Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation

By Cara Judea Alhadeff

It's 1979 and I'm eight years old. My mom and I are buying underwear at SoloServe in Austin, Texas and she's explaining to me her relationship to feminism. Somehow pornography comes up. I distinctly remember her saying: "I don't believe in porn, like I don't believe in Jesus Christ. I know they both are a part of our lives, but I don't need to recognize either of them." This was one of my many childhood introductions to understanding sexuality—both private and public-—as non-hierarchical and knowing that contradiction and difference are inevitable and replete with potential. I learned early on that the way we choose to experience our bodies can provide a framework of intersubjectivity which moves beyond the narrow limits of what we think we know.

"Suddenly I was filled with a turbulence that knocked the wind out of me and inspired me to wild acts...in the depths of the flesh, the attack...An urge shook my body, changed my rhythms, tossed madly in my chest, made time unlivable for me...Who's striking me? Who's attacking me from behind?...Who's changing me into a monster?"

These urgencies from Helene Cixous conjure the fertility of the stranger within. Because the word monster shares its root with the verb, to demonstrate--creating a spectacle establishes a space where we can reflect on our differences and similarities. In my photographs, self-portrait videos, and theoretical practice the grotesque or disarrayed body of the "monster"/the other/the unfamiliar/the immigrant/the socially inappropriate female is intended to rupture predetermined categories of identification.

In his book titled, The Uncanny, Nicholas Royle reminds us that the experience of oneself as a foreign body becomes an uncanny process of being; an otherness within, this monstrosity of one who lives as the nomad in perpetual exile. Similarly, Audre Lorde invokes the imperative for self-investigation and recognition of difference not as opposition, but as fertile grounds for contingent encounters: "I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there." Lorde's urgent call is at the core my work. When we touch that difference, we inhabit the potential of the erotics of the uncanny.

I explore how we experience the other within ourselves as a key to provoke social agency: the creative potential of what Audre Lorde identified as erotic politics. My work investigates participatory citizenship through a conscious integration of the erotic into the everyday.

This erotic politics disrupts and reorients our cultural constructs of pleasure and vulnerability, and ultimately who has power and control over our bodies—setting the groundwork for a feminism that embraces the unfamiliar and its accompanying relational tensions. I am proposing an embodied democracy in which social models are based on recognition of the absolute necessity of difference: an infinite potential of our bodies as

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 1, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1.

autonomous and contingent modes of relation.

I begin to read Helene Cixous's *Coming to Writing* and re-read George Bataille's *L'Histoire de l'Oeil*. My body tells me that their positions converge. I am delighted. Cixous's act of writing mirrors Bataille's characters' abandon(ment) and relation to sexuality. I equally devour both texts simultaneously—knowing that the work/art/love I have always lived-shared is embedded in Cixous and Bataille's provocations. The last time I read Bataille's work, I was 18 and actually living one version of Bataille's lurid tales. Thrust into extreme psycho-sexual relationships on macrobiotic farming communes in Belgium and Tunisia, and then in the South of France with a man who had just been released from a psychiatric hospital.

During that time, I wrote incessantly about the manipulative interpersonal relationships I witnessed and experienced on the communes and farms. That was the first time writing became critical to my survival; when language and the aesthetics of the beyond propelled me into my body.

I hear Homi Bhaba's voice: "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For, above all else, there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement...Being in the 'beyond', then is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also...to be part of revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now". Additionally, Homi Bhabha's concept of the beyond lucidly reflects Nietzsche's incessant and irreducible becoming, a "continual non-arrival" (which I will later discuss).

Cixous also dwells in the beyond: "And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, beside yourself, and you continue getting lost, when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then that's when, where you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenseless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it's in these breathless times that writings traverse you...from the throats of your unknown inhabitant, these are the cries that death and life hurl in their combat".

Returning to the States and to my first year of college, a school renowned for its creative writing program, I found I could no longer write—stifled by the tyranny of reductive language that I found in both academia and popular culture. I began to take color photographs—images that directly mirrored my written language and my commitment to erotic politics.

Then and now, I insist that the fluid relations between art, bodies, daily life, and politics

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 2, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1. are absolutely essential at a time when reactionary, divisive politics dominate our worlds. Through my work, I explore this web of relations as a process of multi-layered storytelling in which ambiguity is not a lack of clarity, but a multiplicity of clarities.

Last November in Berlin I had the opportunity to engage with Kristeva at the Kristeva conference titled, "*La Pensee Féconde*," "Fertile Thinking." My photographs were projected behind Kristeva as she responded to participating panelists who lectured on a particular aspect of her work. I was thrilled to witness my photographs and her words envelop one another: choice and chance co-existing in an elliptical continuum, voice and image animating and digesting one another. Through promiscuous crossings, Kristeva, as the speaker, myself, as the image-maker, and the audience—filling in the in-between spaces—formed the quintessential dialectic. This visual improvisation required that each of us give up ownership and entitlement and enter a rhizomatic field of vulnerability, a surrender to dialogic self-sacrifice.

Earlier that week, at a conference on the "Ir-rational" for which Michael Taussig was the keynote speaker, I also exhibited my photographs. As with Kristeva, multiple voices and visions contradicted themselves while maintaining their integrity as autonomous objects of speculation. Speculation emerges from specularity, our double shadow side, the unknown, the stranger within. Thus, the nature of interpretation, i.e, communication, itself becomes an uncanny act.

The uncanny is my political strategy, an erotic ethic, a commitment to aesthetics as multiple and relational, that reminds us and demands from us Foucault's insistence to free oneself from oneself through conscious curiosity: "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all...But then, what is philosophy today—philosophical activity...if not [the] endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently?"

Cixous demands, "Don't you tremble with uncertainty?" (Coming, 6) My resounding response is Yes!, and I also tremble with knowing the unknowable.

"...The uncanny as the continuing experience of an uncertainty" (Royle, 35) recalls Elizabeth's Grosz's glorious (and pervasively applicable) analysis of lesbian orgasm as "continual non-arrival". A dialectics of no resolution resounds with my commitment to art as erotic politics—one in which binary codes do not dictate our decision-making process; but rather, how ambiguity, metaphor, aphorisms, the eternal not-yet lead us to the give-take of continual non-arrival. Choice and chance co-exist in an elliptical continuum.

But, what happens when socialized norms are so deeply ingrained in us that our imaginations become more threatening than reality? SHOW IMAGES The more discussions I have with viewers about my work, the more I witness the infinite complexities of how difference is regulated--in particular, rigid gender distinctions and

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 3, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1.

the ways in which we are all so entrenched in the invisibility of sexism.

A few years ago, I was invited to participate in an exhibition sponsored by San Francisco's apparently not so radical fetish scene-Women-of-Color BDSM. Among the four participating photographers, I was the only woman. After several months of logistical preparation, my photography entries were abruptly censored by the curator because of our conflicting interpretations of the concept of fetish. She expressed disgust at what she interpreted as placenta coming out of a "man's" crotch, and at a woman with hair on her toes. Her bottom-line was that the bodies in the images needed to be unambiguously beautiful, i.e., hairless, well-groomed, and gender-specific: "I believe I stated that there can be nudity, however, it should be tasteful, fetish-style sexy, artistic and in keeping with the 2257 [code] i.e.,: No sexual stimulation, no intercourse, no erect penises, no fingers in vaginas, no spread eagled legs for the women, no spread butt anus shots, fisting, pornographic inspired. The images we would like to present will give a flavor of the various fetishes. However, many aspects of fetish are about the sexy clothes, shoes, props, play toys, hair and makeup..." When one of the most underground queer sub-cultures in the most "experimental" city in the US is so deeply rooted in hetero normative patriarchical conventional notions of the real: i.e., assimilationist consumerism, sanitized beauty, and psychological comfort, then, as social exiles, where can we go? Apparently, not across the Bay Bridge to Oakland. One of my images that was censored in San Francisco's City Hall for sexualized interpretations: I was told (and read in my comment book) the reflected head was seen either as testicles or as hairy breasts, was censored in the Oakland Federal Building for racialized interpretations: it happened to be Black History Month—the head in my photograph was seen as a head, as opposed to testicles and breasts, but a head of enslaved bodies. Also, the justification for removing this particular image included comments about the monks who had been recently burned in Tibet, and also references to the Oklahoma Federal Building Bombing—as if I was depicting and even celebrating the mutilated, fragmented bodies of subjugated ethnic others.

Since the early 90's, my photographs have been publicly defended by Freedom of Speech organizations such as artsave/People for the American Way and the ACLU. By witnessing first hand people's reactionary tendencies and unconscious addiction to the familiar and pre-determined normalcy, these experiences with censorship have helped me clarify my role as an activist, writer, and visual artist. Through my images and collaborative performances, I position the body to continually defy the assumption that it is easily categorized by blurring its own constructed boundaries of difference/sameness, pleasure/pain, expectation/unfamiliarity. Perhaps because I am a child of a holocaust survivor, multiple, contradictory perspectives feel inherent to the way I function both personally and politically. Instead of automatically defining difference as threatening, I hope to construct environments in which corporeality and subjectivity become pedagogical strategies for social change.

I am less concerned with overt moral crusades that have dictacted our behavior and cultural norms over past centuries, and am much more wary of the insidious explicit and

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 4, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1. implicit ways in which we have internalized phallic norms and fear of our own bodies what, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Foucault identifies as the "fascism within". Kathy Acker similarily alerts us: "As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others." Virginie Despuentes, the writer and director of the film, "Baise Moi", which was banned in her home country of France, reminds us, "We are all familiar with the syndrome of the hostage who identifies with his captor. That is exactly how we have ended up policing each other, judging each other through the eyes of those who keep us under lock and key".

My body, my words, and my images struggle against the normalization-homogenization that dictates our society's drive to assimilate, make familiar--what Freud identified as the "double [that] has become an object of terror". Just as Nietzsche thrived in the inherent strangeness of ourselves, our worlds, I seek to inhabit the strange, embed myself in the strange without feeling estranged.

Bataille insists: "Fundamentally, an entire human being is simply a being...from whom there's no separating anything now. An entire human being is partly a clown, partly God, partly crazy." These uncertainties help me explore my own ambiguous desires and fears about my body and its internal and external designated "disorder"—breaking up predetermined taxonomies. In this context, I explore women's access to public sexuality, male multiple orgasms, female orgasm, and in particular, female ejaculation as models for full-capacity living.

The first time I ejaculated, I didn't know it wasn't "normal" so I just reveled in sharing the sensation. No judgment. No fear. Until the guy I was with clearly expressed his surprise. Only then did my mind intervene.

It is a cultural assumption that it is men, and not women, who are capable of ejaculation. My research is not about the fact that millions of women do indeed ejaculate. Nor is my project an attempt to replicate or usurp male tendencies or to render womens' bodies within a systematic functionality, thereby reifying hierarchical power relationships in which sexuality is reduced to a generic hydraulic model. I am not looking for a substitute for male sexuality or to "depict male sensibility in a female body"; but rather, I am driven toward a sexual ethic which reconfigures how we experience sex and the erotic—how we inhabit our bodies in our everyday lives.

This conceptual shift which deconstructs patriarchical insciptions on our bodies is not a prescriptive project. We cannot afford to reassert another hegemony to replace or mimic existing normative paternal tyranny. Such toxic mimicry would reinforce dichotomous habitual behavior. In his Temptation to Exist, the Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran enlists Samuel Beckett: "What is the good of passing from one untenable position to another, of seeking justification always on the same plane?" Instead, I hope to undermine the insidious nature of internalized, invisible, taken-for-granted capitalist

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 5, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1.

Oedipal structures.

By exaggerating, reorienting, and cultivating vulnerability, conventionally designated "private" expressions seep into the public and open up the potential for collaborativeintuitive hysteria. Hysteria, like female ejaculation, ruptures clean cut categories and expectations.

As a woman who ejaculates without the need for specific physical stimulation, the sociopolitical implications of what my body represents are vast: a rhizomatic sexuality, without an end-point, one in which my body inhabits and produces a chiasmic dissolution of social expectations. This Deleuze-Guattarian "model of the production of subjectivity...animates the biopolitical economy" of "becoming different".

When I first read Angry Women, Andrea Juno's collection of interview's with radical propleasure feminists, I immediately identified with scholar, performance artist, and now my private yoga student, Avital Ronell. Ronell explores the possibilities of having/living/promoting "a feminism that is joyous, relentless, outrageous, [and] libidinally charged"(127). She asks, "How are you going to make the world safe for true deviance, true play, a genuine expression of aggression as desire, and sexual expression that displaces aggression?"(Ronell,151). My work generates an erotic agency which is, in Ronell's framework, "flexible in life-having humor, irony, desire and pleasure...the irony is that letting go and experiencing the source of pain paradoxically revitalizes the body and self to experience joy and life...[W]e need a language change, which means, among other things, we have to actively affirm mutation"(Ronell, 147 and 141).

By unraveling society's phallic illusion of order, and its concomitant binaries, we inhabit the interplays of empathy–not a unified merging, but the fluid exchange of autonomy and sexual difference as conscious strategies.

Conscious choice imbues the psycho-anatomical within a framework which helps us thrive on contradictions and ambiguities in our chaotic daily lives. I am suggesting a collective uncanny in which, for example, prostitution, pornography, and public sex could become an integral part of an explicitly collaborative feminist social emancipatory project. This political project accentuates both the ecstasy and the rage involved in the collective transformation from our restrictive homogenizing society to one in which celebration and mutation operate as the political strategies of the everyday.

I am, like Cixous's woman man, who "abandons herself with joyous relief to her vital uncertainty", and like her muse, Clarice Lispector, who wants "the profound organic disorder that nevertheless triggers the intuiting of an underlying order. The great power of potentiality." Similarly, Bataille's lust-ridden characters, obsessed and warped by their own lewd desires, are driven to the very demands Cixous exhorts: "rejoice in the terror [of the] plunge... Let yourself go! Let go of everything! Lose everything! Take to the air. Take to the open sea. Take to letters...vomit up everything, give up everything...seek out the shattered, the multiple I...shake off the Law...there's nothing

> "Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 6, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1.

behind you, everything is yet to come".

I found home the first time I visited Le Musee Picasso in Paris. As a nine year old overwhelmingly seduced by Picasso's contorted bodies, the world suddenly made sense. I recognized that this is how we, people, really are. This is Reality. Clarity. Honesty. Picasso's grotesquely beautiful heads integrated into monstrous forms, helped me feel at ease in my own body—dissonant and rich with life-affirming energy and sensual and political potential. Converging with Cixous, Bataille's characters' plurality of impulses remind me of Picasso's figures. Their "brutal frenzy" and surrender to the "lewd" confirms who I am, who I have always been. The lush, precise excesses and the fertility of chaos in both Picasso and Bataille spawn an economy of over-abundance, an erotics of the uncanny.

I channel this over-abundance into my photographic and collaborative work which is about the physics of touch and the fluidity of perception in our supposedly solid world. Although my photographs are consciously choreographed, the relationships are born out of an improvisation in which gravity and balance unfold. The result is a conversation between image, movement, and sound woven together—unraveling the performance of photography and the performance of its viewing. I arrange the space, objects, and bodies (in particular, my own) in such a way that blurs the lines that separate them. This luminescent excess inhabits both the domestic and the animalistic.

Cixous explores the cunt as self: "Wild thing or woman? With one hand she holds her animale pressed between her thighs, she caresses it briskly (as a 'wild thing'). While with the other hand she does her utmost to kill it (as a man's 'woman'). Happily, as ill luck would have it, beating it only adds to its joy"—its "overfullness of femininity". Similarly, Nietzsche's excess of life suffering and pleasure has been tremendously reassuring to me –his sublime ecstasy and over-fullness (overflowing, abundance, awe, wander, wonder as creative principles) as a love of the world (as a body both separate and within). If we are truly conscious of ourselves in relation to ourselves and to others, we inhabit the excess of the uncanny: "[It] is a figure and experience of what is at once inside and added on, always already at home yet an outsider, constitutive yet supplementary...The uncanny overflows"(Royle, 19).

The characters (myself) in my photographs become hybrids of machine and animal that populate dream-like worlds. The quotidian in relation to the sensual spectacle sets up a ritualistic narrative—a strewn collision of bodies and space is simultaneously purposeful and haphazard. Through a carnal visual language, these polymorphic bodies are engaged in ambiguous ceremonies. My photographs explore the body as a membrane between sensuality and restraint, surrender and resistance. My intention is to disrupt the distinction between the interior and exterior of both psychological and physical experiences.

I am in a continual process of non-arrival—discovering my "still unknown". Cixous provokes us: "To see the most familiar face as unfamiliar is to see it in its truth…one has to be willing to see, without flinching, the stranger in oneself."

"Female Ejaculation as Social Emancipation," by Cara Judea Alhadeff, p. 7, *NMEDIAC*, Fall 2010, Vol. 7 No. 1.

As a nine-year old at Le Musee Picasso, I saw this stranger in myself and this is who I see when I read and re-read Bataille. Clarice Lispector and Cixous ask, "Who are you who are so strangely me?" (Cixous, xiv). "Breaking down walls...leads to the recognition of the stranger even in those one loves, or is" (Cixous, xii). "Love your fellow being as if he were your stranger..." (Cixous, xvii). Cixous and Lispector lead us right back into the pregnant chiasma of no resolution. My intention is to move beyond the question of who is disfigured by whose power, and challenge how that disfigurement can be reconceptualized as a vibrant and affirmative collaborative social movement.



Figure 1. Three of Cara Judea Alhadeff's photos featured in the MONA-Detroit show (2010).

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