

# FLOWING LOCKS and MONSTER BODIES

Hannah Raisin  
and Atlanta Eke's  
affective feminist  
performance

■ Laura Castagnini

**H**annah Raisin's work incites a response that circulates through disgust to delight and disbelief. Since beginning art school in 2005, Raisin's performative investigations into the limits of her own body have been visceral and demanding; the Melbourne-based artist has filmed herself eating a bunch of red roses until she threw up, pouring milk on herself out the front of a theatre showing *Mary Poppins*, and feeding caviar to her sequin-clad vagina. Raisin's practice is fuelled by her personal frustrations with societal restrictions and norms and thus her employment of feminist and performative strategies are intuitive rather than theoretical or political. In a voice that is both playful and affective Raisin's work speaks to the startling relevance of feminism to a younger generation of Australian women. *Flowing Locks* (2008), for example, presents the young, beautiful, artist gracefully dancing in a lycra bodysuit in the forecourt of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA). Her snapshot of flawless femininity is broken by an extraordinary amount of bodily hair that sprouts from her pubic area and armpits to flow in the wind. After four decades of hairy feminist pits it may come as a surprise to some that female body hair continues to pack such a punch.

I was reminded of *Flowing Locks* when viewing Atlanta Eke's 2012 Next Wave Festival performance, *Monster Body*. Eke's presentation similarly voiced the tensions of femininity, and its relevance to my own life often left me breathless with recognition. Although presented in a different artform, dance as opposed to video, Eke's *Monster Body* shared a number of overlapping images and concerns with Raisin's *Flowing Locks*. These intersections of parody, excess, and the (feminine) grotesque, as well as my affective response to both works, has prompted me to further investigate the role of incongruity in feminist performance. Raisin's *Flowing Locks* is an ideal lens for examining Eke's *Monster Body* – specifically the juxtaposition of feminine and female as represented through dance and contrasted with the corporeal body. Such a critical approach responds to the working methodologies of these particular artists as well as a broader cultural shift in critical discourse.<sup>1</sup>

The key moment in Raisin's *Flowing Locks* is the incongruity between societal expectations of femininity (graceful dancing) with an exaggerated reality of the lived female body (bodily hair). The exaggerated, abject hairiness of the female body interrupts gendered expectations of both the artist and the wider social sphere. The realisation of this disjuncture results in another kind of disruption – a bodily one. Lips



Hannah Raisin *Flowing locks* 2007, performance, HD single channel video, 1:24 minutes.

part, mouths open, and the viewer laughs. A key element in the production of laughter is incongruity; a momentary realisation of rupture between expectation and reality. This disruption provokes laughter but also challenges and parodies gendered performance. A similar incongruence between femininity and the female body arises repeatedly during Eke's *Monster Body*. In one scene Eke, wearing a flesh coloured bodystocking (similar to Raisin's in *Flowing Locks*), fills her tight costume full of small balls and puts on a plump koala mask. As the sound of car noises fills the room the dancer attempts ballet moves, theatrical poses, and a catwalk in her lumpy ensemble. Her movements portray the performance of femininity as distinct from the reality of the female body – which throughout *Monster Body* is represented as monstrous and animalistic. In the opening scene Eke, wearing nothing but a gorilla mask, hula hoops and watches the audience file into the theatre. In the subsequent piece she stretches and dances naked in time to guttural animal sounds. Thus, while femininity is represented by both Raisin and Eke through the act of dancing (and posing) itself, the female body is invoked through a range of signifiers including hair, lumps, beastly masks and animal noises.

Another scene in *Monster Body* begins with Britney Spears'

*I'm Not A Girl* blasting from the loudspeakers and Eke standing naked centre stage. The audience waits patiently, wondering when she will begin to dance, and then realise a stream of urine is running down her leg. To our horror she then sits down in the puddle and begins a series of feminine poses on the floor that end in her violently rolling over. The sugary sweet singing continues and we are starkly reminded that girlhood (and womanhood) is so often marked by an uneasy relationship to the body. A collision of popular culture and bodily functions is also enacted within the practice of Raisin. Her video *Cycle* (2010) depicts the artist standing alone in her bathroom wearing a blue bathing suit and holding her cat. In her mouth is a plastic tube leading down to her crotch which – the viewer soon notices – she is using to drink her own urine. Within both *Monster Body* and *Cycle* laughter arises upon the moment of realisation of incongruence; that a woman is actually urinating in public, on stage or for the camera, and that we are watching it. At the same time urine, a gender-neutral bodily fluid, is a liquid that all humans expel, but usually distance themselves from. The artist's direct engagement with urine, through lying in or drinking it, counters societal expectations of clean, pretty girls and is thus a feminist action.



Humour comes from a combination of incongruity and the exaggeration of reality. Although women do not usually display extremely long body hair or lie in their own urine there is some element of accuracy in the performances of Raisin and Eke. Despite their best efforts of concealment women do indeed possess lumps and bumps, grow hair in places other than their heads, have voices capable of making beastly noises, and urinate. Linda Hutcheon has theorised parody as operating through “repetition with difference” that is enabled by a critical distance.<sup>2</sup> This definition is useful when considering the work of Raisin and Eke whose work ‘repeats’ traditional signifiers of femininity to remind us that gender is a fragile performance – one which can be shattered to pieces with an eruption of laughter.

Affect and incongruity in feminist performance are certainly not new concepts. For more than a generation feminist performance art has subverted, countered, and vexed notions of femininity as well as presented and celebrated the unruly female body. Hannah Raisin and Atlanta Eke’s work, however, reconsiders and repurposes earlier subversive strategies to connect with new contexts and audiences. As a

young woman living in Australia I find it a rare occasion for contemporary art to speak my language, move me, to make me feel something. Which is why the feminism espoused by Raisin and Eke is the kind I have been searching for; it is funny, poignant, and still so very relevant. ■

**Laura Castagnini is an independent curator and Master of Arts (Art History) candidate at the University of Melbourne.**

<sup>1</sup> See Susan Best, *Visualising Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant Garde*, IB Tauris: London, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*, Methuen: New York and London, 1985.

**ABOVE:** Atlanta Eke *Monster body* 2013, live performance Dance Massive Festival. Photo: Rachel Bernhaut.

**OPPOSITE BELOW:** Atlanta Eke *Monster body* 2012, live performance, Next Wave Festival. Photo: Sam Ackroyd. All images courtesy the artist.

