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ARTICLE

On Being Ugly in Public: The Politics of the Grotesque in Naked Protests

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Abstract

Sexualized naked protest using young and attractive women's bodies have long featured in the repertoire of protest tools for interventions in public space. Antirape feminist groups and nonhuman-animal rights activist groups, in particular, have mobilized these bodies to attract attention to their causes. Contemporary debates have suggested that these sorts of protest are objectionable, and that they are entwined with contemporary rape culture. This article complicates these accounts by considering what happens when the naked body is presented as a grotesquery in the service of these apparently emancipatory politics.

Analyzing two instances of naked protest as case studies, this article examines what happens to naked protest when the bodies protesting are "ugly" or are rendered so. The analysis suggests that naked protest featuring bodies that are "ugly" harbors the possibility of mobilizing a transgressive politics beyond contemporary rape culture. This article has implications for better understanding how to mobilize protest in a way that is transgressive and bold without further enshrining rape culture as the normative background against which it takes place.

Keywords: protest; feminism; grotesquery; carnivalesque; rape culture

The Contested Politics of Nakedness

Both nonhuman-animal rights protests and feminist protests have mobilized the naked body as tools in their protesting repertoire. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are notorious for this, and their iconic 1994 campaign, "We'd rather go naked than wear fur," featuring naked supermodels of the era has been repeated by the activist group on nearly an annual basis. Similarly, antirape protesters have used sexualized imagery to draw attention to their causes. The ethics of female nakedness within these forms of protest have been widely debated (see, for discussion, Pace 2005; Mika 2006; Deckha 2008; O'Keefe 2011; Bongiorno, Bain, and Hasalm 2013; Wrenn 2015). Much of this scholarship interrogates the ways in which misogyny, sexist double standards, and heteropatriarchal desirability are mobilized as part of these protests, including their complicity with contemporary rape culture.[1]

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This article complicates these current debates by considering the implications of the ugly naked body as a tool of protest. In order to do this, I revisit what we know about naked nonhuman-animal rights protests and naked feminist protests. The critical possibilities of ugly naked protest as uncanny carnivalesque are imagined. I then consider what it means to be an ugly body in protests by examining two instances where the sexual desirability of a naked protester is disavowed in the service of the protest: Femen's "sex bomb" protest of 2012, and Lush's anti-animal-testing protest, also of 2012. The article concludes by considering what potential there is, if any, in ugly protest for transforming the *status quo*, against a background of contemporary rape culture.

The Enchantment of Naked Protest

Naked protests have form. From the public spaces that these bodies occupy to the sorts of bodies that you will find there, from the notoriety of nakedness as a form of protest to the role of the audience who witnesses the protest, naked protests take *specific forms*. Interlaced, these forms become vehicles to convey political messages that are meaningful within the specific time-spaces and sociocultural contexts in which they occur. Naked protests also have form; Brett Lunceford traces the naked protest back to ancient Greece (Lunceford 2012, 1). He notes, along with Philip Carr-Gomm, that though nakedness might at first appear to be an unusual way in which to rouse political sentiment, it has, over the last century, and even over the last few decades, become an increasingly popular protest mechanism (Carr-Gomm 2010). Mobilized to draw attention to political problems—from "Breasts not Bombs," to free the nipple protests, to so-called lactivist protests—the human (usual female) body laid bare as a political act is widespread. What are the implications of naked protests for contemporary feminist politics?

Issues of social and spatial gendered justice have never been more pertinent in contemporary postindustrialist societies. In particular, questions of how the aged, (dis) abled, sexed, classed, raced, and gendered body appears in public space, and the politics of this appearance, tell us a lot about the sociocultural dynamics that sustain inequality and injustice in public space. Nirmal Puwar outlines how this operates through the mobilization of specific forms of "consecrated somatic norms" (Puwar 2004). How certain bodies are able to occupy public space in certain ways and at certain times, and how this marks how spaces that might at first appear neutral are in fact laced with masculinist, ethnocentric—we might add heterocentric—codes that cast the white, middle-class, able-bodied male body as a norm against which all other bodies are measured. Bodies that do not fit are cast as out of place, as "trespassers," "space invaders," whose out-of-place-ness marks those bodies as Other.

Puwar gives us this analysis in the context of seats of power in the English capital. She remarks how throughout the city of Westminster, from the Houses of Parliament, through Whitehall to Trafalgar Square, colonial, white heteromasculinity is actually engraved into the very architecture of the space. But what happens when Trafalgar Square—with its surrounding embassies and various national galleries—becomes a site of political refusal?

Judith Butler has outlined how public squares—Tahrir Square in Egypt, for instance —when used as sites of resistance, harbor the potential to transform the politics of the state through, in part, the forging of an alternative polis (Butler 2011). Of course, these can be only temporary subversions, yet they mark disruptions in dominant discourses of subjectification that saturate public space. What, given this, happens in stylized naked

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protests that have as their object rights for nonhuman animals and feminist politics? What does the intervention of naked bodies in public space do to the consecrated somatic norm of public space? And what of the *polis* of the consecrated somatic norm of these protests?

The naked body has been used by environmental groups such as PETA, or by Lush, to protest the testing of cosmetics on nonhuman animals, the killing of nonhuman animals for fur, to promote veganism, to promote fake leather, to protest the desecration of Canadian tar sands, to protest packaging, and to protest dairy farming, to name only a few examples (Deckha 2008; Aronczyk 2013; Wrenn 2015). Maneesha Deckha and Corey Lee Wrenn have separately expressed concern that the type of naked body that is presented in these protests is the female, able-bodied, sometimes celebrity, often young, white, and conventionally attractive body (Deckha 2008; Wrenn 2015). Moreover, this naked body is often presented in a state of violence—bloodied, screaming, bound, gagged, caged, branded—to make it appear even more vulnerable (Deckha 2008; Wrenn 2015; Fanghanel 2019). It is exposed, objectified: to-be-looked at (Mulvey 1989). Situating the human female body in this way, in the service of justice for nonhuman animals, reinforces patriarchal scripts of masculine power over feminine submission (Glasser 2011, 57) and normalizes not only the notion that naked women are bodies to be consumed by a masculinist gaze within the heteronormative, contemporary, sociocultural context in which these protests emerge, but that there is something compelling—sexy, even—about these bodies in a state of physical violence (Wrenn 2015, 139; Fanghanel 2019).

Feminist protests such as those manifested by Femen, or by SlutWalk, also deploy nakedness as part of their protest repertoire. The Femen protest group, which was founded in Ukraine in 2008, is well-known for its topless and bare-breasted protests,[2] whereas SlutWalk protests are famous for inviting their participants to dress "like sluts" in ostensibly "sexy" outfits.[3] Not unlike the naked protests undertaken by nonhuman-animal rights protesters, these are not usually protests where the protesters are entirely naked—not the sort of protest we see in the "naked curse," for instance (Stevens 2006; Oriola 2012) or the women of Meira Paibi protest against the violence of the Indian army (Veneracion-Rallonza 2014, 260)—instead, both Femen and SlutWalk present an easily consumable spectacle of nakedness (Debord 1967/1994). By mobilizing usually young, usually thin, usually white, attractive, able-bodied women in naked protest, Femen and SlutWalk give us a commodified version of the naked protest (O'Keefe 2014; Fanghanel 2019), one that is easy to consume, one that titillates, one that is complicit with capitalism and one that, like nonhuman-animal rights protests, glamorizes sexualized violence through its presentation of women wailing or screaming and allowing their bodies to be dragged around on the ground by police or security services (Eileraas 2014; Reestorff 2014, 487; Green 2016). Importantly, it is one that, in Puwar's words, consecrates a somatic norm within these protests (Puwar 2004).

Naked protests of this sort have been condemned for the ways in which, rather than upsetting an unjust *status quo*, they use political tools—eroticized nakedness undergoing violence—that actually make them complicit in sustaining a contemporary context that enables rape culture to thrive, and for exploitation, objectification, and abuse to continue unabated (Adams 1990/2016; Glasser 2011; O'Keefe 2011). In part, they achieve this by mobilizing what Carol Adams refers to as the "absent referent." When a woman is treated violently, according to Adams, she reminds the witness of the violence that is suffered by nonhuman animals (Adams 1990/2016, 23). By standing in for those animals, she

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becomes, herself, absented. Part of the effect of this sort of intervention into public space comes from the shock that these images evoke (Deckha 2008). Criticism about protests that mobilize the naked female body draws attention to how, for instance, the Femen group, or PETA itself, become complicit in the very injustice they seek to subvert. This happens in part through the spectacularization of the naked protest, and by mobilizing consecrated somatic norms of naked protest that magnify this spectacle.

Spectacular, Uncanny Carnival

For Guy Debord, everything is spectacle. The spectacle marks how the "relationship between people is mediated by images" that divorce representations from the work of their production (Debord 1967/1994, thesis 4). A spectacle—from the Latin, meaning "public show"—holds in tension a performative element and an audience who sees this performance. As such, there is a scopophilic, or to-be-looked-at element to these protests. They are protests in which part of the function of the protest is to be seen (Mulvey 1989), and for onlookers to take pleasure in the seeing.

Debord describes spectacle as a worldview, or perhaps an epistemology, that becomes the medium through which sense is made of social life and that structures everything within a capitalist context. Spectacular protests—or bodies that are spectacularized—emerge within an already-spectacularized society where the image being consumed—here, the naked protest—is divorced from the production of that image. Part of the way in which it is possible to produce this image is that it occurs in a sociocultural context of thriving rape culture, which both venerates and denigrates women along normative lines of heteropatriarchal imaginaries of the feminine. Rape culture renders unexceptional women's experiences of harassment, abuse, or trouble.

Theorists of naked protest have offered the possibility that alongside the spectacularization of the naked female body, this type of protest functions as a form of carnivalesque (Lunceford 2012, 31; O'Keefe 2014, 6–7). Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque is well known. He describes it as a "temporary liberation from . . . the established social order" (Bakhtin 1984, 10), an inversion of prevailing hierarchies, structures, and statuses that, for a bounded space/time, leads to renewal and regeneration: leads to something else becoming potential. M. Lane Bruner's analysis of carnivalesque protest illustrates how, as an interjection, protest can disrupt the dominant politics of the state and might initially appear to be an (albeit temporary) affront to the spectacularization of social life (Bruner 2005). If the spectacle functions because we take it for granted, the way in which the carnival jars with what we know has the potentiality to provoke a different sort of critical awareness—or distance from—what we know. And certainly, this potentiality is latent in the protests of Lush or Femen, even if, as Theresa O'Keefe's and Nirmal Puwar's work demonstrates (Puwar 2004; O'Keefe 2011), mobilizing a consecrated somatic norm of young women wearing sexy underwear in public is not particularly subversive, and as Mary Russo reminds us, the carnivalesque, with its only temporary disordering, remains "essentially conservative" (Russo 1994, 58).

Grotesquery—incorporating the earthly, the chthonic—is a constituent feature of the Bakhtinesque carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984, 19). With its emphasis on disorder, the topsy-turvy, the inside-out, the comic, the carnal, the excessive, the interaction between the world turned upside down and the uncanny horror of the "open, protruding, extended, secreting body" is what forges uncanny carnival (Russo 1994, 62). Here, the uncanny draws on Freudian understandings of a self that is composed of drives —Eros, Thanatos—whose subjectivity is forged through antagonisms among the id,

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ego, and super-ego. For Freud, the uncanny is an unsettling recollection of the base desire of Id; the terror that what has been repressed—the fear, the violence, the desire—will overwhelm the subject (Freud 1920/2003). Uncanniness—the strangely familiar, the unknown known—is horrifying because it is unsettling, nauseating, even abject (Kristeva 1980/1982). An uncanny carnivalesque protest marks a rupture in the status quo, in that which is known, or canny. It reminds onlookers of their depraved fear of the diseased, disgusting, deathly, and grotesque.

The ACT UP protests of late 1980s and 1990s illustrate this form of grotesque, uncanny, carnivalesque protest. ACT UP—a protest group at the forefront of campaigns for support for people with the AIDS virus—mobilized a number of techniques to promote awareness about their campaigns, including "savvy" media campaigns, and humorous, unsettling, sometimes sinister interventions in public space that characterized the "campy humor" of their politics (Reed 2005, 189). "Kiss-ins"—public assemblies of same-sex kissing in public space—and "die-ins"—where protesters "draw police-style chalk outlines around each other's 'dead' bodies" (201, 195), pull into public space acts that are usually intimate and private. Mass kissing in public acts as an affront to the heteronormativity that even today composes how public space is constructed. "Dying" speaks to the visceral and primordial fear that casts death and decay as abject horrors. The shock of the "die-in" emerges through this appeal to the uncanny and the grotesque, even if the shock is only fleeting. As forms of grotesque protest, the approaches of groups like ACT UP, which so plainly accost a public with things that it does not want to see or to know about, helps us to understand the two contemporary cases that we analyze here. Refusing to let the unsettling unknown (uncanny) *be unknowable*, this confrontation becomes abject because it violates the consecrated order of politics, disease, who can speak, who can be heard, and where this happens (DeLuca 1999).

Analysis of how uncanny spectacles constitute what protest means, or does, or can do must also attend to the sociocultural context in which these protests take place. For ACT UP, the affluent, middle-class professionalization of its actors inflects the successfulness and the clout of these protests, even if AIDS sufferers were otherwise stigmatized in the 1980s and 1990s (Reed 2005, 183). ACT UP cannot be divorced from the North American context in which it predominantly took place, either. This wealthy, postindustrialist, capitalist setting both made the conditions for ACT UP possible and ACT UP itself necessary. It would be quite another story to consider what ACT UP would look like, how ACT UP would feel, if it were not taking place in the US, but in South Africa, Haiti, or Ukraine (see Chávez 2012 for a discussion, and Semigina 2015).

We will see this exemplified more closely in the case studies of naked protest that I describe in the next section. The two protests that I focus on here occurred in differently capitalist settings; one in a shop window on one of London's busiest shopping streets in the United Kingdom, and one outside an underground station in post-communist Kiev. We see what happened when the bodies that participated in those protests did not conform to the consecrated somatic norm of these naked protests, or were refused this capacity: when they were grotesque, or rendered so.

Animal Test Subject and Sex Bomb

In 2012, Lush cosmetics launched a global campaign protesting animal testing. Lush is a cosmetics and toiletries manufacturer that has a reputation for running political campaigns about global environmental and humanitarian issues (Aronczyk 2013). The protest took the form of a ten-hour "endurance performance" in which a

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male performer (who was the director of the piece), played the "scientist," and a female, who played the "animal," acted out a scenario where the "animal" was violently experimented on by the "scientist." He was wearing a long, white, lab coat, a blue medical cap, and mask. She was dressed in a full-length leotard that was the same color as her skin, giving the appearance that she was naked. With her hair tied up off her face, the "animal" was as exposed to the onlooking public as the "scientist" was covered.

In this performance, we saw the "animal" force-fed, having liquid injected into her eyes, and electrodes attached to her head to simulate the giving of electric shocks. We saw her measured and manhandled. The front of her hair was shaved off, and one of her eyebrows was entirely plucked off by the "scientist." We could see only his eyes and his hands as he worked on his subject for the day. Unlike the "scientist"'s impassive face, every expression on the "animal"'s face—every impression of pain that the "scientist"'s experimentations exerted on her body—was visible: all the more so because of her positioning in a shop window in this busy shopping area.

A video of the event (which has to date been watched online nearly three million times) made and narrated by Lush,[4] makes explicit that the purpose of this performance is to draw attention to the use of nonhuman animals in cosmetics-testing to show the "reality" of how testing feels for nonhuman animals who are used in these tests. In this video of the protest, we see the "animal" crying, we see her looking forlorn, and we see her resigned to her fate. The scientist, in contrast, appears cool and unaffected by her pain. As this performance unfolded, members of the public walked past the window and took photos with their phones; the press reported the story, and promotional pictures were taken for Lush's own campaign materials. In the words of the campaign manager, Tamsin Omond, "people are watching and looking with complete shock in their eyes, and trying to find out what is going on" (Lush 2012, 2.37).

The video that accompanies this performance tells us that the "animal" is a "young girl called Nicole, who is twenty-three years old, a vegan, and a performance artist" (Lush 2012, 0.28), and that for her as a "campaigner," this was an issue that mattered (Rosario 2015, 98). We can also see from the video of the protest that she appears to be young, able-bodied, and white. The male scientist also appears to be young, white, and able-bodied. Though he is the director of the piece, we do not hear from him in either the promotional video or in the furor the followed it, which was not the case with the female performer. His anonymity and concealment in the performance is matched only by the way in which he disappears from scrutiny after it. Such a thing normalizes the violence of his action and continues to objectify the already exposed "animal" performer.

This protest attracted a lot of media intention—as many naked protests do—yet some of the critiques of it pointed to the gendered dynamic of the coupling (a male "scientist" abusing a female "animal"). The performer herself commented that onlookers—not realizing at first what story this protest was supposed to be telling—mistook it as a "performance intended to highlight domestic violence" (Rosario 2015, 98). The intention of this campaign was very clearly to promote social justice and to foster a transformed politics of equality between human and nonhuman animals. Yet because of the gendered dynamics of the performance and the violence that was incorporated into it, Lush was accused of eroticizing violence and of creating a performance where violence against women was titillating and attention-grabbing.

Yet both the performer (Nicole Cataldo-Davies) and Lush distanced themselves from the suggestion that what the "animal" endured "brought her any form of pleasure" or

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was in any way sexualized (Rosario 2015, 101). Despite her conformation to the "consecrated somatic norm" of naked protest (young, attractive, thin, female, suffering violence), those involved with the protest are telling us that it was not sexy. What does this denial tell us about this protest? Before we answer this question, I want to bring a different voice into dialogue with the context for asking this question in the first place.

The Femen protest group is famous for topless protests. Femen says that they protest against dictatorial regimes, the proliferation of sex-work (which they describe as "genocide against women") and organized religious oppression of women (Femen n.d.). In the past, they have protested against regimes of oppression in Ukraine, in Russia, in Belarus, against the Pope, and against Islamic veiling practice (to name only a few instances). Femen protests are characterized by their confrontational tone. Bare-breasted, these self-styled "Amazons" write political slogans on their torsos, and, wearing *vinoks*,[5] storm buildings or monuments, shouting their slogans ("nudity is freedom," *The Atlantic*, 14th Feb 2018. Protests come to an end when the women are arrested or otherwise removed from the site. Commenters have noted that what we might call the "consecrated somatic norm" of Femen conforms to a specific bodily aesthetic of athletic, usually white, thin, apparently able-bodied, conventionally attractive bodies (O'Keefe 2011; Zychowicz 2015). Indeed, their "pop star" aesthetic becomes part of their "brand" of protest (Zychowicz 2011), which uses "beauty as a weapon" (*The Atlantic* 2018 14th Feb 2018, 15th Feb 2018). Against this background, I want to talk about one particular protest that troubles this representation.

"Sex Bomb" was an intervention in public space that was intended to protest the Euro 2012 football tournament taking place in Ukraine and that was expected to attract male tourists to the brothels of Ukraine. In this protest, a Femen campaigner positioned herself at the entrance of a metro station in Kiev. Smoking a cigarette from a long cigarette holder, wearing a bright yellow wig, knee-high socks, red PVC elbow-length gloves, a black garter over her knee, red heart-shaped sunglasses, and zebra-print high heels, the performer had the words "sex bomb" written on her naked torso.

Other members of Femen surrounded her, but they were fully clothed in bright pink boiler suits, playing the "bomb-disposal squad." They ran around her with megaphones shouting "Danger! Danger! Sex bomb!," "Please Keep Back!," "Run, People, Run!" The "sex bomb," meanwhile, smiled and blew kisses at the surrounding onlookers, and adopted sexually provocative poses, coquettishly posing on the pavement like a centerfold. She appeared amused and delighted at the "panic" she was causing.

Whereas the bomb-disposal team was made up of Femen protesters who conformed to their own somatic norm—thin, young, white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive —the "sex bomb" performer was exceptional. A parody of a sexually attractive woman or a "sex bomb," she was dressed in deliberately gaudy, colorful clothes. In contrast to the smooth, tight skin of protesters in other Femen campaigns, she was older and fatter than the other women. Her breasts hung low on her body. These were not the pert, round, full breasts that have confronted Vladimir Putin or the Pope; this was what we might call a grotesque body. Her thighs were dimpled with cellulite, her stomach—large and round—hung over her thighs. A badly-fitting thong completed the parody of the sexy woman: the bombshell.

Though hers is a nonconforming Femen body, her appearance in this protest should not be understood as a conscious diversification within the Femen brand. Femen, whose protests, we have seen, are composed mostly of conventionally attractive women, is not opening itself up to protesters outside of its own consecrated somatic norm. Instead, this nonconforming body is part of this spectacle precisely because she is not a "sex

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bomb." The potentially cruel, Bakhtinesque ironic laughter here emerges because, within a normative imaginary of beauty, the sex bomb is nothing of the sort. Dressed up as a simulacrum of sexy femininity, this parody is all the more vicious because it works by acknowledging that many onlookers would not find the sex bomb conventionally attractive, and that she is, in fact, conventionally ugly. The presence of this performer seems to enshrine, rather than destabilize, norms of beauty, aesthetic femininity, and heteronormative desire.

Becoming Grotesque

What emerges in these two protests are two nearly naked women who present different manifestations of the consecrated somatic norms of naked protests; one who conforms, and one who does not, but both of whom are also presented to us as ugly bodies. Whether a body whose beauty has been erased, in the context of the Lush protest, or a body whose beauty is ironicized, as in the case of Femen, both bodies have some sort of interplay with the grotesque, and with rape culture that values some women's bodies and denigrates others. How far does this complicate what we already know about naked protest?

Naomi Baker demonstrates how ugliness has become intimately incorporated into constructions of gendered subjectification (Baker 2010, 5). Whereas for women, ugliness has classically been associated with inner evil, and even exterior beauty has been thought to hide an inner "physical and moral deformity," for men it was entirely possible for an ugly exterior to hide a benevolent, moral, and wise inner life. Peter Carmichael's typology of ugliness demonstrates how ugliness and morality have become embroiled with each other (Carmichael 1972). Ugliness, for Carmichael, tends toward maleficence, wantonness, wretchedness, despicableness. Given its qualities, that which we call grotesque or ugly has, perhaps unsurprisingly, ordering functions. Yet more than simply an ordering force, a grotesque body is interactive. It is composed via sociality, through carnivalesque laughter, and through transgressiveness (Russo 1994, 8). Yet ugliness is not simply the opposite of beauty. As Kathryn Morgan notes, ugliness is also contrasted with that which is plain, or ordinary (Morgan 1991, 45). Ugliness is held in a sort of tension with beauty because both have the capacity to excite strong feeling (Baker 2010, 22). Ugliness might have its own kind of splendor (Morgan 1991, 45).

The grotesque—meaning wildly formed, boldly odd—is out of place. It is abject and it deviates from that which is normal, or the "intended design" of things (Baker 2010, 17). It is by designating something as Other that what is One can be formed. Beauty is "whole, discrete, coherent, defined" (17). As Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, and Julia Kristeva, among others, have shown us, matter out of place—matter that exceeds codification—is a source of anxiety, even a source of anger in contemporary social life (Douglas 1966; Foucault 1970/1994; Kristeva 1980/1982). We see this reflected in how both of these protests interact in this assemblage of how they are created and interpreted.

Ugliness and deformity provoke laughter that, according to Russo, is both carnivalesque, as we have seen, and uncanny (Russo 1994, 7). Russo offers Bakhtin's image of the "laughing senile pregnant hag" as a way into understanding this. This figure of the hag is an evocative one. The hag, from the Old English *hægtesse,* meaning "witch," is also cognate with haga, from which the far more benign word "hedge" has its etymological origins. The hedge, or haga, marks the boundary between the *polis* of the settlement—the protection of the sovereign—and the unruly world beyond it (beyond the pale, the point beyond which banishment operates Agamben 1998). The *hægtesse*—

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the witch, or goddess, or wise woman—straddling the boundary between order and chaos, between what is knowable and what is not, marking the point between what is "within the compass" of what is permissible and what happens in the hinterlands, is inevitably grotesque (Baker 2010, 75).

Simultaneously a figure of decrepitude and renewal—of "pregnant death, a death that gives birth"—encompassed within the ambivalent body, the senile, pregnant hag disturbs because she is a ludicrous impossibility, and exceeds normative ordering (Bakhtin 1984, 25; Russo 1994). Yet, though we laugh at the absurdity of this body, it is also terrifying because of its possibilities. Uncannily linking death with life, markedly open—laughing—and tied to the world, its embodied contradictions are powerfully unsettling—almost nauseating—because they speak to the uncanny horror that is expressed when the abject threatens the integrity of the self (Kristeva 1980/1982). And this integrity is menaced by the liminal position of the hag, who, with one foot in one world and one in another, is neither of one nor of another, and in this ambivalence, poses problems everywhere (Turner 1967).

Becoming a Grotesque Protest

In both the Lush protest and the Femen protests, we encounter naked bodies that are mired in the gender dynamics of the sociocultural contexts in which they take place (including a rape culture that sustains as normative an imagery of women's bodies suffering violence), and so have somehow figured themselves as ugly, or been thus figured.

Citing the work of medieval philosopher William of Auvergne, Baker suggests that ugliness comes from the malformation that attends having too much or too little of something (Baker 2010, 17). To be disproportioned, or incomplete, or in the wrong place, or in the wrong way, is ugly. Consider the somatic norm against which naked protests are measured—those that we usually see in the protests of PETA, or Femen's other interventions—the thin, white, able-bodied, attractive bodies that fill media reports of these naked, topless, bloodied protests. How does the making-grotesque of the animal test-subject and the sex bomb happen? And what does this mean for these politics?

Cataldo-Davies's performance as the "animal test-subject" was, we are told, not sexualized:

> We did not perform a sexy version of oppression or create a teasing "naughty" campaign. . . . Our aim was most certainly not to titillate. The bodysuit was not attractive (regardless of how the mainstream media may have presented or written about it). The costume made her an anonymous test subject and stripped her of the accoutrements of sexuality or eroticism. (Omond 2012)

Similarly, Cataldo-Davies confirms that they "attempted to keep the costumes as androgynous as possible, both in the design of her body suit and [the] loose-fitting white overalls and mask" worn by the "scientist" (Rosario 2015, 98). Cataldo-Davies explained she would have preferred to protest naked, and that she chose to protest wearing a suit that made her appear to be naked because she wanted to give the appearance of being as much like an animal as possible without infringing the law by actually being naked (98). Certainly, the body-stocking that covered her meant that the image was safe for use on social media in a way that it would not have been had she been without it. The body suit, Omond tells us, was "not attractive." It was not for titillation, it was not

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sexy or erotic. The crescendo of the scene, at the end of the ten-hour performance, sees the "animal" having a trashcan liner placed over her head as she is carried into the street and placed on a pile of rubbish bags on the pavement. This final humiliation for the "animal" compounds the dehumanization of the test-subject and is intended to remind the audience of the way in which animals used for testing are commodified, consumed, and discarded. The act recalls the "die-ins" of ACT UP, by treating the animal as a corpse to be unceremoniously disposed of. It also recalls taboos around death and anxiety about the abject, and begins the work of rendering this protest grotesque.

In other naked protests that promote nonhuman-animal rights, activists wear flesh-colored body suits, depicting muscles, sinew, and veins, which give the appearance that their skin has been flayed from their bodies. Although the performance might shock the onlooker because it is so grotesque and suggestive of violence, even these protests are usually performed by young, able-bodied, thin, white women. In early modern literature, Baker understands this discursive practice of making the otherwise beautiful body ugly as a vehicle through which to preserve virtue and purity (Baker 2010, 165). Against an ascetic Christian background, Baker argues, the beautiful and the beguiling are viewed with suspicion that is redeemed by making the self ugly. It is why, though tales are told of both male and female saints who have disfigured themselves, women have done so to escape the attention of lascivious men who seek to rape them (for instance, Saint Rose of Lima, Saint Ebba), whereas men have done so to punish themselves for their own lascivious thoughts or deeds (see Pipkin 2013, 174). Bernadette Wegenstein's account of Saint Agatha's disfigurement takes this analysis further; women who are uglified become sacred and set apart (Wegenstein 2018, 219–22). That which is sacred cannot be touched; it is both fragile and dangerous. It is in this way that ugliness might open up the possibility of resisting heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the "heterosexual gaze, *avant la lettre.*" (Wegenstein 2018, 222).

Self-uglification becomes a form of gendered, virtuous purification and of refusal. We can see echoes of this in Cataldo-Davies's and Omond's insistence that the "animal" in this protest is "stripped" of the "accoutrements of sexuality." Given, as demonstrated elsewhere by Deckha, Carol Glasser, and Renata Bongiorno and colleagues (Deckha 2008; Glasser 2011; Bongiorno, Bain, and Hasalm 2013), that the naked protests of nonhuman-animal rights movements are in fact firmly situated within an economy where the naked body is legible as a sexualized text, the emphasis on desexualized nakedness here can be interpreted as an attempt to operate outside of rape culture. And yet, if this is the lens through which we interpret the lack of sexiness of this protest, we can see that attempts to claim ugliness as a position from which to mobilize politics, which are tied to a claim for purity or virtue, are also complicit in a rape culture that valorizes feminine purity and virtue. Rooted as it is in the postindustrialist and capitalist context of the city of London, this uglification occurs in a completely different context from that described by Baker and Pipkin (Baker 2010; Pipkin (2013). Yet, through it, we can see how uglification that operates as a means to escape sexual harassment in those early modern instances haunts the contemporary antagonisms about sexuality, desire, and female bodies in public space that are at play here.

Against this background, the grotesquery of the sex bomb complicates this story further. Presented as a parody of sexy femininity, this protester appears to be much older, and is certainly fatter than the usual naked bodies we see in Femen protests. Accompanied by a "bomb-disposal squad," who, dressed in hot-pink boiler suits, have no trouble conforming to the consecrated somatic norm of Femen protests, the

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contrast between this fat, old body and the younger, tauter bodies of the women running around her is necessarily political.

The aging female body—also associated with decay and death— still manages to inspire vitriol, pity, and horror (Ussher 2006). The fat body is "emphatically, excessively, unforgivably, carnal" (Baker 2010, 119). The public performance of sexual desire of a reviled body here also echoes the kiss-ins of ACT UP and other queer-rights protests. Manifesting sexual desire in bodies that we do not want to see (old bodies, fat bodies, queer bodies, disabled or diseased bodies) harkens back to the uncanny, unsettling qualities of this presentation of desire and its capacity to trouble how public spaces are constituted. The conjunction of these characteristics in the sex bomb is what makes this protest grotesque.

If the purpose of the protest is to warn male tourists visiting Ukraine for the Euro 2012 football tournament away from Ukraine's brothels, then this old and ugly body is intended to be repulsive. The protest functions by suggesting that no-one would choose to have sex with such a grotesque body, and yet this is what might be waiting for them in the brothels of Kiev. The twin meanings of "sex bomb"—sexy woman, and actual bomb of sex—prevent this body from becoming anything other than ugly. The menace of a fat, ugly, woman-as-bomb who might explode and disfigure, disgust, and pollute those around her recalls anxiety about the abjection of the self that we encounter in Kristeva's work (Kristeva 1980/1982).

Unlike the Lush protester whose body is rendered grotesque by lack—lack of hair and of eyebrows, lack of sexual accoutrements—Sex Bomb is always-already ugly because of her excessive size, and this is heightened by her vulgar movements, her ill-fitting attire, and the incongruity between this figure and the sexiness she is parodying. Yet, like the senile, pregnant hag, this body is also laughing, reveling in the trouble she is causing, seemingly completely at ease with the shock and horror that she, as Sex Bomb, provokes. She can discursively be all the more condemned because she is grotesque, and yet does not seem to care about it. A vernacular understanding of the sex bomb protest understands this laughter as one between the crowd and the "bomb-disposal squad" (who, themselves, are not ugly). We are supposed to laugh at the sex bomb. However, carnivalesque laughter will not so easily compartmentalize itself. Laughter for Bakhtin is generative (Bakhtin 1984, 12). Even degradation and deathliness bring renewal. The sex bomb, from an analytical perspective, is also laughing at everyone: the crowd, the onlookers, even the other protesters. Certainly, though this sex bomb figure is offered to the witnesses of the protest not to celebrate her form, but to horrify them, in acknowledgment that the sight of her is awful—that an encounter with her, dangerous—*the sex bomb is also laughing at this idea*. It is laughter that unsettles, that is subversive, and that implicates us all.

The Ugly Truth?

If naked protests usually operate within an economy sustained, in part, by the proliferation of rape culture, where naked female bodies are offered up in order to grab attention and to make headlines for political causes, does the ugly body mark a rupture in this dynamic? Can this confront rape culture?

According to Carmichael, "ugliness is evidently nothing positive" (Carmichael 1972, 497), and nothing can be recuperated from an ugly body. Baker is suspicious of claims that ugliness can straightforwardly be free from gendered oppression (Baker 2010, 7). As she highlights, ugly bodies have a normative function. They mark the limits of

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acceptability and are cast as "other." The power that ugliness has, in its early modern manifestations, is to mark a body as virtuous, or as profane and undesirable. For women to deface themselves, or to be defaced, is presented as either a punishment for bad or unruly behavior, or an attempt to preserve their chastity or purity (175, 179). Both manifestations reinscribe the ugly body as one that is still subject to normative constructions of idealized femininity. For a resistance to be mounted, something else needs to shift for the ugliness to be outside the realm of heteropatriarchal rape culture that valorizes the chaste feminine and scorns the failed feminine.

Russo suggests that as an excessive, abundant, emaciated, putrefying force, ugliness indeed enshrines the borderland between what kinds of bodies we will see and what we will not see (Russo 1994, 10). She suggests that the normalizing forces of the distinctions between what is ugly and what is not are very potent. The urge toward homogeneity is profound. This is why exceeding norms is risky. And this danger brings with it the sort of vilification that ugly women's bodies receive (see Douglas 1992). At the same time, being marginal, being dangerous, is also to be powerful (Russo 1994, 60). Kristeva, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich tell us the same stories (Kristeva 1977; Rich 1984/2003; Lorde 1985). Occupying the margin—here, being designated as ugly—harbors the potential to scrutinize and to call the center to account. The hedge-dwelling hag, at the periphery of what is accepted, has in her sights the violence of how norms are consecrated.

And yet choosing to make the self ugly, or refusing to not be ugly, can be thought as revolt, even as it skirts perilously close to being denigrated within a rape culture that disdains ugly female bodies. Ugliness is fascinating. It harbors its own scopohilic draw, perhaps because, as Laura Mulvey suggests, it recalls the terror of castration, the image of the open wound (Mulvey 1989, 19). If scopopholia is usually associated with the passive, looked-at female body and the active—looking—male gaze, the erotic, striptease element of the looking takes on a transgressive potency when the gazed-at is ugly or deformed (Wegenstein 2018, 219). Baker illustrates how women who have historically refused to live within the constraints of the obligation to be beautiful have also considered themselves to be free, or unencumbered (Baker 2010, 159). And the story of Sun Pu-erh that Sara Halprin recounts also attests to this freedom (Halprin 1996, 3). In an evocative exploration of what we might recuperate from ugliness—or rather, what we might appropriate—Morgan advocates for a feminist revolt that "revalorises the domain of the 'ugly'" (Morgan 1991, 45), in which women undergo surgery to adopt "fleshy mutations . . . to produce what culture constitutes as 'ugly' so as to destabilize the 'beautiful'"; to "have one's face and breasts surgically pulled down . . . and have wrinkles sewn and carved into one's skin" (46).

To make the self ugly can be "abhorrent to contemplate" (Carmichael 1972, 498). And such a move might prove absurdly profane. But this notion of abhorrence—from the Latin meaning "recoil, shrink back in terror from"—evokes the terrifying outsider potential of ugliness. Moreover, to make the self ugly—to destroy the eyebrow, to shave the hairline, to suffer painfully and in public—as we saw in the Lush protest, also means accepting a normative understanding of what ugliness is in the first place. Occupying such a devalorized position for the self, even when it is not one that is attributed to oneself, as we see from Omond's and Cataldo-Davies's comments, certainly holds power because of ugliness's relationship to the mainstream. If it were not ugly to be ugly—if ugliness did not exist—then the taking of this position would not foster the transgressive potential that it does.

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We might think that to be speaking in the language of beauty and ugliness is to reinscribe, rather than resist, the normative devalorization of what is ugly. Bring this thought into a dialogue with the work of the performance artist ORLAN. Her 1990–1995 performance entitled "The Reincarnation of Saint-ORLAN" consisted of her transforming her face, through different surgical interventions, into a patchwork of Renaissance figures of beauty. Thus, a nose from Psyche, the forehead of Mona Lisa, the eyes of Diana . . . paragons of beauty in themselves, converged onto her face to create a hybrid of elite beauty. The end result is one that gives her face an unsettling, otherworldly appearance. This intervention adopts what Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane recognize as a Brechtian estrangement from beauty (Phelan and Lane 1998, 291). Thus, ORLAN turns beauty on its head, in perhaps the same way that we see ugliness transformed in these protests.

Indeed, when we compare the denied beauty and assumed ugliness of the Lush protest to the parodied beauty and assumed ugliness of the sex bomb protest, we can see a different sort of potency emerge. Sex Bomb, quite outside of the discursive narrative of her ugliness constructed by Femen, might be causing the most disruption to public space of any of these naked protests.

Femen's decision to center the protest around the undressed body of a woman whose body does not conform to *their* usual somatic norms foregrounds a body that is more confrontational and less easy for onlookers to consume. Though the sex bomb is offered to the protest—making a spectacle of herself (Russo 1994, 60)—because she is cast as ugly, her refusal to *be* ugly harbors the potential to break prevailing norms that sustain rape culture. Blowing kisses to the crowd, laughing, posing for photographers, flirting with them, Sex Bomb is *becoming a sex bomb*. Though intended to appear ridiculous, her performance of a sexually alluring woman is one that seemingly refuses to accept her supposed ugliness. She waves coquettishly and interacts with the crowd as if she were Marilyn Monroe, or some other manifestation of an iconic, glamorous, consecrated somatic norm of feminine beauty. She does not permit herself to be read as ugly, even if she is thus read by the crowd and by her fellow protesters. More than simply a rejection of the male gaze—as we saw in the Lush protest—this is a reappropriation of it.

Sex Bomb refuses simultaneously to be easy to look at (like other Femen protests, like other nonhuman-animal rights protests) *and she refuses to be ugly*. Like the Lush protest, this is not an easy protest to consume; it is thus less spectacular, but more than the Lush protest, Sex Bomb's performance appears to completely refuse the possibility that she might be ugly, or that ugliness is not something that can be valorized. And it is here that we might begin to see some possibilities for naked protest outside of rape culture: by refusing the capacity rape culture has to designate and denigrate some bodies and not others. Of course, within the context of this protest, this activist's lascivious, fat, and old body was presented as something to be frightened of, to run away from, so its transgressive potential is curtailed by Femen itself. We are not out of the woods yet, but are we approaching the hinterlands?

Ugly as Transgression

Much existing research about naked protests, including that which I have contributed to myself, emphasizes the way in which the sort of naked body we might expect to encounter in one of these protests is figured as an aesthetically pleasing body that is easy to look at, to photograph, and to disseminate across the world (as is the case with

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Femen, PETA, Lush, and SlutWalk protests) (Pace 2005; O'Keefe 2011; Wrenn 2015; Fanghanel 2019). Those bodies certainly transgress norms of what we do in public space through their nakedness, yet they are not, in themselves, wholly transgressive. Indeed, by eroticizing violence, and by offering the naked female body to be objectified, both nonhuman-animal rights protests and antirape protests rely on the fact that in order to convey their political messages, they emerge in capitalist sociocultural contexts where erotic violence is titillating. In the pursuit of social and spatial justice, they rely on the fact of rape culture to function, and they are themselves complicit in its proliferation. At the same time, the stories that are told by the bodies that we have explored in this article complicate this picture.

By deliberately mobilizing ugliness as a political weapon, these protests might be thought to halt the interminability of rape culture in different ways. By defacing herself—or allowing herself to be defaced—the protestor in Lush's front window attempts to move the discussion of nonhuman-animal rights out of the sexualized realm that we usually encounter in these sorts of protests. That she denies her own beauty can be interpreted as a move to make her body legible as a text outside of rape culture. It resonates with the abjection and self-negation that Baker describes in her analysis of women whose freedom is found in forging ugliness (Baker 2010; see also Halprin 1996). At the same time, for ugliness to function in this way, it must be conceived within an economy that knows what is ugly in the first place.

This is where the potency of the sex bomb's refusal to be ugly emerges. Sure, she is offered up to the protest because she is supposed to be ugly, but her performance is one that also refuses the possibility of this. She marks a break with the construction of ugliness as something that is a problem. By refusing to be ugly, as hag she might refuse some of the power of ugliness to denigrate, but because this ugliness operates within a rape culture that precisely does denigrate ugly women, this ugliness—that she appears to ferociously disavow—holds onto its power to disturb and perturb its audience.

The power emerges, in part, because of the uncanniness of the grotesque body. Femen's brand of self-proclaimed "pop-feminism" claims that beauty is their weapon (Tayler 2013); meanwhile, nonhuman-animal rights groups like PETA (n.d.) admit that "provocative, attention-grabbing actions are sometimes necessary to get people talking about issues that they would otherwise prefer not to think about." Attractive naked bodies—usually those of models and celebrities, in the case of PETA—are mobilized to grab this attention. In Femen protests, protesters explain that they have weaponized beauty; that their "blonde, curly hair, flowers . . . make up" is intended to irritate the male onlooker; that this beauty is intended to be provocative; that beauty is in the hands of the protesters, and not of men "any more" (*The Atlantic* a, 3.14, 4.10). Yet elsewhere, Femen tells us that traditional feminism comprises "old fashioned, old grumpy women, [who are] not attractive for young girls like [them]" (*The Atlantic* b, 4.41). Reclaiming beauty certainly resonates with postfeminist ideas of self-determination and agency, but the rejection of historic feminist struggles, with the rejection of women who are "old," "grumpy," "old-fashioned," marks how invested the Femen group remains in conventional beauty, ageism, and, indeed, rape culture.

These feminist and nonhuman-animal rights protests may want to provoke the onlooker with their weaponized, naked beauty, but in these protests it is the grotesque body that does so, in ways that the protesters themselves may not have anticipated. It angers and troubles. We saw this in violent and aggressive responses to both the Femen and the Lush protest. And it appears to be the uncanniness of this body that makes it potent. Like the power of ACT UP's interventions in public space, or

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ORLAN's confrontational work on beauty, the manifestation of the ugly body with all its flaws reminds us of decay, disease, and death and also the horror of the laughing, senile, pregnant hag (Bahktin 1984). By refusing even the grounds upon which ugliness exists, in the end it is the "sex bomb" who transcends the terrain upon which the text of her body is read. Even if she is recaptured into legibility as an uncanny creature, it is this capacity to terrify by sliding around these representations that she harbors the capacity truly to trouble the rape culture upon which these protests habitually rely to function.

Ugliness fosters potentiality that might be as transgressive as it is normative (see Halprin 1996; Baker 2010). In this article we have considered how the concept of ugliness and the grotesque interact with the consecrated somatic norm—that which we will accept seeing—of naked protest. We have seen how rape culture sustains and is sustained by interactions with these norms of nakedness. Yet none of this stops these interventions from having the potential to transform contemporary politics, or to foster social justice that is not paid for by the oppression of others. But in order for naked protest to become revolutionary, we must attend to the dynamic among the politics of space, the ethics of desire, and the systems of power that intersect them. We might do this by opening ourselves—hag-like— to the horror of becoming-grotesque while also refusing the limitations of what is grotesque in the first place.

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Notes

1 Rape culture is understood as the normalization of violence against women in contemporary social life.

2 See https://femen.org/category/gallery.

3 This has since been attenuated in recent iterations of the SlutWalk with emphasis more on inclusivity rather than on reclaiming the label "slut."

4 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4K9iSyj_lk.

5 These are flower crowns, which are part of Ukrainian folkloric traditions, representing virginity and innocence.

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