

# Silicone Embodiments: The Breast Implant and the Doll

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*In this essay, I argue that silicone supports contemporary fantasies and performances of a body that is intact and sealed. This analysis is developed through a discussion of Amber Hawk Swanson's performance art involving a silicone sex doll replica of the artist (2007) and silicone breast implants that 'ordinary' women receive, situated within the context of the previous doll art of Hans Bellmer (1955-1949). I argue that while the sex doll is structurally a perverse fetish object (psychoanalytically speaking), Hawk Swanson's project sheds light on the neurotic structure of desiring and obtaining a breast augmentation. My analysis is that silicone facilitates new phallic performances of embodiment that are particularly attractive in a consumerist society.*

## 1: Introduction

Silicone is a synthetic material that has transformed embodiment, particularly in the Western world. In her comprehensive history of cosmetic surgery, Elizabeth Haiken calls silicone the “wonder product of American industry” in the 1940s, when the Dow Corning Corporation was founded and began to explore the seemingly endless possibilities for silicones in industry, something chemists had been studying for decades.<sup>2</sup> When used in health and beauty products, silicone coats the hair and skin with a glamorous lustre. Silicone implants are placed inside the body in cosmetic surgery, augmenting its morphology. It is possible to prosthetically acquire new body parts that mobilize a range of gender and sexual possibilities as silicone sex toys are strapped on and manipulated. And indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 246.

entire bodies are fashioned from silicone. A fantasy that silicone sustains is of a sealed, intact body that is capable of continuous pleasure use, without concern for the limitations of flesh bodies. Within contemporary representations and euphemisms for cosmetic surgery, there exists a curious and telling tension between the soft plasticity of the body, and the hardness of the descriptor “plastic,” which is used to describe bodies that have undergone cosmetic surgery. Gender difference is performatively marked through the over-exaggeration of breasts, as Meredith Jones has argued; that is to say, contemporary ideals of white, middle-class feminine bodies are paradoxically hard and phallic (the slender gym body) with large breasts that exist as a remnant of a soft body.<sup>3</sup> These paradoxes between hardness and softness are also seen in the kinds of identities that are valued in a capitalist consumer society, which privileges the individual who considers their body as infinitely transformable to fit the ‘market’ for attractiveness, yet also a contained and complete ‘product’ that is marketed (in employment and relationships in particular).

This paper connects two cultural phenomena fashioned from silicone—sex dolls and breast implants—and theorizes the effects of silicone on human embodiment. Amber Hawk Swanson’s photographic and video series “To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll” (2007) documents her performances with Amber Doll, her silicone sex doll doppelgänger. These performances with Amber Doll disrupted heteronormative spaces like wedding receptions, tailgating parties, and amusement parks. They entered these spaces as a couple, dressed identically. Hawk Swanson would frequently leave Amber Doll alone in order to document the audience’s reactions to its presence.

Often these reactions alarmingly remind the viewer of the “borrowed quality” of all women’s bodies,<sup>4</sup> for once Amber Doll was alone, the audience members shifted its clothing to reveal its genitals and breasts, penetrated it with their fingers, and squeezed its breasts. My analysis compares Hawk Swanson’s work with surrealist Hans Bellmer’s photographs of his plaster doll fashioned from an interchangeable series of body parts in the 1930s and 1940s titled, *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). Comparing Hawk Swanson’s Amber Doll to

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<sup>3</sup> Meredith Jones, “Makeover Culture’s Dark Side: Breasts, Death, and Lolo Ferrari,” *Body & Society* 14 (2008): 89-104.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 33.



Figure 1 (top): *Tailgate Mouth* (2007); Figure 2 (bottom): *Tailgate Skirt* (2007)  
Photos courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

Bellmer's doll demonstrates shifting conceptions of embodiment that are facilitated by silicone, and the development of the fantasy and performance of the hermetic feminine body. This analysis uses a psychoanalytic approach, since these cultural phenomena possess both a conscious and unconscious dimension; that is to say, they are both rational and irrational.

At first blush, silicone sex dolls and silicone breast implants seem to have little in common with each other aside from being constructed from the same types of polymers. This material similarity is quite significant. Surgeons have experimented with the use of silicone in breast augmentation procedures since the 1960s, ranging from the injection of liquid silicone directly into the breast tissue in 1965 to today's innovations in cohesive gel or "gummy bear" implants.<sup>5</sup> Silicone has been an attractive material for breast augmentation because it holds heat, is pliable to the touch, and does not pose the infection risks of other materials like paraffin or fat. Even as debates about the safety of silicone implants persist, many women prefer silicone implants to saline implants because of its tactile properties. While saline implants might *look* the same as silicone implants, they do not *feel* the same. Silicone is held up as a gold standard for breast implants because silicone implants look and feel lifelike, and unlike saline, silicone implants are unaffected by external temperatures so they do not feel cold in the wintertime.

Similarly, Abyss Creations' introduction of the RealDoll—a sex doll with a posable PVC skeleton and silicone flesh—in 1996 signaled a remarkable innovation in the sex doll market. Sex dolls have been crafted from a variety of cheap and low-quality materials, from the iconic vinyl blow-up doll of American frat party movies to stuffed toys and pillows, but the silicone sex doll is superior to its predecessors. Like silicone breast implants, the doll can be made warm by submerging it in a hot bath, its flesh yields to touch, and it is relatively easy to clean. The high cost and the relative customizability of the doll has created an elite tier of a previously ridiculed subculture, which has received some attention in popular culture. For example, Synthetiks advocate Davecat, who is married to a RealDoll, has appeared in multiple television documentaries and the reality show *My Strange Addiction*, and David Gillespie's film about a man's relationship with a silicone sex doll, *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), was screened in mainstream movie theatres in the United States and Canada. Like silicone breast implants, silicone sex dolls are described and marketed as being remarkably *lifelike*; they perform in ways that closely match their living counterparts.

However, silicone sex dolls and breast implants are far from lifelike, even though their advertising campaigns suggest otherwise. They are fabricated out of a chain of synthetic polymers that bind together, and cannot be classified

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<sup>5</sup> Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 237.

within the realm of life and death. Like many synthetic materials created by humans, silicone decomposes very slowly; it is almost immortal. The doll and the implant are inert objects that do not respond to touch, do not feel pain, and experience no pleasure that can be transmitted back to their owners. It is at this nexus that my curiosity lies, because it strikes me as strange that these *lifelike* objects designed for sexual pleasure and use are also paradoxically *deathlike* and without feeling. What can the interplay between these objects tell us about contemporary fantasies and performances of embodiment, sexuality and gender? What desires and positions are addressed by the silicone breast implant and the silicone sex doll? And finally, how does silicone as material mobilize and sustain these fantasies, desires, and positions? To think through these questions, I wish to discuss in detail Hawk Swanson's performance "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic understandings of perversion and neurosis. I argue that while the silicone sex doll is a perverse fetish object in a structural sense,<sup>6</sup> Hawk Swanson's performance project does not address the pervert but rather the neurotic. While the desire to possess and have sex with a doll fits into a perverse psychical structure, the desire to emulate the doll through breast augmentation falls within a neurotic structure. Before I delve into Hawk Swanson's work, I want to establish a psychoanalytic context for thinking about silicone and embodiment through the structures of neurosis and perversion. I begin by outlining Freudian and Lacanian understandings of neurosis and perversion, and then I demonstrate how these are connected to the breast implant and sex doll.

## 2: Neurosis, Perversion, and Silicone

I propose that a decision to purchase and undergo breast augmentation surgery can be thought of as a neurotic act, while the decision to purchase and have sex with a silicone sex doll is a perverse act. While the specifics of this argument will be expanded throughout my discussion of Amber Hawk Swanson/Amber Doll and breast augmentation, I want to lay out an understanding of neurosis and perversion as psychical structures and make some preliminary remarks regarding the breast implant and the sex doll in this section. After this section, I use this psychoanalytic framework to think through the position of the doll within art and psychoanalytic histories, Hawk Swanson's "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007), and the 'ordinary' decision to undergo a breast augmentation.

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<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, there are three psychical structures: perversion, neurosis, and psychosis. These structures do not correspond to a sense of a "normal" human; indeed, if a "normal" structure were to be defined, it would be neurosis, but only because neurosis is most common. More on this follows.

Within Freudian psychoanalysis, neurosis can be identified through the presence of symptoms that the patient is aware of, that are not created anatomically, and that the analyst can treat through analysis. Inner conflicts that are caused by the frustration of childhood sexual drives during the Oedipus complex (repression) manifest themselves through neurosis.<sup>7</sup> Freud classifies neurotic symptoms as obsessive, hysterical, or phobic, and these symptoms often cause anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Neurosis is also opposed to psychosis, which is a more severe disturbance of the psyche with anatomical causes, according to Freud.<sup>9</sup> The majority of Freud's patients suffered from a variety of neurotic symptoms that caused somatic disturbances, and neurosis can be thought of as the most common pathology.

Diverging from Freud, Lacan defined neurosis as a structure, rather than a set of symptoms.<sup>10</sup> Freud's understanding of neurosis as a set of symptoms that can be treated and cured leads to the conclusion that a 'normal' and a 'neurotic' subject are not structurally different, but rather that the neurotic subject can become normal through psychoanalytic treatment. However, through Lacan's reframing of neurosis as a structure (one opposed to the other two clinical structures in his theory, psychosis and perversion), he takes an anti-normalizing turn that resists the distinction between 'normal' and 'pathological.' So while neurosis in Lacan may be 'normal' in the sense that it is the clinical structure that the majority of people inhabit, because it is a clinical *structure* (and not a *pathology*), it cannot be 'cured.' Instead, Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to alter the subject's relation to the neurosis, rather than cure it. Lacan formulates the neurotic position as one of questioning, which varies depending on whether the subject's neurosis is hysterical or obsessional. The hysteric subject questions their sexual position (Am I a man or a woman?), and the obsessional subject questions their existence (To be or not to be?).<sup>11</sup> Often those who are hysterics also occupy the position of 'woman,' and those who are obsessional also occupy the position of 'man.'<sup>12</sup> Lacan's reformulation of neurosis is significant because it challenges the

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<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Repression (1915)," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914)," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 70.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes Upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (1911)," in *Three Case Histories: The 'Wolf Man,' The 'Rat Man,' and the Psychotic Doctor Schreber*, ed. P. Rieff (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 155-156.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175 and 178-180.

<sup>12</sup> Note that these are positions, not genders or sexes. A frequent misinterpretation of Lacan is that he is speaking of the latter.

use of psychoanalytic therapy and theory to support normative social categories and expectations, and the same is true of his reformulation of perversion.

The neurotic subject suffers. This suffering can manifest itself in the somatic symptom, which produces an enjoyment (*jouissance*) for the neurotic subject through that suffering. Conceptualized as a defence against castration, the suffering of neurosis can also demand that an other make up for what the subject feels they are lacking (in the analytic setting, the analysand demands that the analyst perform this function). If we think about neurotic suffering through the example of silicone breast implants, the desire to undergo breast augmentation can be conceived of as a request that the surgeon make up for the lack through the implantation of the silicone object in the body. In the surgical encounter between the potential breast implant patient and surgeon, the patient accomplishes an unconscious displacement of lack onto the body, conceived of (in this instance) as insufficient breasts. The inadequacy of the breasts is a somatic symptom that registers as a complaint, which might be described in the surgeon's consultation room as the source of low self-confidence, unattractiveness, unhappiness, or sexual frustration. In other words, the small breasts are the cause of the neurotic subject's suffering in the case of breast augmentation and the patient demands that the surgeon compensate for their lack by implanting silicone into the breast. Ultimately this action will not successfully satisfy the demand because the implants cannot fill the neurotic's lack. The relation of the patient to the neurosis is unaltered, and thus persists. The relation to lack is quite different in perversion, which I turn to now.

Freud conceptualized perversion as sexual behaviours that do not coincide with the norm of heterosexual intercourse. Like neurosis, Lacan theorized that perversion was a clinical structure, rather than a set of behaviours or symptoms, again resisting the potentially normalizing judgments of Freud. Fetishistic perversion (or fetishism) is an unconscious response to the child's discovery that the mother does not have a penis and is castrated.<sup>13</sup> The child retains the knowledge of the mother's castration simultaneously with the magical belief that the mother has a penis, as a means to manage castration anxiety. This process is called disavowal in Freud<sup>14</sup> and Lacan. The pervert's task is to re-establish the mother's phallus through the fetish object. (In Freud, one possible story is that because the shoe is the last object the child sees before seeing the evidence of the mother's castration, it becomes the most opportune fetish object.<sup>15</sup> Another way of framing perversion as a defence against castration is to say that the subject undergoes castration and yet disavows it, choosing instead to substitute the moth-

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Fetishism (1927)," in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 352.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

er's penis with an object (the fetish) that sustains this fantasy. So, the pervert unconsciously acknowledges the mother's lack and concurrently disavows it through the use of the fetish object as substitute. The neurotic, on the other hand, defends against castration through complaint: if the complaint comes from the position of a woman, the subject demands that the other make up for her lack, and if from the position of a man, the subject manifests the complaint through castration anxiety.

The silicone sex doll enthusiast's relation to the doll is different from the breast augmentation patient's relation to the implants, since the doll has the possibility of satisfying the fetishist's demand. This is because in fetishism, the pervert is able to make up for lack through the fetish object. In this instance, the doll is not an imperfect answer to a demand or complaint, but is instead a satisfactory solution in its fetish object status as maternal phallus. Unlike the neurotic, the pervert has formulated an unconscious solution that will satisfy because the pervert disavows castration rather than protests against it. The silicone sex doll is like the maternal phallus in its hyperfemininity and in its physical manifestation of a contained body that is not subject to decay, exhaustion, or pain. It can also be thought of as a fetish object that satisfies a perverse scopophilic drive, since the doll can be looked at and visually explored in ways that a living human might resist. Testimonials from online communities of doll enthusiasts attest to the doll as a fetish object that is pleasurable both because it sexually satisfies in a unidirectional fashion and because it is so lifelike that it startles the viewer who perceives it as a living human, and can be photographed in all manner of outfits and positions.<sup>16</sup> Hawk Swanson's project plays with the possibilities for the sex doll to satisfy and perform like the living woman, building on prior work in psychoanalysis and in Eurowestern art that has made the doll central to its analysis.

### 3: The Doll in Art and Psychoanalysis

As Eva-Maria Simms notes, while the doll is a significant play object in the lives of children, dolls have not received much attention from scholars, especially psychoanalytic scholars. In the infrequent times when the doll is mentioned in psychoanalytic texts, it is most commonly lumped in with other childhood toys.<sup>17</sup> However, this is not to say that the doll has been insignificant to intellectual, psychoanalytic, and art communities since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Simms helpfully articulates three ways the doll is theorized within psychology and psychoanalysis: as one of many toys, as an object within the maternal world, or as penis sub-

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the testimonials at <http://www.realdoll.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Eva-Maria Simms, "Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud," *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 663.



stitute.<sup>18</sup> Each of these understandings of the doll diminishes its power and grip on the imagination, a power that is palpable in the uncanniness and discomfort of Hawk Swanson's project. The doll is unlike other toys, as it most closely approximates the body and can operate as a double. While the doll might operate as an object within the constellation of the maternal world (useful to the child for expressing love or hate toward the mother, or as a transitional object that helps the child separate from the mother), the separateness of the doll renders this understanding limited. And finally, while Freud does suggest that the doll can operate as a penis substitute for the girl child (just as the baby operates as a penis substitute for the mother), this conceptualization of the doll is only partial as well.<sup>19</sup> As a double of the human body, the doll is powerful in its refusal (inability) to engage or respond to the living human. And as Freud notes, the doll is powerful as an uncanny object that approximates death and the corpse.<sup>20</sup>

Amber Hawk Swanson situates her work with Amber Doll as offering a commentary on the everyday and banal objectification of women's bodies in contemporary culture. Hawk Swanson's project is located in a lineage of art that intimately involves the doll as subject/object of the work, particularly the public spectacle of Oskar Kokoschka's doll in 1918 and Hans Bellmer's doll photographs from 1935-1949.<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a history of the doll within Western European art and intellectual communities. However, for the purposes of situating and historicizing the shifting notions of embodiment predicated on silicone that Hawk Swanson experiments with, some comments on the work of Bellmer are useful. Bellmer's work offers an alternative way to read "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) that expands an analysis of women's objectification, and moves it into larger questions about silicone embodiment in contemporary cosmetic surgery culture.

In the mid-1930s, Bellmer constructed two dolls: one was a prototype, and the other a more sophisticated doll that had four legs, four breasts, three pelvises, an abdomen, an upper torso, and a head recycled from the original doll.<sup>22</sup> The second doll's body was significantly more manipulable because the body parts were assembled around ball joints, allowing Bellmer a range of positions. Using these fragmented body parts to construct extraordinary bodily configurations with too many or too few limbs, in the photographic series *Les Jeux de la Poupée*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 633.

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality (1931)," in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 384-385.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), ed. and trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Some of these can be viewed at

[http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist\\_id=452](http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=452).

<sup>22</sup> Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 154.

(*The Games of the Doll*, 1935-1949) Bellmer staged aggressive and violent fantasies that starred the doll as a variably coquettish, submissive, abused, raped, and victimized character. Bellmer was compelled by the doll's image and the ability to render visible the fragmentation and secrets of the female body, a topic on which he wrote extensively.

*I am going to construct an artificial girl, with anatomical possibilities which are capable of creating the heights of passion, even of inventing new desires.*<sup>23</sup>

The female body is like an endless sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that its real meaning can become clear through a series of endless anagrams.<sup>24</sup>

*And didn't the doll, which lived solely through the thoughts projected into it, and which despite its unlimited pliancy could be maddeningly stand-offish, didn't the very creation of its dollishness contain the desire and intensity sought in it by the imagination?*<sup>25</sup>

The doll provided Bellmer an opportunity to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble its body repetitively in whatever manner he desired, in a way that might create new desires and offer insights into the female body as infinite anagram or sentence. Bellmer also succinctly highlights one of the most threatening dimensions of the doll's existence, which is that even though we may be able to imagine—or more accurately, project—feelings onto the doll, and manipulate its body in whatever way we want, the doll's total obedience and impassive demeanour is infuriating. Because the doll cannot respond or defend itself, the control exercised over the doll only opens up new terrains of desire rather than satiating it, frustrating the aggressor.<sup>26</sup> Bellmer's doll is dissimilar to Amber Doll, even though both dolls are sexual objects. Like Amber Doll, Bellmer's doll is highly sexualized with round fleshy buttocks (sometimes serving as breast substitutes in certain configurations of the doll's body), round breasts, and long

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<sup>23</sup> Hans Bellmer, *The Doll* (1936), trans. Malcolm Green (London: Atlas Press, 2005), 16 (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> Bellmer quoted in Miranda Argyle, "Hans Bellmer and the Games of the Doll," available at: <http://www.mirandaargyle.com/Hans%20Bellmer%20and%20The%20Games%20of%20the%20Doll.pdf> (my emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> Bellmer, *The Doll*, 40 (my emphasis).

<sup>26</sup> While it is outside of the scope of this paper, which focuses on the ideals and experiences of silicone embodiment, Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Domination* (1992) could be an excellent resource to further theorize the doll art of Hawk Swanson and Bellmer through a lens that focuses on what these projects tell their viewers about relationships of domination, where both the one who exercises power and the one who submits to it participate in the bond.

human hair, and both exist in the realm of non-normative, non-reproductive sexualities. Both dolls exist as photographic objects for the artist, and Bellmer even imagined being able to project the doll's desires literally into the doll's torso through a film apparatus (this is in contrast to Hawk Swanson's performances, which are focused on the artist's desires). Bellmer's doll is an adult-child hybrid (the doll has voluptuous breasts and a hairless vulva, signifying in its time a child or adolescent sexuality and pedophilic desire), and Amber Doll is a pornographic representation of an adult woman. The most significant difference between Bellmer's doll and Amber Doll though is that Bellmer's doll can be taken apart and put back together, whereas Amber Doll is a seamless intact body of silicone. Some RealDoll body parts can be taken off for repair or replacement (face, eyes, tongue, labia, vaginal and anal "cores"), but they are not meant to be removed; nor does Hawk Swanson do this intentionally in her performances, although Amber Doll's tongue accidentally fell out at their wedding reception.<sup>27</sup> However, as I will discuss shortly, Bellmer anticipates cultural ideals of feminine bodies in 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalist industries such as cosmetic surgery, even though his doll is not physically capable of approximating them: a surface upon which to project fantasies of wholeness and impermeability, endlessly transformable and responsive to new trends in embodiment.

The inability to assemble and disassemble the dolls is significant to understanding how silicone makes a new intervention into embodiment. Bellmer's doll was constructed primarily from plaster, and was thus a hard and cold object and not particularly suitable for sexual exploration (or penetration); on the other hand, Amber Doll is a pliable and warm object that is designed to be penetrated in all three of its orifices. In its sexual inaccessibility and ability to be rearranged infinitely, Bellmer's doll references the Pygmalion myth, where the artist Pygmalion sculpts the perfect woman (Galatea) from ivory. Pygmalion falls in love with the statue, which is transformed into a living woman of flesh who is ultimately not as pleasing as the statue. While the desires expressed by Bellmer may indeed fall under the perverse structure articulated by Lacan, the photographs of the doll prompt the viewer to consider the questions of the neurotic (just as Amber Doll might be a perverse object that illuminates something about neurosis as well).

Articulated as a jigsaw puzzle of sorts, the photographs of the doll body in Bellmer trigger questions about femininity as a position of victimization. The photographs of the coy, cowering doll vulnerable to abuse elicit a sympathetic

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<sup>27</sup> Hawk Swanson continued to work with Amber Doll after the 2007 performance and series of photographs and video. The eventual fate of Amber Doll was a reincarnation into Tilikum, the infamous orca whale responsible for the deaths of three individuals at SeaWorld in California (TILIKUM, 2011), as well as the cataloguing and display of the non-orca parts of Amber Doll (All That Is Left of You/Everything That You Are Now, 2012). For more, see <http://www.amberhawkswanson.com/>.

response in the viewer. Paradoxically, even though Bellmer's doll is quite unlike a human body in its hard plaster coldness, it arouses the viewer's emotions because it represents the terror and violence of the body-in-pieces (*le corps morcelé*) as articulated by Lacan.<sup>28</sup> The concept of the body-in-pieces refers to the baby's experience of the body as fragmented, unruly, and incoherent, in contrast to the baby's experience of the mirror image of the body, which is an idealized image of the body as whole and intact. This disjuncture between the body-in-pieces and the mirror image of the body is disturbing because the inability to feel wholeness is perceived as a failure or lack of the body. Bellmer's doll disrupts the viewer, provoking identification because of its fragmentation and its unsettling image of the experience of the body. Amber Doll, on the other hand, does not provoke our identifications because it *is* the idealized image in the mirror. David J. Getsy points to the "ambivalent ethics" and "anxious set of choices" that audiences of the performances are confronted with: Amber Doll is the double of Hawk Swanson and its body blurs the lines of consent because it appears to be a voiceless, passive object.<sup>29</sup> Its silicone body is whole and not lacking; indeed, the body of Amber Doll is a three-dimensional representation of idealized and digitally altered femininity that is repeated in fashion and pornographic photographs. This is also the idealized body of the cosmetic surgery industry, against which the unpredictable human body will always fail.

We might thus say that while Bellmer's work engages its viewer to consider the body's lack and failings through identificatory practices, Hawk Swanson's work engages its viewer to consider the same lack and failures through an inability to identify with the phallic and impermeable doll. Bellmer's doll addresses the psychical experience of embodiment as vulnerable and fragmented, while Hawk Swanson's doll addresses the *ideals* of embodiment that we can only fail to live up to. In comparing these two doll art projects, it is possible to recognize shifting conceptualizations of embodiment that have occurred in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Bellmer anticipates the geo-historical space of the present that Hawk Swanson is working within, particularly the phallic ideals of femininity that are espoused in cosmetic surgery culture and critiqued in Hawk Swanson's work.

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 79.

<sup>29</sup> David J. Getsy, "Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 19, 4 (2013): 470-471.

## 4: Bully and Prey: The Marriage of Amber Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll



Figure 3: Amber Hawk Swanson, *First Day* (2007)  
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

While Bellmer's *Les Jeux de la Poupée* unfolded in a time of heightened sensitivity to the body's vulnerabilities after the corporeal devastations of World War I, Hawk Swanson's "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) unfolds in a historical moment in the Eurowestern world that privileges invulnerability and actively works to mask the body's vulnerability through diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery and their performative dimensions. Hawk Swanson is a Brooklyn-based video and performance artist whose work has been exhibited nationally in the United States as well as internationally in Canada and Estonia. While her work has been received with great interest by the popular media and art communities, it has surprisingly not received much critical scholarly attention.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> David J. Getsy has written about Hawk Swanson's performances with Amber Doll in relation to her CrossFit performances that queered fitness regimes and emerged out of online comments about her body in relation to the doll in "Queer Exercises," and as exemplar of the resistance of statues, frequently assumed to be passive in "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance." Anna Watkins Fisher has written about the relationship between *The Feminism? Project* and "To Have, To Hold, To Violate:



Figure 4: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Shower Curtain Kiss* (2007)  
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

Her photographic and video series “To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll” (2007) explores themes of (self-) objectification, agency, power, and femininity that are present in her earlier video series, “The Feminism? Project” (2006). “The Feminism? Project” is a series of ten videos scripted from interviews that Hawk Swanson conducted with women (ranging from her mother to her sorority sisters) on the subject of feminism. Hawk Swanson re-enacts edited portions of the interviews about feminism while engaged in various sexual and sexualized activities like being spanked or penetrated, giving a hand job, receiving oral sex, masturbating, and participating in beauty practices like facial hair bleaching and pedicures. Hawk Swanson’s commentators on feminism seem indifferent to the sexual and sexualized acts they are engaged in, as they mull over the question of what feminism means in valley girl voice intonations. These videos rehearse many common-sense ideas about feminism: that feminists are angry, psychologically disturbed man-haters; that feminism is the validation of all life choices, including those that might perpetuate one’s oppression; and that feminism is over as men and women are now equal. They also reveal how feminist discourse about bodily autonomy and reproductive choice has been seamlessly absorbed into late capitalist discourse about consumer choice. The com-

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Amber and Doll” as meditations on adolescent femininity and sexuality in “Like a Girl’s Name.”

mentators on feminism that Hawk Swanson embodies in “The Feminism? Project” (2006) willingly participate in acts and discourses that may be understood as contributing to their own subordination through their sexual objectification. However, in a not very subtle way, the videos raise questions about women’s sexual agency and self-determination that emerge in feminist debates about sexual practices, pornography, prostitution, and participation in BDSM (to give a few examples). The commentators on feminism are trapped in a paradox: they express feeling empowered and equal (dismissing the claims of feminists as irrational and old-fashioned), and yet in the action of the videos the characters surrender their bodies to others to be used as objects of non-reciprocal pleasure. As Anna Watkins Fisher argues, the video’s subjects reveal that their hackneyed perception of feminism as threat—rather than systemic oppression—is a political position, contradicting their refusal of politics.<sup>31</sup>

In “To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll” (2007) Hawk Swanson evacuates this position and instead situates the sex doll named Amber Doll in the position of the commentators on feminism who appear in “The Feminism? Project” (2006). Amber Doll is a RealDoll, a life-size sex doll constructed from a manufacturer’s readymade body (Body #8) and a custom-sculpted face in the likeness of Hawk Swanson’s digital image. Unlike the characters in “The Feminism? Project” (2006), Amber Doll cannot tell the viewer anything because it is a literal object and thus mute. It bears an uncanny resemblance to Hawk Swanson, and yet their bodies are quite different. Amber Doll is only 5’7” (the tallest model available), where Hawk Swanson appears to be at least 5’10”. Amber Doll’s body approximates a plastic aesthetic, with high large breasts and an impossibly thin waist; while Hawk Swanson is also thin, her breasts and waist are more proportionate to her frame than the doll’s.

Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll wear tattoos on the inside of their left wrists, binding them together visually through language. In an ornamental calligraphy script, their tattoos read “Bully” and “Prey,” respectively. These tattoos define their relationship to each other, and the positions of bully and prey are enshrined in their wedding ceremony. In “The Making-Of Amber Doll” video (2007), Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll get married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel and the officiant refers to the pair by the proper names “Bully” and “Prey.” During the ceremony only Bully/Hawk Swanson speaks, and Prey/Amber Doll is mute. As observers, we fill in the silence offered to Prey to repeat the wedding vows (which is not nearly long enough for spoken words) or perhaps we are indifferent to the absence of participation by Prey in the ceremony.

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<sup>31</sup> Anna Watkins Fisher, “Like a Girl’s Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young,” in *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, 1 (2010): 57.





Figure 5 (top): *Las Vegas: Mirror* (2007); Figure 6 (bottom): *Las Vegas: Rings* (2007)  
Photos courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission



After the ceremony, the video cuts abruptly to Bully carrying Prey across the threshold of a standard American hotel room, and as the scene shifts, the wedding march music cuts out suddenly. We hear the swish of the wedding dresses as Bully carefully navigates the door's threshold, trying not to catch the body or dress of Prey in the door's hardware. In the final second of the video, the shot shifts to Prey who is lying on its back on the hotel bed. Its wedding dress is pulled up to its waist, and its legs are spread open and feet are at its head level, while its arms are both stretched upwards. The shot moves from the doll's vulva, which is smooth with trimmed pink labia and a small well-groomed patch of pubic hair, to the doll's face and breasts. Prey is completely immobile and vulnerable to attack, unable to defend against Bully's advances. We are left to imagine how Bully and Prey consummate their marriage, although the heterosexist and misogynist narrative leaves very little for us to imagine. Bully will penetrate the silicone vagina, and as the abruptness of the scene suggests, it is Bully who will be active in the scene while Prey will be entirely passive.



Figure 7: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Kitchen Fall* (2007)  
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

The object (Prey) is pathetic, and the viewer oscillates between the position of feeling sympathetic to the doll's defenselessness and exposure and the voyeuristic feeling of watching mainstream heterosexual pornography. The latter feeling is overwhelming, because the video is filmed from the perspective of Bully. This is different from the viewing positions available to us in viewing photographs of

Bellmer's doll, and I suggest that this is because of a shifting relation to embodiment that is induced by silicone embodiments. Amber Doll's silicone embodiment is an idealized image, not the body-in-pieces of Bellmer's doll; the viewer is disinclined to identify with the doll, and through the doubling effect of Bully and Prey the viewer can take up a sadistic position of attacking the ideal image.

Unlike the plaster body of Bellmer's doll, Amber Doll possesses a silicone body. Paradoxically and quite uncannily, Amber Doll's body is incredibly lifelike and yet it is significantly harder to identify with this body or feel sympathy towards it. This seems illogical, as one might reasonably presume that a body that resembles our body more accurately would be even more open to identification than a plaster body. Amber Doll exists in a cultural milieu where there are countless images of airbrushed women's bodies positioned in ways that make them most vulnerable to attack, and many of these bodies are now enhanced by silicone (or its digital counterpart, Photoshop). As a result, I propose that silicone is precisely the material that facilitates aggression towards the body of Amber Doll. The images of idealized passive women's bodies in mainstream heterosexual pornography are approximated by Amber Doll far better than any living woman ever could. This is because the kinds of bodies that are valued in the contemporary West are phallicized bodies. The way that men's and women's bodies are rendered phallic in valorized images is defined by the gender binary: men's bodies convey hardness through skin stretched over hard muscle and women's bodies convey hardness through low body fat and slenderness.<sup>32</sup> This hardness is a performance that is valued and marketable, as it exists as synecdoche for discipline, self-maintenance, and inherent goodness. Silicone is a material that enables the human body to approximate this phallic feminine ideal, previously unavailable except through photographic manipulation.

Thus, while the silicone body of Amber Doll might be a fetish object, or intended as such, to frame this body as a cultural ideal is to argue that it can shed light on the neurotic anxieties about the body in consumer culture. Amber Doll is a disidentificatory object not because it is a fetish object, but because it highlights how mainstream Eurowestern fashion, cosmetic surgery, and pornographic cultures are premised on a feminine ideal that is all surface, invulnerable, yet available for the use of its masculine ideal counterpart. The nonreciprocal relationship between Bully and Prey is both a replication of mainstream heterosexual narratives, but also a reversal of the narrative given about the effects of mainstream media on women's body image. Instead of adopting an attitude of deference to Amber Doll, Amber Hawk Swanson violates and possesses the ideal image for her own purposes, rather than using it as a 'cover-up' or decoy in the way it might be used as a fetish object. The use of the silicone sex doll in this

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<sup>32</sup> Jones, "Makeover Culture's Dark Side."

way reveals the limits of the fantasy of impermeability promised by silicone, because the cost of this lack of vulnerability is a deadness of being.

### **5: Silicone Breast Implants and Phallic Femininity**

Meredith Jones' excellent analysis of how breast implants feminize the thin female body is useful to theorize the possibilities of silicone for human embodiment. She notes that while the body usually responds to diet and exercise over time, the breasts are oblivious to this work and cannot be "improved" by these disciplines.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, if exercise and diet have any effect at all on the breasts, it is to eliminate the fat that fills out the breasts. This is a contradictory process: while the body is disciplined into approximating contemporary ideals of femininity that promote thinness and tautness (an achievement), this same discipline expunges the breasts that are a privileged marker of femininity (a failure or detriment). As Jones notes, this is where the cosmetic surgery industry steps in and offers "solutions" to at least two problems created by the discipline of exercise and diet. First, silicone implants offer a solution because they feminize the (disciplined) phallic feminine body through surgery. Cosmetic surgery offers silicone breasts, which are "superior" to any flesh and fat breast because the bearer can continue to diet and exercise to the idealized point of very low body fat, are firm with nipples that project upwards and outwards, and promise to never sag or deteriorate in the way flesh does (this is, of course, a promise and not a reality). Secondly, the silicone breast feminizes the slender ideal body and reassures heterosexual men that the phallic bodies they are attracted to are in fact feminine.

The current ideal cultural performances of phallic femininity are incongruous and contradictory, as Jones highlights: large breasts are most often not firm, but soft, and they sag due to gravity; thin women do not usually possess large breasts; breasts are comprised largely of fat, and dieting eliminates this tissue; and finally, contemporary ideals put together hardness (the diet and gym body) and softness (the large breasts). However, visually approximating large breasts through augmentation is good, but does not go far enough. The breast implant must also feel 'lifelike' and 'realistic.' This condition of 'feeling' is complicated. From the position of the patient, a breast augmentation frequently results in a loss of feeling (at least temporarily) because of nerve damage. Breast implants can also be difficult to assimilate into one's body schema and remain a strange object inside of the body due to painful common side effects like encapsulation (the formation of thick scar tissue around the implant as a response to a foreign object in the body) and implant migration (the shifting of an implant once inside the body, which is impossible to predict or control). So for the patient, while the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

implant itself might be malleable and soft like a flesh breast, the response of the body to the implant can feel either deadening (nerve damage) or like a painful rejection (encapsulation or migration). When the implant is exterior to the body it feels very lifelike, but when it is placed in the interior of the body it acquires a deadened or painful form for the patient, feeling not at all lifelike. Thus, what becomes significant for the recipient of a breast augmentation is the performance of the implant, rather than the feeling.

In fact, the 'lifelike' feeling is felt by an other, one who does not have the implant inside of their own body and instead touches and squeezes the silicone breast implant. Explaining to a surgeon that one wants silicone breast implants in order to please a sexual partner is a proscribed reason to undergo breast augmentation. Instead, patients and surgeons are engaged in a script where the patient must profess that the desired surgery is only self-motivated; so it is acceptable to internalize ideals neurotically, yet not acceptable to acknowledge how these are created socially.<sup>34</sup> However, when we examine the layers of 'feeling lifelike' as a key benefit of silicone, we can see that the sexual pleasure of an other might indeed be a significant component in this decision. Further, within a heterosexist cultural economy that values phallic women's bodies, the silicone implant must feel lifelike in order to confirm her sexual difference as real for the man who desires her. The implant is expected to answer to the question of sexual difference and the question of existence, as the patient approximates an idealized femininity that defends against the inevitable decay of the body through non-degradable silicone. The cosmetic surgery industry promises surgical bodies that are whole, alleviating the patient's neurotic suffering through the surgical fix. The dominant trope of cosmetic surgery is that a body part troubles the patient and causes them psychical suffering which prevents them from fully enjoying their life. Cosmetic surgery offers a solution to the patient's suffering, an opportunity to surgically fix the body part so that it is no longer perceived as abhorrent. The body pre-surgery is lacking and fragmented, and the neurotic demands that the surgeon repair their body and make it whole and not lacking. This process is imperfect, because cosmetic surgery does not alter the relation of the patient to the neurosis. Instead cosmetic surgery offers a temporary solution to the lack, which will resurface again in the body through another symptom.

## 6: Some Conclusions on Silicone Embodiments

Silicone appears to offer almost infinite possibilities for embodiment, sustained by the neurotic fantasy of an intact and sealed body. Alessandra Lemma's articulation of the 'self made phantasy' in her book *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic*

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<sup>34</sup> Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, "Negotiating Femininity With and Through Mother-Daughter and Patient-Surgeon Relationships," *Women's Studies International Forum* 35, 6 (2012): 447-457.

*Study of Body Modification* can build on the fantasies sustained by silicone embodiments. The self-made phantasy is that of a body which has overcome its dependence upon the (m)other and is not subject to the porousness of the mother-child relationship.<sup>35</sup> In her analysis of breast implants, Lemma argues [585] (an analysis developed through her private practice as well as through analyses of breast implant narratives) that breast implants erase the trace of the maternal object through appropriating the envied maternal breast.<sup>36</sup> However, the silicone performance and fantasy of embodiment that are engendered by sex dolls and breast implants are caught in either a neurotic circuit of endless transformation in order to become an idealized, envied other, or the failed demands of an other to fill one's lack.



Figure 8: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Albuquerque Hotel* (2007)  
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

The silicone sex doll is an idealized feminine body, like a three dimensional, digitally altered photograph. Because Amber Doll so perfectly accomplishes a femininity that is at once phallic and feminine, it is also the idealized whole image of Hawk Swanson's Bully body viewed in the mirror. It is this wholeness and perfection that makes it Prey to Hawk Swanson's Bully; Prey is capable of a perfect performance of idealized white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity.

<sup>35</sup> Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 112-113.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

Bully acts out aggression toward Prey as the intact mirror image that engenders lack, and is able to have, hold, and violate that mirror image in response. Bully misuses the fetish object through her recognition of the neurotic ideal embodied by Prey. However, while Prey's body feels lifelike, Prey does not feel. No matter how much aggression Bully doles out to Prey, Prey will never be lacking and Bully will never be whole. Bully uses Prey neurotically, because her acts of aggression and power over Prey can be read as a demand for her lack to be filled by Prey's silicone body (if Bully were to use Prey perversely, Prey would cover over that lack as fetish object, replacing the maternal phallus). If, as Lemma argues, our identities are structured against a milieu of loss, and when the loss cannot be tolerated envy comes to govern the psychic world,<sup>37</sup> then we can interpret Hawk Swanson's work as critiquing a cultural context in which individuals are expected to render themselves whole and independent through endless consumer choice. Hawk Swanson's performances with Amber Doll as an ideal and a consumer object expose the impossibility—and *undesirability*—of attaining wholeness and independence.

Likewise, the silicone breast implant is a better breast than the flesh breast and an object of scopophilic pleasure. The body's responses to the implant (rejection, encapsulation, loss of feeling) are neurotic somatic signals of the implant's failure to fill in the lack supposed to reside within the small breast. The body with breasts that have been augmented through silicone is not whole, and like Bully's relation to Prey, its failures throw the patient into a confrontation with neurotic lack. Hawk Swanson's work with Amber Doll shows us the impossibilities and perils of silicone embodiment, a fantasy of intactness that is exploited by the cosmetic surgery industry in a time of late capitalism. These perils are serious, and highly gendered: feminine bodies become and contain literal objects that do not feel pleasure or pain, can be used for the (non-reciprocal) pleasure of others, and are always available to satisfy scopophilic desire. The silicone body is the corpse body, an object that is deathlike, though 'lifelike' enough to prompt violent sexualized aggression while pleasure is subordinated to surface wholeness. Reading the proliferation of breast augmentation alongside Amber Hawk Swanson's work develops a critique of silicone embodiment that highlights the impossibility of approximating an ideal body, and the violence that is done individually and culturally through the fantasy that one must *become* the ideal, instead of *be like* it.

**Note on images:** All eight of the images in this essay are of archival pigment prints measuring 21 inches x 14 inches (on 24 inch x 37 inch paper). Each print

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

was issued in an edition of five (5) and two (2) artist's proofs in 2007. The photographs of the images are © 2015 Amber Hawk Swanson and used with her permission.

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