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The Im/possible Femininity of Nina Arsenault: theatrical gender in *I w@s B*rbie* and *The Silicone Diaries*

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ABSTRACT – The Im/possible Femininity of Nina Arsenault: theatrical gender in *I w@s B*rbie* and *The Silicone Diaries* – This essay argues that the performed corporeality of performance artist Nina Arsenault demonstrates how gender can be constituted by two mutually exclusive theories of gender simultaneously. Specifically, Arsenault im/possibly embodies gender as performative and as an essential psychic sense of self. Her expression of a feminine identity onstage is incompatible with theories of gender performativity because it incorporates a voluntary act: performance in the theatre. Arsenault also opposes theories that claim gender is an essential psychic sense of self by expressing her sense of self in her art practice/everyday life. Arsenault highlights that the theatrical materiality she embodies, which also further establishes her femininity, is im/possibly performatively constituted. Put simply, Arsenault embodies gender through performance and performativity.
Keywords: **Theatricality. Performativity. Transsexual. Transgender. Performance.**

RÉSUMÉ – La Féminité Im/possible de Nina Arsenault : genre théâtral dans *I w@s B*rbie* et *The Silicone Diaries* – Cet essai affirme que Nina Arsenault démontre que le genre peut être constitué simultanément de deux théories du genre opposées, révélant la manière dont le genre peut être formé d'une façon qu'on considère im/possible. Plus particulièrement, je défends la thèse selon laquelle elle incarne, d'une manière im/possible, le genre comme performance et le genre comme conscience de soi psychique essentielle. L'identité féminine qu'elle exprime sur scène est incompatible avec théories de performativité du genre, parce qu'elle englobe un acte volontaire: celui du jeu théâtral. Plus simplement, Arsenault incarne le genre de manière im/possible à la fois par la performance *et* par la performativité.
Mots-clés: **Théâtralité. Performativité. Transsexuel. Transgenre. Performance.**

RESUMO – A Im/possível Feminilidade de Nina Arsenault: gênero teatral em *I w@s B*rbie* e em *The Silicone Diaries* – Este ensaio defende que a corporalidade interpretada pela artista da performance Nina Arsenault demonstra como o gênero pode ser constituído ao mesmo tempo por duas teorias mutuamente exclusivas. Especificamente, Arsenault encarna de maneira im/possível o gênero como performativo e como um sentido psíquico fundamental do eu. Sua expressão de uma identidade feminina no palco é incompatível com teorias de performatividade de gênero porque encarna um ato voluntário: a performance no teatro. Arsenault também opõe teorias que afirmam ser o gênero um sentido psíquico fundamental do eu ao expressar seu sentido de eu na prática artística/vida cotidiana. Arsenault destaca que a materialidade teatral encarnada por ela, e que também fundamenta ainda mais sua feminilidade, é constituída performativamente de modo im/possível. Em suma, Arsenault encarna o gênero por meio da performance e da performatividade.
Palavras-chave: **Teatricalidade. Performatividade. Transsexual. Transgênero. Performance.**

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Nina Arsenault's surgically altered transsexual body is eerily similar to Mattel's Barbie doll. She is plastic, just like Barbie. Her large round breasts and curvy hourglass silhouette are made of silicone implants and injections sculpted into her thighs and hips. Her cosmetically constructed thirty-six-inch bust, twenty-six-inch waist, and forty-inch hips shaped by pliable plastic molded to her flesh are as dramatic as Barbie's thirty-nine, eighteen, thirty-three measurements are in pliable plastic molded to wire[1]. In her solo performance works *I w@s B*rbie* (2010) and *The Silicone Diaries* (2009), Arsenault unabashedly declares that her style of femininity has been influenced by Mattel's famous doll (Arsenault, 2012c; Arsenault, 2010). *I w@s B*rbie,* written and performed by Arsenault, tells the story of her experience of being hired to play Barbie at a fashion show hosted by Mattel celebrating the 50th birthday of the famous doll at L'Oreal Toronto Fashion Week. *The Silicone Diaries,* also written and performed by Arsenault, is a series of monologues that tell the story of her discovery of who and what she wanted to be and become, the cosmetic and plastic surgeries she underwent to construct the Barbie-like figure she aspired to embody, and the sex-work she did to earn the money to undergo the surgeries needed to make this fantasy a reality. At the beginning of *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault describes a mannequin at a local department store that inspired her unique femininity as "A life-sized doll" that is "more beautiful than Barbie" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 206). Later in the play, she incorporates this plastic aesthetic inspired by this mannequin in her own embodied gender identity when she asks her cosmetic surgery consultant for "a nose like a Barbie doll" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 217). Through the stories told in these two plays, many of which were first published in her bi-weekly column for Toronto's *Fab Magazine*, Arsenault explores what it means to be a woman who embodies standards of beauty deemed impossible.

Ironically, Arsenault is lauded for embodying and problematizing the very impossible standards of femininity that Barbie has been criticized for promoting: She has been awarded the Pride Toronto "Unstoppable Award" for "continuing to challenge and illuminate her community's constructed notions of sex and beauty", as well as the Bruce Bryden "Redefine the Possible Award" from the York University Alumnae Association. Arsenault has garnered this attention to her embodiment of impossible feminine beauty in her artistic practice across mediums: in her public lectures, her

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LGBTQ publications (such as the once popular but now defunct *Fab Magazine*), the provocative images she produces in collaboration with photographers, performances in nightclubs, appearances on television, and onstage in her sold out performances of *I w@s B*rbie* and *The Silicone Diaries* at various LGBT and LGBT-allied theater companies across the world. Though Arsenault was not awarded these awards specifically because she embodied the impossible standards of feminine beauty established by Barbie, it is her Barbie-like figure and femininity that has been an important part of how she "[...] continu[es] to challenge and illuminate her community's constructed notions of sex and beauty" and how Arsenault "has demonstrated leadership and successes that are innovative, unconventional and daring". Arsenault has not only constructed a feminine body inspired in part by a doll that is endlessly criticized for promoting impossible standards of white femininity, but she has done the impossible by being *celebrated* by queer, feminist, and progressive institutions for embodying a style of femininity that has been continually denounced by queer, feminist, and progressive institutions[2].

Arsenault has constructed and embodied her unique style of femininity in the context of a fundamental debate among queer and feminist scholars on gender and transsexuality. This debate centers on two mutually exclusive theories of gender that have dominated how gender is conceived in Europe and North America. One side of this debate, articulated by trans studies scholars and institutions, posits that gender is an essential element of a person's psychic sense of self, or what I succinctly refer to as a "psychic truth" that determines how an individual expresses their gender in a way that feels true to themselves. In the introduction to the *Trans Studies Reader 2*, leading trans studies scholars Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (2013, p. 9) describe gender as a "deep essential truth" and as the National Centre for Transgender Equality (2015) states, gender is a determined by "[...] your internal knowledge of your gender – for example, your knowledge that you're a man, a woman, or another gender". The other theory in this debate, developed by American philosopher Judith Butler, posits that gender is constituted performatively. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990, p. 185) writes "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality". Specifically, Butler's theory demonstrates that gender

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is constituted through a "stylized repetition of acts" which "constitute the *illusion* of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1990, p. 191, italics added). For Butler, "gender attributes […] are not expressive but performative" and consequently "these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (Butler, 1990, p. 185). If, as Butler claims, an individual does not have a gender prior to the acts that constitute that gender, then an individual cannot understand their gender as an integral element of their psychic sense of self. Conversely, if gender is made apparent through behaviours motivated by essential elements of a person's psyche, as theories of gender as a psychic truth posit, then gender cannot be merely iterations that produce the "illusion of an abiding gendered self", as Butler claims.

Im/possibility is an analytic framework which synthesizes the failure of a single, coherent, extant theoretical explanation for the gender that Arsenault successfully embodies. Arsenault's gender identity is, of course, possible because she lives her day-to-day life as a unique hyper-feminine person in her Barbie-esque body. At the same time, her gender identity is impossible because she embodies her gender through the mutually exclusive theories of gender as psychic truth and gender as performative. Arsenault im/possibly embodies gender through performance *and* performativity

Through an analysis of the persona and performed corporeality of Nina Arsenault, specifically how she presents herself in *The Silicone Diaries* and *I w@s Barbie*[3], this essay argues that Arsenault demonstrates how gender can be constituted in ways that engage mutually exclusive theories of gender, and consequently, evidences how gender can be constituted in ways that are deemed im/possible. Arsenault im/possibly constitutes her gender in three over-lapping, yet incompatible, modes: Her everyday life, her art-practice-as-way-of-life/way-of-life-as-art-practice, and her performances onstage. Arsenault performatively constitutes her gender living day to day. But unlike most of us, Arsenault's "life and art are irrevocably entwined", and her artmaking *is* a quotidian activity (Arsenault 2012a). Arsenault considers her theatrical performances, in *I w@s B*rbie* and *The Silicone Diaries* specifically, as a site where she constitutes, expresses, *and* validates her gender identity. Arsenault im/possibly embodies two mutually exclusive theories of gender: gender as performative and gender as an essential character of one's psyche. Her expression of a feminine identity onstage is

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incompatible with Butler's theory of gender performativity because it incorporates a voluntary act: performance in the theatre. Countering Butler's theory, Arsenault's self-presentation, onstage and off, illustrates how both the *ordinary*, involuntary acts involved in living day-to-day and the *extraordinary,* masterful act of artmaking are complementary sites where gender identity can be constituted and expressed. Arsenault also opposes theories that claim gender is an essential psychic sense of self when she expresses her psychic sense of gender in her art practice/everyday life while simultaneously constituting that psychic truth. That is to say that, Arsenault's art practice paradoxically expresses a psychic truth that is only constituted through that act of expression. In both these plays, Arsenault also highlights the theatrical materiality of her hyper-feminine body, and how that theatrical materiality inhabits a theatrical temporality, which also further establishes her unique femininity as not performatively and not-not performatively constituted.

By constituting her gender in an im/possible way, Arsenault exhibits *theatrical* femininity. Arsenault expresses a *theatrical* gender identity because, following from the definition of theatricality I outline below, her gender identity does not correspond with existing theories of gender and her gender identity does not-not accommodate current theories of gender. Fundamentally, her femininity is theatrical because it is not performative nor actuated by her psyche and not-not performative nor actuated by her psyche. Furthermore, according to extant theories of gender, Arsenault's gender should not be possible, but by living as a unique hyper feminine woman day-to-day, it is not-not possible. By constituting her gender through two theoretical modes that offer opposing ways of regarding gender identity, Arsenault's femininity offers possible and impossible alternatives to the violence of oppressive gender norms. She illustrates ways in which theatrical gender, onstage and off, can be an empowering, autonomous, and an im/possible mode of self-expression.

Theatricality

The aesthetic structure of theatricality exemplified by Arsenault's unique gender expression, which is not merely a superficial application of theater-oriented activities such as performing a script onstage, builds upon and specifies what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner describes

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as an aesthetic of double negation, or the "not-not" character of performance (Schechner, 2010, p. 110). Schechner writes,

> During workshops-rehearsals performers play with words, things, and actions, some of which are 'me' and some 'not me'. By the end of the process the 'dance goes into the body'. So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in this production of the play Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field of frame of double negativity choice and virtuality remain active (Schechner, 2010, p. 110).

Schechner's structure of the "not-not", or double negation, does not apply to all performance, but distinguishes between performances that exhibit the concept of theatricality from instances of performance that do not. For instance, in some Christian rituals of communion, the person taking communion, if they have faith, believe that the bread *is* the body of Christ as well as acknowledge that the bread *is* bread. Thus, such a performance/ritual maintains a double affirmation, not a double negation. Even when a Catholic, who believes in transubstantiation, believes that the bread in the eucharist has become and thus *is* the body of Christ, and is no longer bread, they perform an act of single affirmation: the bread *is* the body of Christ and *is no longer* bread. In contrast to these performances, theatricality does not merely exist as a kind of double negation, but is a kind of double negation that specifically maintains a quality of excess: the actor who plays Hamlet in *Hamlet* defies the standard definition of negation in that he *doubles* the negation, and is *both* not *and* not-not Hamlet. Through this excessive double negation, the structure I propose relies on the presence of the live actor in conventional theater practice, while simultaneously maintaining a negation: Hamlet, the character, is not present – Hamlet is always a fiction, and hence does not exist and can never be present – while the actor, the person who is playing the character of Hamlet in the live event of theater, necessarily exists and must be present. Theatricality is excessive in that it is negation, or in other words an absence, that is simultaneously a presence. The not-not character of theatricality contrasts the assumed reduction or absence that is essential to negation. Phenomena that exhibit the aesthetic of theatricality defy the logic of negation by being over-the-top, larger-than-life, and grandiose. In contrast to the logic of negation, which requires reduction to the point of annihilation, theatrical phenomenon captures its audience's attention by being excessive in comparison to the normative objects, acts, or utterances that it recodes.

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Evident in her appearances onstage, onscreen, and in everyday life, Arsenault actualizes a femininity that manifests this structure of theatricality. Arsenault embodies the signifiers of standard ideal femininity represented, for instance, by Barbie[4], but despite being constituted by these stereotypically feminine traits, she also evades and exceeds socially acceptable femininity. According to the theory of gender performativity, Arsenault is feminine – she constitutes her gender through repeated quotidian activity, but she is not-not feminine – she appeals to the stage to constitute her gender identity, which is disqualified as a proper site of gender constitution by Butler. Conversely, according to theories of gender as an essential truth of her psyche, Arsenault is feminine – she understands herself as essentially a woman, but she is not-not feminine – she consciously and voluntarily constitutes her gender through her artistic practice. By confounding both these prevalent theories of gender, Arsenault disrupts the theories of gender that dominate Western thought today. Arsenault's gender is theatrical insofar as it is not properly constituted femininity and not-not properly constituted femininity[5].

Theatrical Performativity

Arsenault simultaneously exemplifies *and* confounds Butler's theory of gender performativity. Arsenault lives her day-to-day life as a woman, consequently constructing her gender performatively, and thus embodies Butler's conception of gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time […] through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1990, p. 191). Arsenault also challenges the limits of what constitutes the everyday that is identified as the proper site of gender performativity. She considers every aspect of her life, from her performance art and stage-work, to lectures and media appearances, to her diet and workout regime, to be part of her artistic practice. As stated in her "Manifesto", any consideration of Arsenault's gender must consider her quotidian lived experience to be a part of her artistic practice (Arsenault, 2012b). Thus, Arsenault rejects the boundary between the ordinary and extraordinary that Butler establishes when she writes that gender "[...] must be understood as the *mundane* way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1990, p. 179). Arsenault's art practice, as indivisible from her day to day life, becomes part of the

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mundane activities that constitute her gender and/or Arsenault's everyday life, as indivisible from her art practice, becomes part of the extraordinary activities that constitute her gender. As a part of her life-as-art/art-as-life practice, Arsenault includes her performances in the context of the theatre as modes in which she constitutes and expresses her gender. Arsenault counters Butler who disqualifies performance as a site in which gender can be constituted or expressed: "[...] performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of the reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" (Butler, 1993a, p. 178). Arsenault confounds the distinction between quotidian life and artistic performances. She undoes the Butlerian boundary between art and life that distinguishes performativity ("mundane", quotidian activity) from performance (as a "bounded artistic act"). Arsenault's quotidian femininity is an extraordinary constitution of gender – there is no difference between her performative constitutions *and* voluntary constructions of gender, which is antithetical to Butler's claim that gender cannot be constituted through agential artistic practice.

Arsenault invites her audience, both in the theater and on the street, to see her as embodying normative femininity but also exceeding what is socially authorized to be normative. Embodying signifiers of femininity, Arsenault adheres to what is determined to be normatively feminine – long hair, eyes and lips highlighted with make-up, an hourglass silhouette. Despite marshaling these signs of normative femininity, her particular excessive embodiment of these characteristics cannot be read as normative. Arsenault's extreme femininity personifies and deviates from Butler's description of the discursive resignification of the word queer. Arsenault embodies feminine norms but, like the history of the term 'queer' outlined by Butler, she enacts a "kind of citation [that emerges] as theatrical to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention" (Butler, 1993a, p. 177). By resignifying normative femininity, Arsenault enacts what Butler describes as a subject's "constrained agency" (Reddy; Butler, 2004, p. 117). Butler tells us that "Social terms decide our beings, but they do not decide them once and for all. They also establish the conditions by which a certain constrained agency, even a decision, is possible on our parts" (Reddy; Butler, 2004, p. 117). But unlike the term

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queer, as described by Butler, Arsenault does not "reverse" the signification of femininity, but rather, maintains both its normative signification (as socially authorized) and an excessive, non-normative signification. Thus, Arsenault's audiences, in the sense that her audience is an indefinite public who, in their totality, reproduce and reify social norms of gender, can only conceive of Arsenault's femininity as theatrical. For her public, Arsenault is not normatively feminine but not-not normatively feminine.

In an article titled *The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler*, Geoff Boucher highlights the contradictory potential for subversion that Butler exposes in her analysis of the term 'queer' in the performativity of gender itself, and which Arsenault exploits in her unique theatrical femininity. Boucher demonstrate that "[Butler's] theoretical trajectory exhibits a major inconsistency" (Boucher, 2006, p. 112). According to Boucher, Butler bases her theory of performativity, following Nietzsche, on the claim "Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 34). Butler also claims that "[...] gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 1990, p. 190). Butler, thus, is inconsistent in her claim that there is no subject prior to gender. As Boucher notes, "[...] it seems impossible that gender parody by an individual could be an 'intentional and […] dramatic' performance of identity, when her theory proposes that action is subjectless and that power scripts all performances in advance" (Boucher, 2006, p. 119). Boucher concedes that Butler understands each subject to have a pre-discursive, affective "will-to-identity" that emerges from her interpretation of Louis Althusser's scene of interpellation (Boucher, 2006, p. 119). According to Boucher, "Butler reads Althusser's vignette and not his theory, to claim that a passionate attachment to the image of the law that precedes subjectification is the basis for this identification, which makes it possible for subjects to recognise themselves in the call of conscience" (Boucher, 2006, p. 121). Thus, according to Boucher, Butler claims "that the speaking and acting 'I' is constituted through discourse and that an auto-affective pre-subject precedes discourse are in contradiction" (Boucher, 2006, p. 122). It is precisely this contradiction in Butler's theory which Arsenault embodies that position her gender identity as theoretically

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theatrical. Even though Arsenault cannot completely control how her gender is conceived by any audience, she is able to marshal characteristics that, though their reproduction and reification in the social world she inhabits, allow her to present a unique gender embodiment that deviates from, but does not oppose or undo, normative femininity. Arsenault embodies a gender that is performatively constituted insofar as she is compelled by social forces to exhibit an intelligible gender identity in her day-to-day life. Simultaneously, she constitutes her unique feminine gender identity in voluntary, masterful performances onstage and off that are determined by an auto-affective (pre) subjective consciousness[6].

For Arsenault, the stage is a site in which she, paradoxically, demonstrates that her gender identity is both a result of performance and performativity. Arsenault confounds Butlerian distinctions when she enacts the day-to-day "stylized acts" that performatively constitute her unique gender identity onstage in her performances onstage. In her solo plays, Arsenault appears as she would if you saw her in the world. In *The Silicone Diaries,* Arsenault appears as she would in a nightclub: her hair is teased and, always, draped over one of her eyes; she wears a plastic translucent black dress, one that reveals her bra, panties, and fish net stockings, while her arms are veiled in black sleeves made of the material of her dress. In *I w@s B*rbie,* Arsenault wears a pink tutu-esque cocktail dress. Her weave is teased large, some hair falls over her face, her eye hidden again, and she wears a pink bow in her hair. Arsenault's costumes in both solo performance pieces disrupt the clear demarcation between the stage and the street, a boundary that is required if the voluntary artistic practice of the stage is disqualified as a site for performative gender constitution. When Arsenault concedes in the final scene of *The Silicone Diaries* that she has "built a perfection onto [her] face that needs make-up and hairstyles to complete it", she presents a face to her audience that is the outcome of performative, quotidian acts that constitute her gender onstage *and* off (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 224).

In *I W@s B*rbie*, which is primarily set at a fashion show, Arsenault is a participant in activities that qualify as performative acts that have the power to constitute feminine gender. Arsenault begins *I W@s B*rbie* by spritzing herself with perfume, mimicking the aesthetics of a commercial; Arsenault enacts yet another feminine "'stylized' ritual of cosmetic quotidian routines"

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(Arsenault, 2010, p. 2). Arsenault notes that other activities being staged around the fashion show for which she has been hired to play Barbie include stereotypically feminine domestic activity: "Amidst the Barbie displays there are real women, blonde women, demonstrating household appliances like irons and steamers" (Arsenault, 2010, p. 8). In one key anecdote in *I w@s B*rbie,* Arsenault performs the mundane act of a hostess when she serves cupcakes to the fashion show's audience. As the domestic hostess of the event, she performatively legitimates her stereotypical feminine, domestic status (Arsenault, 2010, p. 8).

Arsenault's quotidian drag aesthetic also counters Butler's theory of gender as performative. Although Butler appeals to drag as an analogy of the fluidity of gender, she distinguishes drag performance from proper and valid constitutions of gender when she says that drag "demands its stage and its club" (Butler; Davies, 2008, p. 39). Butler claims that the constitution of gender is not, and can never be, "conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject" (Butler, 1993a, p. xxiii). Thus, Butler clarifies that gender is *not* an act of performance, and thus disqualifies drag performance and live performance in the theatre as sites where gender can be properly constituted. Arsenault, who embraces embodying drag aesthetics all the time, confounds Butler's distinction, rendering a practice of gender constitution for which Butler's theory cannot account.

In her day-to-day life, her art-as-life/life-as-art, and in performance, Arsenault embodies drag aesthetics to construct a theatrical femininity. Arsenault consciously employs the signifiers that constitute stereotypical femininity to construct a theatrically feminine gender identity that, like drag, is consciously crafted, but unlike drag, is also her quotidian mode of being. In *The Silicone Diaries,* Arsenault recounts a pivotal moment in her transition when, upon deciding to wear a three-pound weave day-to-day, she reminds herself that "People say, 'Don't do that. Don't do that. You won't look like a real woman if you do that. You'll look like a drag queen if you do that'" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 215). She then tries to convince herself that "It has to be enough. You have to accept yourself. You have to accept your body. Just be proud. Be a proud trangendered woman" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 215). Nevertheless, she refuses to accept the current status of her gender and declares "This is the most I will ever look like a normal, natural

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woman", because "It's not enough" to be natural and normal (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 216). In this moment, Arsenault refuses that her drag-inspired femininity is or should be limited to a stage and accepts that she will embody it in the real world even as it is at odds with legitimate, socially accepted femininity. She ushers the drag queen off the stage and into the streets[7]. By constituting her femininity on the street as well as on the stage and the club, and in the photograph and the media, Arsenault challenges Butler's distinction between *performatively* constituted "real" gender and artistically constructed *performances* of genders.

In *I w@s B*rbie,* Arsenault re-enacts an exchange wherein she is offered the job to play Barbie at L'Oreal Fashion Week that evidences that her day-to-day self-presentation, the activity that qualifies for the constitution of gender performativity, is exemplary of drag, and is also theatrical. Her drag aesthetics are not just identified but celebrated by the woman who has offered to hire her for the job, Deborah:

> Deborah: 'Who could *be* Barbie except a drag queen wearing padding here, here and here *(indicates breasts, hips, thighs)* to give him that incredible Barbie body?'.
> Arsenault: 'Oh, well, Deborah, I'm not exactly a drag queen' (Arsenault, 2010, p. 3).

In one sense Arsenault's gender is not performative, because it belongs to the realm of drag aesthetics, as Deborah points out, but is not-not performative either, because it is realized in her quotidian activity. Conversely, Arsenault's gender is not drag, because she embodies a feminine drag aesthetic every day. At the same time, it is not-not drag, because it is directly and explicitly inspired by the aesthetics of drag.

Arsenault's living practice of self-portraiture also counters Butler's theory of gender performativity because self-portraiture, like drag, relies on an agential, conscious, and voluntary subject. Arsenault describes the surgical alterations to her body as a form of self-portraiture, just like her conventional art practice:

> Traditionally, self-portraits are the artist making an image of themself [sic], and this is what I do. I create images of how I see myself and how I want to see myself, in the world, in the theater, in photography, in writing… For me, the differences between my surgeries, the way I present myself on the street, a memoir or visual self-portrait are very blurry and actually not very

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> helpful. I think of myself as a self-portrait of the author. It's the medium that's different (Arsenault apud Halferty, 2012, p. 36).

Arsenault's treatment of herself as both subject and object of her artwork is key to her practice of self-portraiture. In the words of the dramaturg for *The Silicone Diaries*, Judith Rudakoff, "Arsenault *is* her body of work" (Rudakoff, 2012, p. 3). Within the practice of her self-portraiture, Arsenault, the artist, treats her gender and her body as an art object, as material that can be manipulated and crafted with artistic aims. Arsenault is a voluntary subject who conceives of a unique gender that she autonomously constitutes in her art practice. Through her art practice and her everyday life, Arsenault performs the performative constitution of her gender.

Theatrical Essentialism

Arsenault challenges Butler's claim that gender, as performative, cannot be an expression of an interior psychic essence, but rather is only produced through a "sustained social performance" repeated over time (Butler, 1990, p. 191). In *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, Butler disqualifies an inner essence as a source from which gender identity is expressed when she writes, "It's not that there is some kind of *sex* that exists in hazy biological form that is somehow *expressed* in the gait, the posture, the gesture" (Butler, 1993b, p. 317). For Butler, gender "produces the *illusion* of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core" and thus, gender is always a "surface sign" (Butler, 1993b, p. 317). By appealing to gender as an expression of an inner psychic essence, a conception of gender promoted by popular understandings of transgender identity and espoused by medical authorities, gender theorists, and some trans people themselves, Arsenault challenges performativity, which has become one of the mainstream theoretical frameworks in which her gender can be understood.

Many theories of gender assume that a subject's gender identity is a "deep essential truth", one that cannot be consciously or voluntarily determined (Stryker; Aizura, 2013, p. 9). In the simplest terms, the National Centre for Transgender Equality understands gender as a psychic fact in their definition of gender identity as "your internal knowledge of your gender – for example, your knowledge that you're a man, a woman, or another gender" (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015). Many

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medical professionals conceive of gender identity as an expression of a psychic truth and assess whether an individual should be recommended for the surgical procedure required for a sex change by determining what a patient's "true" gender identity is. Psychiatrist Colette Chiland concludes that "If [a trans person] goes to a doctor, it is not because they feel ill in their minds, but to have their 'true body' restored to them" (Chiland, 2003, p. 16). Some scholars posit gender as an essential feature of an individual. Trans scholar Jay Prosser theorizes gender as an expression of a psychological truth in contrast to prevalent queer theories of gender. Prosser argues that transsexuals are invested in "embodied becoming" enacted through narratives which describe their process of "going home" to their "true" gender (Prosser, 1998, p. 486). The narrative that describes the transsexual's journey "home" at the center of Prosser's theory "[...] will allow one to finally arrive at where one should have always been: the destination, the *telos* of this narrative (being able to live in one's 'true identity')" (Prosser, 1998, p. 488). Though the narratives that are central to the process of "embodied becoming" may be socially or consciously constructed, the *telos* that motivates that narrative exists *a priori* to that narrative. In this way, this *telos* can be considered the psychic truth or interior essence that determines gender. "Home" in Prosser's formulation can be read as a metaphor for the psyche. In Prosser's trans theory of gender, one that mirrors psychological accounts of the "truth" of gender, the psyche is the site of the truth that *houses* what the subject becomes in the process of "embodied becoming" through narrative, and the body "comes home" to the psyche to live its truth.

Because she considers her gender identity as rooted in a psychological truth, which disqualifies her from constituting her gender performatively, Arsenault's gender aligns with Prosser's theory. As Prosser suggests and Arsenault explicitly acknowledges, transgender identities are often identified in childhood or adolescence but not corporeally realized until later in life. In other words, transgender identities are often posed as an expression of a *truth* that has been thought to exist as a stable and fixed psychological fact since birth. In *I w@s B*rbie*, Arsenault describes a gender identity that, once identified, seems to have remained unchanged since childhood when she expresses dismay that she will be rendered domestic. In response to when she is asked to serve cupcakes to the attendees, she protests: "I have an inner

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child, a little girl who grew up in a little boy's body, in a trailer park, who wanted to be Barbie. This inner child needs to be acknowledged as the epitome of perfect plastic beauty. Let's not make her serve hors d'oeuvres" (Arsenault, 2010, p. 16). Despite how Arsenault also executes the required acts that performatively constitute gender, she maintains that her gender identity is a product of a gendered soul. When asked about whether she will undergo genital confirmation surgery, Arsenault contends that she is "a woman inside" and doesn't necessarily have to have a vagina to consider herself a "real" woman (Arsenault; Kurt, 2009). Hence, through the construction and expression of her hyper-feminine gender, Arsenault frustrates the "difference between gendered and sexed subjectivities as respectively *on* the skin (i.e. performative) and *in* the skin (i.e. embodied)" through her art practice (Latchford, 2012, p. 69). In other words, Arsenault performatively constitutes her gender and expresses a "true" gender that is housed in the psyche[8].

Arsenault continually evokes an interiority, a soul gendered as feminine, in *The Silicone Diaries* as well. While recounting an episode when she performs "Shemale porn" online, Arsenault remarks to a client with whom she is becoming intimate "how hard it is being a woman inside a man's body who looks so male, still" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 209). Later, when she is commenting on the extreme procedure of having silicone, not contained by an implant, injected directly into her flesh, a procedure that may have life-threatening consequences, Arsenault notes, "What I do know is that we have put it all on the line for who we had to be, and that means what we had to look like" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 214). Evoking the language of compulsion through the imperative of "had to be", in a manner of consciously constructing a hyper-feminine body, Arsenault rejects the performative constitution of gender as the only mode of gender construction, and instead situates her feminine gender as an unavoidable essential *truth* of her psyche. The epigraph of the published script reads, "When the soul wishes to experience something, she throws an image of the experience out before her and enters her own image" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 204). In this epigraph, the word "soul" suggests that she understands her gender identity as inspired by an essential "fact" of her being.

Both prevailing theories of gender, either as performative construction or expression of a deep truth originating in the psyche or soul, do not allow

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for artistic practice to be a site of gender constitution. Theories of gender as performative do not allow for subjects who conceive of a gender identity that is autonomously expressed onstage because gender is constituted through repeated quotidian action, and consequently cannot exist prior to its expression. On the other hand, the constitution of gender through autonomous artistic practice can only *express* an essential truth of gender identity, and not be an integral mode in which that essential truth is constituted. Despite how the narration of *coming home* described by Prosser can be a creative act, the *need* to come *home* is a product of an unfixed psychological truth. Hence, according to such theories of gender identity, art and performance can only be sites of gender *expression* and not gender constitution. By constituting a gender identity that is determined by an essential truth through performance *and* performative modes, Arsenault confounds both performative and psychic-embodied theories of gender identity.

Theatrical Matter in Time and Space

Arsenault further demonstrates that she is a subject who voluntarily and consciously constitutes and expresses her gender through art and performance when she explicitly exposes how she determined her gender's *material* construction. In *The Silicone Diaries*, videos and images that depict Arsenault's cosmetic transformation remind the audience of the material she has consciously incorporated into her body to construct her unique femininity. The graphic images of her surgeries, which show her in the hospitals wherein she underwent cosmetic reconstructions, are projected between monologues on a screen behind Arsenault. The audience sees Arsenault bruised and bloodied, scars barely healed, as she lies prone in a hospital bed. These images are contrasted by images of Arsenault before any cosmetic procedures. In these images, Arsenault appears as Rodney. (This is the name that Arsenault was given at birth and that she maintained while living as male.) The images of Rodney/Nina in/after surgery that are projected in video and still photographs marks a contrast with the real life/live body of Arsenault in the (silicone) flesh, in the living present of theater performance. This contrast highlights Arsenault's material transformation.

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Arsenault's artistic practice positions her as an inheritor of the philosophy and art practice of French performance artist ORLAN who also challenges normative modes of gender constitution by highlighting the materiality of the body. Documentary videos made in collaboration with interdisciplinary artist Jordan Tannahill which capture one her many plastic surgeries Arsenault, some of which are included in the performance of *The Silicone Diaries*, present her cosmetic procedures as art practice in a similar way as ORLAN's series of surgeries performed for an audience in the early nineties. Arsenault exhibits certain tenets of ORLAN's *Carnal Art Manifesto*. Unlike ORLAN, whose surgical procedures were "never planned as a quest or pursuit of a single image, beautiful, diabolic or anything in between", Arsenault is motivated by a singular ideal/idea of feminine beauty (Ince, 2000, p. 46). Arsenault's work differs from ORLAN in other distinct ways: ORLAN "'is not interested in [cosmetic surgery's] final, plastic result but in the surgical operation-performance and in the modified body as a site of public debate", while Arsenault's quest has always been oriented to an ideal/idea of beauty; ORLAN's Carnal Art "does not contain a desire for pain", while Arsenault embraces and values the pain involved in her transformation[9]; ORLAN "is not against cosmetic surgery, but against the standards it carries and which are inscribed particularly over women's skin", while Arsenault celebrates the im/possible standards of feminine beauty perpetuated by cosmetic surgery (ORLAN, 2010, p. 28). Despite these differences, the core of both artists' practice is to strive for "[f]reedom from the imposition of conventional body image and its implied goal of a life of conventional quotidian reality" (ORLAN, 2010, p. 28).

By exposing the artistic construction of her gender, Arsenault divides herself between the raw material of her corporeality, her flesh, and her cosmetically constructed plastic body to create a double negation. She highlights the construction of her femininity by embracing the label *transsexual*, which necessarily draws attention to the fact that her hyper-feminine gender does not correlate to the sex that determined her assigned gender at birth; drawing attention to her cosmetic surgeries through her work in the theater, photography, and appearances in the media, specifically through the incorporation of videos and stills of her surgical procedures in *The Silicone Diaries*. She also highlights the construction of her femininity by publicly discussing the fact she still has her penis

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(Arsenault, 2012c). In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault symbolically performs the deconstruction of her femininity when she removes her wig in the final moments of the play[10]. As Benjamin Gillespie points out, "Arsenault […] presents the feminine image of herself she wishes the audience to see; however, rather than covering up the cracks that mark this femininity as constructed, she draws attention to them, making them a part of her overall, inherently theatrical, image and presence" (Gillespie, 2012, p. 143). Within the "crack" that Gillespie points to and Arsenault presents in *The Silicone Diaries,* Arsenault is not herself, she is plastic and consciously constructed, and not-not herself, she is, of course, her own flesh and blood, at least to some extent.

The transition that is made visible through the videos and projected images in *The Silicone Diaries* renders the literal plasticity of Arsenault's body as theatrical. As a body that has been sculpted, crafted, and shaped through injections of silicone, Arsenault's body is plastic in the adjectival sense[11]. Her body is made up of material that can be molded. In this play, Arsenault describes the process of directly injecting silicone into the body, which, when not contained in an implant, has the capacity to be molded in the flesh until scarring occurs to hold the silicone in place. Arsenault tells her audience: "The effect is not like a breast implant, which you can usually tell. Once inside the body, [the 'plastic surgeon'][12] can sculpt the Silicone into almost any shape" and "scar tissue is going to form to hold everything in place" within twenty-four hours (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 212). The process begins with the body being made malleable through the injection of silicone but ends with it being settled and fixed. Because of the chemical and inorganic character of silicone, Arsenault describes herself as mostly *inanimate* (Arsenault; Kurt, 2009). When silicone is held in place by the scarring, her body is no longer plastic in the sense it is no longer capable of being sculpted or molded. Yet, by having shown her body to be capable of a drastic transformation that relied on the injection of silicone into her body, Arsenault's body is not-not plastic. Arsenault's theatrical body is animate flesh, inanimate plastic, and thus, not plastic and not-not plastic.

By consciously embracing inanimacy, a characteristic attributed to non-living things, Arsenault can also be described as not human and not-not human[13]. By injecting her body with silicone and undergoing other radical cosmetic procedures, Arsenault subjects herself to what Mel Chen

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describes as body modifications that incorporate "sophisticated prosthetic instruments, synthetic drugs, and nanotechnologies" which "come with a mourning of the loss of purity" (Chen, 2012, p. 7). The injection of silicone into her body "threaten[s] to overturn what an animacy hierarchy would wish to lock into place" (Chen, 2012, p. 159). Arsenault's silicone body is no longer *pure* flesh: she is no longer thought to be made up of the natural stuff of animate life. Consequently, her impure body, infused with inanimate chemical compounds, position her as a *monstrous Frankenstein-esque* figure. By injecting her flesh with inanimate matter, Arsenault corrupts her body's status as "human" as defined by inhabiting a body composed of animate flesh. Arsenault, then, embodies Chen's sense of queer as it "refers to animacy's veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate" (Chen, 2012, p. 11). Echoing Chen's sense of *queer*, Arsenault "violat[es] proper intimacies (including between human and nonhuman things)" (Chen, 2012, p. 11).

By embodying inanimate doll-like aesthetics, Arsenault's theatrical femininity can be seen as an extension of what Mary F. Rogers calls "emphatic femininity" in her book *Barbie Culture*. Rogers extends what R. W. Connell calls "emphasized femininity", which is defined as the omnipresent style of looking and acting feminine that contemporary Western society demands women exhibit in their day-to-day lives. Rogers locates "emphatic femininity" in how Barbie, even when dressed as a masculine icon such as a "police officer", appears feminine (Rogers, 1999, p. 14). Arsenault aligns Rogers's notion of "emphatic femininity" with theatrical femininity in several keyways. Rogers's "emphatic femininity" is akin to Arsenault's theatrical femininity insofar as "it takes feminine appearances and demeanor to unsustainable extremes" (Rogers, 1999, p. 14). Despite the fact that Rogers implies only a doll, one which is lifeless, immutable, and static, is able to sustain such hyper-femininity, Arsenault, through the surgical transformation of her body, is able to sustain the extreme, unsustainable corporeal aesthetics of a doll. Because Arsenault's body is still flesh and blood, her body and the femininity she has inscribed in and on that body is not sustainable, as it will age and die. Yet because Arsenault, who has said that she identifies as *inanimate*, embodies the immutable and static characteristics of a doll, she embodies a femininity

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that is not-not sustainable, as it will remain in some fashion long after she dies.

By embodying the plastic aesthetics of Barbie, Arsenault also functions as a *fantastic icon*. Rogers defines an icon as "a point of recognition widely shared with other members of one's society" that provides a point of "commonality amidst diversity, shared interests amidst conflicting ones, and participation in the same broad culture amidst many subcultures" (Rogers, 1999, p. 2). Rogers specifies that a fantastic icon is an entity that "contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable. Such an icon invites fantasy by taking the as-if or the fictive toward its outer limit. Barbie is such an icon, as are Superman and the *Playboy* centerfold" (Rogers, 1999, p. 3). Arsenault directly articulates that she embodies an exaggeration of "what is actual, possible, or conceivable" when she declares that her femininity is "an imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman" (Halferty, 2012, p. 30). Arsenault takes that which is not material, an imitation or idea, and makes it not-not material. Conversely, when that idea of ideal American white femininity is made material in the form of Barbie, it is lifeless, and thus does not qualify as an "actual" person. Arsenault makes the static and lifeless idea into a living, material embodiment of theatrical femininity through the exaggeration of the "actual, possible, [and] conceivable" in her extreme, hyper-feminine surgical body alterations. Arsenault makes *possible* in flesh what was previously thought to be *impossible*.

Arsenault's work exhibits characteristics similar to the work of Cindy Sherman, who is also inspired by Mattel's Barbie Doll. Sherman's Cindy Doll, or Sindy Doll (altered because of brand-name issues), is "Barbie's rival and copy, and like Barbie she is a doll made to look like a woman…. Or rather, she looks like a sketch of a woman, a kind of draft, a dream, or a twisted utopia" (Stridsberg, 2013, p. 93) In contrast to Arsenault who celebrates pornographic aesthetics, Sherman's "Sex" pictures grotesquely manipulate doll parts to mimic hardcore pornography in order to challenge idealized female bodies often featured in pornography. Like Arsenault, Sherman's photographic work is invested in "the image of woman, the woman-as-image" (Vinken, 2015, p. 129). But unlike Sherman whose fantasy is an attempt to "disintegrate […] woman-as-image by means of her own body", Arsenault perpetuates woman as an image of an image that

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exists in the world every day (Vinken, 2015, p. 134). Sherman reserves her examination of femininity for her photographs, while Arsenault unabashedly embodies feminine icons, such as Mattel's Barbie, in her day-to-day life, her art-as-life/life-as-art, and staged performances.

Arsenault is aware that the metric of femininity that has been inculcated by Mattel's Barbie is an example of a double standard with which contemporary women are forced to contend. With a Master's in fine arts from York University and an Honors Graduate Degree in Theatre from the University of Cape Town, Arsenault knows well that Barbie is a paradoxical representative of both an im/possible standard of femininity and feminine traits assumed to please a patriarchical male gaze. In the opening section of *I W@s B*rbie*, when Arsenault recounts the phone call in which she is asked to *be* Barbie, she considers asking the women hiring her, "Do you really want to hire someone known for having massive amounts of plastic surgery to represent a doll that's accused of fucking up the body images of millions of little girls?" (Arsenault, 2012a, p. 3). Unlike young girls and women, who are told that femininity exhibited in the media and embodied by popular icons such as Barbie are impossible, young boys and men are not told that the hyper-muscular bodies of He-Man and other superheroes are impossible: these hyper-muscular masculine bodies are attainable for young men and boys, we are told, through hard work at the gym. Arsenault has a lot in common with the body builders, fitness models, and gay porn stars who have constructed bodies modeled after hyper-masculine superheroes through strict workout and diet regimes and medical technologies such as steroids. Arsenault has shattered the glass ceiling of gender expression; she has succeeded in achieving something that has been determined to be impossible for women, but possible for men. Arsenault, an animate entity, embodies an im/possible femininity inspired by the aesthetics of an inanimate, plastic doll.

Arsenault is not only theatrical in terms of the inanimate materiality of her body, but also in terms of the temporality that her theatrical embodiment of (in)animacy involves. The temporality of Arsenault's theatrical gender is evident as she continually draws attention to her transition *over time*, while simultaneously describing her body as static. In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault identifies female mannequins as a model of femininity that inspired her as a child: upon seeing a mannequin at a local

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department store Arsenault declares the object is "one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen" (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 206). The origin story of her identification with femininity situates the mannequin as her feminine ideal as static and not capable of change over time, which consequently makes the repetition of stylized acts required for the performative constitution of gender over time impossible[14]. Arsenault's identification as *inanimate* suggests that she understands her body, which now includes a lot of silicone, as similar to the inorganic character of the mannequin. When Arsenault goes to Mexico to undergo a series of plastic surgeries, her cosmetically altered trans caretaker's "face is so tight" that she seems to defy aging – she too is frozen in time (Arsenault, 2012c, p. 208). In *I w@s B*rbie,* Arsenault mentions several moments that resist the necessary temporality of gender performativity: Arsenault writes, "Behind the Thin Face I have no past and no future. I have only this moment" and "Barbie is...still" (Arsenault, 2010, p. 6). By opposing temporalities that are essential to the constitution of normative gender, Arsenault embodies what Judith Halberstam conceives of as "queer time" which "has the potential to open up […] alternative relations to time and space" which allows for "forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1 and p. 2). By being unchanging over time, now that she is more plastic than flesh, Arsenault's femininity functions beyond the framework of gender performativity. Her femininity is not performative. Yet, because Arsenault lives her day-to-day life as a woman, her gender is not-not performatively constituted. Arsenault is theatrically performative in the expression of the theatrically essential truth of her gender.

Theatrical Liberation

Arsenault's femininity is exemplary of a mode of gender constitution that theatrically liberates us from the mutually exclusive modes of gender constitution that dominate modern Western thought: gender as performative and gender as the embodied expression of an essential psychic sense of self. Arsenault's femininity is theatrically liberating insofar as her unique gender identity is not impossible – she embodies her gender in her day to day life via extant theoretical modes – and is not-not impossible,

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since she constitutes her gender via these mutually exclusive theoretical modes. Conversely, Arsenault's unique gender is not possible – extant theories of gender fail to accommodate her unique gender identity – and it is not-not possible, since she embodies her gender in her day to day life. By both failing and succeeding in embodying these mutually exclusive theories of gender, Arsenault opens up new theoretical possibilities to understand how gender can be constituted, which liberates us from the extant theories whose limits have been first identified and then breached. But, because she does not outright dismiss these theoretical modes of gender constitution, she exemplifies the inescapable power of these dominant theories have to determine how gender can be understood in our contemporary moment.

The financial cost of Arsenault's transformation into a Barbie-esque feminine icon is one aspect of the constitution and construction of her gender identity that situate it as (almost) impossible to achieve. These costs cannot be ignored; it cost over two hundred thousand dollars to undergo the more than sixty cosmetic procedures required to craft the body Arsenault constructed. But rather than entrench the double standards that place limits on what is possible and acceptable for women to achieve by arguing that Arsenault's femininity is seemingly not possible because of its exorbitant cost, it is important to recognize that Arsenault, through struggle and hard work, has indeed achieved something remarkable. The fact that she has constructed her im/possible body makes her achievement not-not possible. Arsenault was not born into a wealthy family, and in fact she spent much of her childhood in a working-class trailer park in Southern Ontario, Canada. Arsenault was able to raise the money to pay for her surgeries through sex work, usually as a web-cam porn model, but also as a stripper and prostitute. It is also important to note that in these forms of sex-work Arsenault had the freedom to decide with whom she had actual sexual contact. Even when she is involved in prostitution, Arsenault does not necessarily engage in sexual activity with her clients if she does not want to do so. In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault recounts a story in which she manipulates a man she first meets through her web-cam model website to fly her to San Francisco for surgery but refuses to sleep with him (Arsenault, 2012c). The process in which Arsenault raised the money for her plastic surgeries is further evidence of the agency she takes over her own body and gender expression and her refusal to adhere to what is either thought to be

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possible, or acceptable, for women to do and achieve. Arsenault is exemplary of a woman who does not accept the limits, theoretical, social or financial, that restrain the force of her imagination and boundless sense of self.

Arsenault exhibits a gender that is theatrical. Her im/possible gender, in its material and temporal construction, is, but is not, performative and is, but is not, an expression of an essential truth of her psyche or sense of self. It is inconsequential to settle the debate of whether she is *walking patriarchy* because she enthusiastically embodies Barbie-esque aesthetics or she is an empowering queer artist because she had the ambition, discipline, and determination to construct an unrealistic corporeal aesthetic (Arsenault; Kurt, 2009). The power of Arsenault and her unique femininity is to offer us a new mode through which to consider gender, while not disqualifying extant theories that explain how gender is constituted. Arsenault shows us that the theater, which can permeate life off stage, is not just a place where we express ourselves, but can be a practice in which we can become the person who we want to be, even if the world tells us that what we want to be is impossible.

Notes

[1] Of the more than sixty plastic surgeries Arsenault underwent up to this point in her career, not all of them were done with the intention of making her more Barbie-like. She underwent some cosmetic procedures to erase physical markers of masculinity (such as the procedure she undergoes to remove the indentations above her buttocks that she calls *boyholes*) and some were standard anti-aging procedures. See Arsenault (2012c).

[2] Along with Barbie, Arsenault has been inspired by the femininity embodied by porn stars, faeries, suburban housewives, and cyborgs. Because this essay focuses specifically on the *embodiment* of femininity, and because Arsenault's embodiment of femininity necessarily involves an extreme amount of plastic implanted in her body, Barbie, and other doll-like figures such as mannequins, must be understood as a central influence of her gender identity.

[3] This essay focuses on Arsenault's live performance and does not include a discussion of her work in photography because live performance offers evidence that cannot be excused or dismissed by accusations of digital

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manipulation. Live performance, especially in conventional theatre practice when a performance of a play is repeated night after night, can be understood as a performative exercise. Furthermore, this essay focuses on these two particular plays because they mark a milestone in which Arsenault embodies and embraces a gender identity that marshals normative signifiers of femininity to exhibit a gender identity that is not socially accepted as normative femininity. Arsenault, across various artistic mediums, has gone on to explore embodiments of more radical feminine gender expressions that do not incorporate socially accepted signifiers of femininity in such works as *40 Days and 40 Nights*, *Hamlet/Machine*, and *Apotheosis*.

[4] The standard ideal of femininity exhibited by Barbie is rarely identified as, but always and already is, white femininity.

[5] The idea that Arsenault is a theatrically gendered subject aligns with J. Paul Halferty's analysis (2012) offered in "Unreal Beauty: Identification and Embodiment in Nina Arsenault's 'Self-Portraits'" in *Trans(per)forming Nina Arsenault*, which examines Arsenault as exemplary of Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg. Halferty highlights how Arsenault "'suggest[s] a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies" (Haraway apud Halferty, 2012, p. 36). Thus, Arsenault, as a theatrically gendered subject, is a "creature of our social reality" that "disrupts the binaries that structure so much Western thought" (Haraway apud Halferty, 2012, p. 31).

[6] This argument aligns with arguments made by Wenjuan Xie (2014) who writes, "Most importantly, Butler's autonomous discursive structure of gender 'deeds' precludes the agency of the gender 'doer'. Butler rejects the notion of a pre-given subject who would then perform, denying the active role that the subject plays in the action of subversion" (2014, p. 27) and "because 'the unaccountable subject' in gender performances is not able to choose how to repeat, it seems that neither the failed, parodic repetition nor the successful and abiding ones are motivated by the subject's intention" (2014, p. 34). Because art practice, at least in the case of Arsenault, is intentional, Arsenault cannot be validly performing her gender and not-not be doing so.

[7] Theorizing Arsenault's gender as theatrical echoes Frances J. Latchford's analysis (2012) of *The Silicone Diaries* as sex parody in the anthology *Trans(per)forming Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work*. Latchford argues Arsenault parodies not simply gender, but sex, because her performance does not treat "queer-gender-drag and transsexual-sex-embodiment" (2012, p. 70) as categorical antitheses, which, in important respects, many queer and

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transgender theories, like Butler's, do. To avoid the peril Latchford identifies within queer and transgender theories that insist on distinguishing gender and sex as either psychic or embodied, my focus is not parody, but on the idea that Arsenault is a theatrically gendered subject. Arsenault's gender, when interpreted as theatrical, encompasses both the comedy and tragedy of her autobiographical performances and the theatricality of her subjectivity, which expands the discussion of her work beyond the subgenres of parody, burlesque, or camp, which are the focus of Latchford's analysis.

[8] Though I argue that Arsenault constitutes her femininity in ways that prevailing gender theory determines are not possible, I do not contend that these gender theories fall apart when confronted with this one instance that challenges their totalizing power. After all, Arsenault is unique – not everyone can, or wants to, express her gender identity through the voluntary and conscious labor of artistic practice. In this essay I do not aim to dismiss these prevailing theories of gender *in toto*, but rather, I want to challenge how these theories of gender have totalizing power in how we conceive of gender in our post-modern moment. More specifically, through the constitution and expression of her unique gender identity, this essay argues that Arsenault becomes a figure, and specifically a feminine icon who refuses to adhere to the restrictions and limits places on her by larger social and theoretical forces.

[9] The last words of *The Silicone Diaries* are "To accept that my pleasure and my sublime privilege is to suffer. And to live. With. Beauty" (Arsenault, 2012c).

[10] This act is also reminiscent of drag practices, in which the drag performer casts off their wig in their curtain call, revealing their "masculine" identity beneath the "feminine" costume.

[11] Arsenault literally embodies Roland Barthes' description (1972) of nature after the invention and proliferation of plastic. Barthes notes that, in a world of plastic, "the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated" (Barthes, 1972, p. 195).

[12] I have put "plastic surgeon" in quotations because this procedure, which is illegal in the U.S. and Canada, was done by another transsexual women in a hotel room in Detroit. So, though the procedure would best be described as a cosmetic medical procedure, it was not executed by a plastic surgeon.

[13] The silicone injected in her body is positioned as inanimate when Arsenault tells the audience that she was told to lie on her stomach for twenty-four hours

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after the silicone was injected into her body because it must be "locked into place".

[14] Butler (1990, p. 191) writes that because "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated", gender is constituted in a "social temporality".

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