's ability to practise their art as they would like. The impulse to create remains but is unexpressed, and physical and mental exhaustion create constraints against pursuing expression. That is what makes it so hard when working full time. One *needs* to create to feel emotionally fulfilled, but one's your body and mind cannot because both are too tired. It becomes a juggling act that is hard to balance. Either you work full time and earn money to live or you work less and make more art but are not fully financially supported.

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<sup>73</sup> Emin, "I Need Art Like I Need God."

<sup>74</sup> Vara, "Chapter 6: Another Dimension," 175.

## **Part Four: The Carnavalesque and the Abject**

Andrew Robinson introduces Russian philosopher Mikail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque in his article, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power." Robinson defines the Carnavalesque as "...an alternative social space, characterised by freedom, equality and abundance."<sup>75</sup> My art practice enables an alternative free social space in my mind. Deborah J. Haynes, author of "Bakhtin and the Visual Arts," adds, "Bakhtin focused on the aesthetics of the creative process itself, on the activity of the artist or author who creates."<sup>76</sup> My activity is taking enjoyment out of making grotesque sculptures or paintings. I enjoy depicting devils and demons - illustrations and sculptures that may have scared me as a child. Haynes adds that Bakhtin "...was concerned with how humans give form to their experience: how they perceive...and how they shape that perception into a synthesized whole."<sup>77</sup> My experience informs the art I make.

Bakhtin also had a concept of unfinalizability which Haynes explains: "Unfinalizability has at least two distinct levels: the ways we need others in order to finalize the self; and the ultimate unfinalizability of all things, events and persons."<sup>78</sup> Bakhtin's idea recognises that people may change and that we are not final in this world. The concept of the Shop Girl is certainly not final. She is subject to change and is the Shop Girl one

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<sup>75</sup> Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power."

<sup>76</sup> Haynes, "Bakhtin and the Visual Arts," 293.

<sup>77</sup> Haynes, 203.

<sup>78</sup> Haynes, 300.

day but something else the next. I recognise that I will not always have a need for her protection. Bakhtin also had a notion of polyphony, of multiple voices representing one individual and the idea that as Nasrullah Mambrol writes, “truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by “a single mouth”.<sup>79</sup> This relationship between the author and the voices is similar to my relationship with the Shop Girl. Andrew Robinson in an article for Ceasefire Magazine titled, “In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia,” writes, “The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character.”<sup>80</sup> I am the author but the Shop Girl’s reality is just as valid as mine.

Earlier I asked about finding freedom within the heavily imposed societal structures of capitalism and the patriarchy. A similar idea regarding the carnivalesque is raised in Adam Leary’s essay, “The Single Take of Shite and Time.” Leary, using the words of Terry Eagleton, points out, “... carnival is licensed transgression.”<sup>81</sup> In these enforced structures, whether that be the patriarchy, the state, or your boss enforcing them, you are made to think you are free in order to keep you from protesting. Leary uses the words of Umberto Eco to point out:

“...it [carnival] reinforces the status quo by functioning as a filter of subversive impulses. Eco points out that carnival has historically been used as a means to stifle popular revolt, and suggests that it continues to be so used, inasmuch as

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<sup>79</sup> Mambrol, “Bakhtin’s Impact on Postmodern Sensibility.”

<sup>80</sup> Robinson, “In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia.”

<sup>81</sup> O’Leary, “The Single Take of Shite and Time,” 296.

the mass media operate a 'continuous carnivalization of life' that substitutes pleasure for politics."<sup>82</sup>

Adding to Eco's point I suggest reality television as one example of modern licensed transgression. It is real enough that the viewer can relate but just fantastical enough that it offers an escape.

Robinson on the notion of the carnivalesque and the grotesque writes that the grotesque style, "...transgresses the boundaries between bodily life and the field of art, bringing bodily functions into the field of art."<sup>83</sup> This reminds me of Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject: the idea of a transgression between two fields, specifically the ordered self and the uncontrollable body. Creating is through thought *and* body: think first then create ,or vice versa. Frederik Byrn Køhlert has written on the abject and how it relates to the carnivalesque through the work of Québécois artist Julie Doucet. Her illustrative works are portraits of her grotesque other self. Køhlert draws the reader's attention to the "...sexist implications of Bakhtin's model..."<sup>84</sup> Køhlert does however note that Bakhtin is not the only philosopher who has aligned the masculine with "...the abstract and 'high' and the feminine with the material and 'low'..."<sup>85</sup> I find it interesting how theory in relation to women is so strongly connected to the body. Is this because the female body is considered uncontrollable and that it has the power to grow life and give birth;

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<sup>82</sup> O'Leary, "The Single Take of Shite and Time," 296.

<sup>83</sup> Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power."

<sup>84</sup> Køhlert, "Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet," 21.

<sup>85</sup> Køhlert, 21.

so within one uncontrollable body is yet another uncontrollable body? It is that body that becomes “...a site of political struggle...”<sup>86</sup> This is furthered by the writing of Linda Hults in her book *The Witch as Muse...*, “...women’s bodies are readily interpreted as vehicles of disorder, requiring control by an idealizing aesthetic and by social codes and constant surveillance.”<sup>87</sup> The beauty industry profits from women’s insecurities that the industry itself has created. Køhlert quotes Elizabeth Grosz:

“...transgressive corporeal expression can potentially destabilize ideological codifications of the female body, much like the release of subversive energies associated with historical carnival could produce certain disruptive effects.”<sup>88</sup>

Art brings my mind into my body and vice versa - making me a whole person, not just the Shop Girl. As Robinson puts it, “The golden age is lived, not through inner thought or experience, but by the whole person, in thought and body.”<sup>89</sup> Making art makes me more present in my body. It brings me into myself. As someone who exists quite frequently in my own world, often forgetting where I am or what I’m doing, art helps to ground me. I always know who and where I am when I am making art.

Kristeva’s notion of the abject is that it, “...can be understood as an expulsion of a debased ‘other’ across the boundary of the self...”<sup>90</sup> Abjection in this context is

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<sup>86</sup> Køhlert, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*, 17.

<sup>88</sup> Køhlert, “Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet,” 21.

<sup>89</sup> Robinson, “In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power.”

<sup>90</sup> Køhlert, “Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet,” 22

necessary to "...the formation of the self, and is a process through which the subject can achieve a sense of identity and agency."<sup>91</sup> Making art is the process through which I achieve a sense of identity and agency. I view the Shop Girl as both my protector and my other. Art enters when the margins between us blurs.

I do not consider my art itself to be abject; it is a process that helps me through abject feelings or experiences. Some of my earlier sculptures were representative of abject feelings, but my sculptures for this project are not (or are not intended to be) abject. Some of the Shop Girl's experiences can be related to the abject: for example, the breakdown of personal boundaries both physically and mentally from actions against me by customers and then the feelings that follow. Kristeva writes, "Rarely does a woman tie her desire and her sexual life to that abjection, which, coming to her from the other, anchors her interiorly in the Other."<sup>92</sup> When the Shop Girl has been objectified by customers, by the other, feelings of abjection follow: revulsion at oneself and the objectifier, powerlessness, rage, frustration and confusion; thinking, did that just happen? If I speak up then I could be overreacting. That horrible feeling of being outside your body knowing you cannot kick up a fuss because their behaviour was too subtle to call out but also the shared knowledge that a line has been crossed.

The Shop Girl can easily transgress into the artist's studio, but the artist could not exist within the Shop Girl's shop. The artist would be too much of a threat to the Shop -

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<sup>91</sup> Køhlert, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 54.

unclean, disorderly, spilling filth on the pristine clothes. My preferred media could be considered abject. The clay is an amorphous mass that during each firing process becomes stronger, its boundaries become clearer, "...a feeling you are repeating some primal transformation of the unformed to the formed."<sup>93</sup> Clay forces me outside of my comfort zone - as an example I do not like having dirty hands, I wash my hands frequently throughout the day, the sensation of them being dirty/sweaty/sticky makes me uncomfortable. Yet when my hands are submerged in the clay I can let go, I can let go of my stress, of my anxiety. Lack of access to resources (studio, my tools, materials, the kiln) led me to paint during lockdown and from that I have reconsidered my creative process. I have been reminded that what I get from working with clay I can experience with other media. Making detaches me from the Shop Girl and her experiences - a therapy to process what she is subjected to by capitalism. I come back to myself. I am more present in the moment and feel more inside my own body.

The clay's drying process forces patience, it cannot be fired until it is dry. The kiln burns away any excess, strengthening the piece. The second firing is for the glaze, the surface: formerly a powder, then a liquid, and then painted, dried and melted, to come out again stronger in its final form as glass. I make my effigies and when they burn in the fire they come out stronger. Negativity and excess is burnt away, and only the core identity remains. The firing of the clay in this thousand degree oven burns away those abject feelings and strengthens my resolve.

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<sup>93</sup> Gormley and Gayford, *Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now*, 113.

## **Conclusion:**

Maybe next time you get frustrated with a customer service worker, remember that under that exterior is a person. Someone who is holding up their armour trying to protect their spirit. Get angry with the system that enforces their existence, be angry with the rigid structures that require the Shop Girl.

Over this year I have moved into the role of the artist, which feels less of a performance because it does not feel like an act. I have moved to this role full time and the Shop Girl part-time. I am making art more frequently and working in the shop less. My reliance on the Shop Girl is diminishing and lockdown has almost entirely erased my need for her. The artist will always be needed and will always exist. The Shop Girl will also always exist as long as there are shops to enter but my relationship to her will continue to change. I will always hold a fondness for her. She will always be a part of me, for the rest of my life. She stepped in and protected me from the harshness of bosses and customers on the days that I could not. For that I will always be grateful.

How does one protect their spirit within the confines of consumer capitalism?

You do not at first. No one person can change or fix capitalism but you can find ways to soothe the spirit while in it. Ways to distract, ways to cope, ways to exist under such oppressive structures. If one is benefiting from these structures, they do not at first feel oppressive until examined, and then their full weight becomes apparent and bears

down. Once awake to the crushing weight that is capitalism and how tightly intertwined it is with the patriarchy, it is impossible to ignore. But freedom can be found within, creating a slight reprieve from it all. My spirit is protected by my crafted performance of the Shop Girl. My spirit is repaired by my artistic practice. My perception is not mine or mine alone. The Shop Girl experience is not unique or special. But it is my unique experience, and it is special to me. I find comfort in knowing that there are other people in the workforce who have gone through a similar experience. Who transforms into someone else once the lights are out, the doors are closed and the curtain comes down.

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