

Lady Gaga and the *Other*:
Persona, Art and Monstrosity

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Submitted to OCAD University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
In
Contemporary Art History
September, 2011

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2011

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Abstract

Lady Gaga's rise to stardom in 2008 surprised many individuals who foresaw the quick demise of the singer-songwriter's career due to her controversial lyrics, performances, and fashion attire. Known for her shock value aesthetic, Gaga's approach to fame included explicit female sexuality, a chameleon persona, and an effervescent embracement of one's Otherness. This paper explores how Lady Gaga has manufactured her success. By adopting the traits of a performance artist and appropriating key strategies from art history, she reflects the work and personae of several modern and postmodern artists, including Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dali. Through spectacle, fame, and performance, she embodies the postmodern Other and lobbies for a new generation of post-gendered individuals, free from discrimination and disenfranchisement.

Acknowledgements

I am truly thankful for the guidance, support, and encouragement from my advisor Dr. Jim Drobnick. His assistance from the initial to the final level of this paper enabled me to develop a better understanding of the subject, and without him this would not be possible.

In addition I would like to thank Dr. Marie-Josée Therrien, my second reader, for her help and assistance towards the project.

Finally I would also like to give my gratitude to my post-colonial professor Dr. Dot Tuer, who as well assisted in preparation for this paper and aided in the understanding of gender theory and post colonial theory.

For my parents.

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Lady Gaga and the *Other*:
Persona, Art and Monstrosity

Stefani Germonatta, better known to most as Lady Gaga, shocked the world over three years ago, becoming one of the most controversial, intriguing, and biggest pop sensations in the last decade. The singer/songwriter already has amassed numerous accomplishments, including five Grammy awards, twelve MTV video awards, the most Googled image in 2009 and 2010, and maintains over eleven million followers on Twitter.¹ While much of Gaga's stardom can be attributed to her music, she exceeds what other musicians of her time have done. She incorporates music, fashion, art and theater into her performance, and manifests a spectacle in almost everything she does, including the persona she constructed, Lady Gaga. This paper investigates how Lady Gaga has manufactured her success, specifically through the use of strategies developed in the artistic realm. By engaging developments from avant-garde art and performance, such as multiple personas, she creates Otherness through the monster motif. In order to evaluate such a notion of Otherness, this paper explores the questions: How does Lady Gaga construe her persona as a work of art and spectacle? And what artistic influences and appropriations contribute to Lady Gaga's monster aesthetic?

In order to evaluate Gaga's place in pop culture, this text explores the concepts of Otherness, persona, monster theory and performance. Otherness takes many forms; it can

refer to someone of a different race, nationality, religion, social class, sexual orientation and so on. The Other, as theorized to by Edward Said,² pertains to an individual that is perceived by a group as being an outsider, someone who does not belong because they are different. Gaga embraces self-otherness in her art and music by taking on almost every possible representation of Otherness, including, race, religion, social class, and sexual orientation. She understands these individuals who feel disenfranchised by society and advocates for them by embracing her own Otherness. Gaga's recent album *Born This Way* is a homage to individuality and self-otherness, including the music video for her single *Born This Way*, which reveals a new race humanity created on an alien planet. This new race bears no prejudice and integrates all religions, nationalities, races, genders, and sexual orientations. While Gaga's work does not directly reference post-colonial theory, some ties can be made to the writings of Stuart Hall, and more specifically his theories on identities: identity as being and identity as becoming.³

One of the ways Gaga establishes Otherness, and fosters self-othering (becoming open to Otherness, both internally and externally)⁴ is through the monster motif. Gaga uses the monstrous and grotesque body as a metaphor for Otherness, but in a way that regards monstrosity as something beautiful, rather than horrific and ugly. Her use of the monstrous body as a symbol of Otherness in cultural society is connected to Jeffery J. Cohen's *Monster Theory* and *Monster Culture*. Cohen states that society needs monsters in order to normalize and enforce, and therefore in order to define ourselves, society needs to contrast with something that is completely different from themselves (the

monster)⁵. Lady Gaga makes it a point to be different, not to distance herself, but rather to give her fans someone to whom they can relate.

Gaga's active quest to celebrate the Other, and produce memorable moments of freakish and bizarre spectacle, derives from her carefully constructed persona and performances. Her persona exhibited in the media forces her to be in a continual performance, she also combines theater performance with performance art.

The first three sections of this paper—Spectacle and Performance, Fashion as Spectacle, and Fame as Spectacle—explore persona as a work of art and spectacle. In numerous interviews and articles, Gaga credits Andy Warhol as a large influence and inspiration for her work. Early in her career, Gaga's distant, reserved, persona mirrors Warhol's. Besides her persona, Gaga became known for overt "shock value" manifested through fashion statements, performances, and music videos. Gaga uses her persona, fashion and fame to create spectacles that drive her art, as well as concepts of individuality, Otherness, acceptance and monstrosity. Once again these spectacles arise from her fashion music videos, stage performances, red carpet appearances, and daily fashion attire.

The fourth section of this paper—Influences and Appropriations—discusses appropriations and references Gaga attributes to past performers and artists. Many articles have identified her fashion attire references to past designers, but several of her costumes and performances appropriate artists such as Vanessa Beecroft, Jana Sterbak, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol. While being inspired and influenced by these

artists, Gaga and her creative team alter the original intention of such artworks to incorporate Gaga's themes and concepts of fame, Otherness, and monstrosity.

Sections five and six—Otherness, Transgender, Identity Politics, and Fame and Monster Culture—analyze gender as a performance and Lady Gaga's identity as a drag performer and performance of a post-gendered individual. Through discussion and study of gender and feminist theorists Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, relationships between Gaga's performing of a monstered individual examines how she blurs categories of race and gender.

Lady Gaga exploded onto the pop music scene in 2008, becoming a hypermodern⁶ phenomenon in the present female pop scene. Recent sensations like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Jennifer Lopez were fading out. The music industry continued producing replicas/clones of formerly successful artists, each more fabricated than the next. Then came Lady Gaga. She performed in next-to-nothing, sang songs about sex, and had the vocals and talent to support her eccentric style.⁷ Unlike Spears and Aguilera, Gaga surpassed the inevitable cookie cutter pop star by promoting an unorthodox, edgy and crude female star. The entertainment industry erupted over Gaga, something not witnessed since the rise of Michael Jackson, Madonna or David Bowie.

Lady Gaga came to prominence with a strong love of music, prodigious talent and a supportive family. On March 28 1986, Gaga was born in Yonkers New York, just outside of New York City. Her parents Joe and Cynthia Germonatta were an Internet entrepreneur and telecommunications assistant, respectively. Already at age four she began learning to play the piano. By age thirteen she had written her first piano ballad,

and by fourteen performed in Manhattan nightclubs. She attended Convent of the Sacred Heart, a Roman Catholic secondary school located in the Upper-East Side of the city. During her high school career, Germonatta performed in several school plays, and strove to be a dedicated and studious student. However she also describes herself as being “a bit insecure...I used to get made fun of for being either too provocative or too eccentric, so I started to tone it down. I didn’t fit in, and I felt like a freak.”⁸ Following high school, Germonatta attended the prestigious New York University’s (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts. Only attending the school for two years, she later dropped out to focus on her music career. In order to survive she took three jobs, one being a Go-Go dancer at a Manhattan nightclub. Soon after, she briefly signed a record deal with Def Jams Recordings, but soon got dropped after only three months due to her unconventional clothes and personality; all of which ironically cast Gaga as being unsellable. During this time Germonatta started the Stefani Germonatta band with several friends from NYU. She was living in an apartment in the Lower East Side, performed nightly at burlesque shows, and began experimenting with drugs. After a falling out with her father, whom she had always been close to, Germonatta reinvented herself. Soon after, R&B artist Akon discovered her, and she was picked up by Interscope Records and introduced to songwriter and producer RedOne. She collaborated with music producer Rob Fusari who compared her vocals to Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen. Germonatta received a text message one day from Fusari, which read *Lady Gaga*. He later explained that he had written “Radio Ga Ga,” the title of a Queen song, but the text had been auto-corrected to *Lady Gaga*. Germonatta at the time was in the process of trying to come up

with a stage name replied, “That’s it.” After that day she was Lady Gaga, and stated, to Fusari, “Don’t ever call me Stefani again.”⁹

There is no argument that Lady Gaga has taken the world by storm. Her image, products and music can be seen and heard everywhere. But what is it about Lady Gaga that the world finds so intriguing? What accounts for her cultural prominence? One reason pertains to her unique, avant-garde fashion statements worn during performances, music videos and public appearances.¹⁰ While other pop stars like Madonna or Christina Aguilera went through a number of fashion phases in their careers, Lady Gaga’s style changes almost daily. Her image transforms from a 1980s disco queen to futuristic dominatrix, a robotic cyborg (among many others). Gaga creates a spectacle with her fashion statements. A second basis for her cultural prominence is Gaga’s ability to connect to fans on a level unmatched by her contemporaries. Through lyrics, performance and being an activist for the LGBT community, she consciously fights for causes she believes in. Along with attending National Equality marches, and protesting against the military policy of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT), Gaga demonstrates commitment to her fans and ideals.

Spectacle and Persona

When Stefani Germonatta sent Rob Fusari a text message back in 2007 that read, “Don’t ever call me Stefani again,” she created a persona and performance that appears to be able to last a lifetime. Like many artists and musicians, Gaga constructed a persona that borrows from past artists, and throughout the years continues to evolve and change with

her performances. Although Gaga's chameleon persona resembles past musicians such as David Bowie, Cyndi Lauper and Elton John, it is her remarkable appropriations to past historical artists that are most intriguing. Gaga's persona mirrors Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp.

On several accounts Gaga has been compared to pop artist Andy Warhol. Warhol, like other artists of his time and prior, used his persona to create fame and prominence in the art community. Like Gaga, Warhol's persona was calculated and deliberate, and matched that of his art, which Jonathan E. Schroeder describes as, "detached, but friendly, familiar, yet distant."¹¹ Both artists through their persona turned themselves into a brand. Warhol, arguably developed one of the most recognizable styles in art history, however, none of which he originally constructed. His remakes of Brillo boxes and Campbell's Soup cans enabled him to develop a brand identity and brand equity, by introducing images that were easily identifiable.¹² Gaga, herself, created an identifiable style, however one that constantly changes and morphs. Her style consists of the fantastical, bizarre, and grotesque; anything that creates controversy or a spectacle. Perhaps Warhol's greatest influence upon Lady Gaga is his constructed persona. Warhol, much like his art, based his persona around that of a machine. He declared that he wanted to be something that makes, not paintings, but industrial productions.¹³ Warhol declared, "I'd prefer to remain a mystery. I never like to give my background and, anyway, I make it all up different every time I'm asked. It's not just that it's part of my image not to tell everything, it's just that I forget what I said the day before, and I have to make it all up over again."¹⁴ His machine-like persona is best exemplified in his many interviews

between 1962-1987. Warhol posed the question “can an interview be a work of art?”¹⁵ During his interviews with *Art Voices*, Warhol developed a format of answering questions with short “yes” or “no” responses. He used these responses to comic effect, and as well in such a way that we actually learn more than the answers “yes” and “no” ordinarily convey.¹⁶ Gaga appropriated a similar format responding to interview questions, when she first emerged as a pop star. In an interview with the British talk show host Jonathon Ross, her replies to his questions are extremely short, and distant:

Your name is Lady Gaga and that is based on the Queen song Radio Gaga?
Yes.

What is your real name? What is your given name? And now everyone calls you Lady Gaga?
Everyone calls me Gaga.

So your mom calls you Gaga, and your friends call you Gaga?
Yes.

If there was, or if there is, a special someone in your life, would they call you Gaga?
Sometimes.

I know you’ve had number one [songs] here, but you are known quite well else where in the world. Australia? Japan?
Yes.¹⁷

At the beginning of her career, Gaga would not divulge much about her background. Similar to Warhol, she kept herself at a distance making sure her past (Stefani Germonatta) never surfaced, in order for her pseudonym Lady Gaga to prevail. However, one of the astounding and mystifying aspects of Lady Gaga is her constant morphing of her public image and personality. In Gaga’s more recent interviews, she has combined her persona of Lady Gaga and that of Stefani Germonatta to no longer be separate

entities. Stefani Germonatta and Lady Gaga are the same person. Lady Gaga is no longer a persona or a character, but in fact Germonatta herself. During an interview with Anderson Cooper, Gaga claimed that photographers and interviewers are constantly asking who the real Lady Gaga is and she replies, “I’m right here. This is what I’m really like. This is exactly what I’m really like.”¹⁸ On the matter of appearance, Warhol believed that artists should care as much about their look as they do about their art. After moving to New York City, Warhol began wearing wigs and exhibited himself in public like a work of art, an activity that Gaga enacts to an even greater extent.

This convergence and relationship between art and persona bears an even greater resemblance to the work of Salvador Dali. Dali is a fascinating example of the development of a twentieth-century artistic persona, one that intentionally blurs the lines between life and art, truth and fiction.¹⁹ Dali, a Catalan surrealist artist, was famous for his “craziness” in both his shocking art and persona.²⁰ Dali’s bizarre persona often bordered between constructed persona and mental illness.²¹ However, Dali’s persona did appear to be “just an act”²² and like Gaga, Dali constructed his persona for public consumption and entertainment. Both Gaga and Dali obtain social status for being controversial artists. Throughout his entire artistic career, Dali fashioned himself into a multitude of identities ranging from genius, to madman, to commodity, to Surrealist.²³ Still very early in her career, Gaga also exhibits identities similar to Dali, especially madman and genius. Her music and performances mirror her persona, and as an artist her work is constantly changing and evolving, which is why her persona as well continues to change. The difference between the two artists lies in reasoning for their fabricated

persona. Dali seemed to construct his persona for economic gain, whereas Gaga's persona is constructed for performance and artistic purpose.

Fashion as Spectacle

To begin a discussion of the aesthetics and spectacle of Lady Gaga, one must first be familiar with her creative design team: The Haus of Gaga. Andy Warhol's "The Factory" was the inspiration for the Gaga's Haus and as well the name references the 1920's German design school the Bauhaus.²⁴ "The Factory," served as Warhol's studio in New York City during the 1960s. Inside contained an assembly line that produced Warhol's silkscreens, as well, several films were shot inside the Factory's walls. Not only did the Factory serve a functional purpose of a studio, but it was also a gathering and stomping ground for Warhol's friends, superstars, musicians and artists.²⁵ The Haus of Gaga originally started in Lady Gaga's Los Angeles home, and became the nickname given to her circle of close friends. Since then it has grown, and transformed into the name of her creative design team. The Haus is personally handled by Gaga and is divided into different project teams providing Gaga with varying fashion details, from Gaga's clothes to on- and off-scene props.²⁶ Every miniscule detail to grand stage production pertaining to the look and sound of Gaga is either developed by the Haus of Gaga, or approved by them. The team led by creative director Matthew Williams, also includes choreographer Laurieann Gibson, fashion director Nicola Formichetti, marketing director Bobby Campbell, manager Troy Carter, back-up dancers, hair stylists, makeup artists and personal assistants.²⁷ From 2008 onward her team has expanded and worked in

collaboration with several top fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Thierry Mugler, Versace and Phillip Treacy. The Haus also collaborates with several companies including Polaroid, Dr. Dre Beats headphones, MAC cosmetics, and artists in an attempt to fuse the worlds of fashion, art, and music in everything she creates.²⁸

The reason why Lady Gaga rose to fame so quickly comes from her desire to create spectacle and controversy. In Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, he describes the spectacle as the inverted image of society in which relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, in which passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity.²⁹ He writes that "The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."³⁰ One of the many ways Gaga accomplishes this is through fashion. Her dress separates herself from other contemporaries in music and entertainment. By analyzing the music video for *Telephone*, observations can be made regarding fashion as a spectacle. The video itself created an enormous amount of media attention when it first appeared in March 2009. This was partially due to the outfits worn by both Gaga and Beyonce, which demonstrates the contradiction between costume and commodity. For instance, Beyonce has her own affordable and wearable fashion label, House of Dereon.³¹ In *Telephone*, however, Beyonce does not model her clothing brand. Instead the outfits in *Telephone* are bespoke pieces created by couturiers, vintage couture pieces or costumes created by the Haus of Gaga art department.³² Some of the in-house costumes include sunglasses made out of cigarettes and dresses created from police caution tape. The combination of in-

house designs with couture designs makes the fashion in *Telephone* difficult—if not impossible—to replicate for the majority of viewers, and combines and blurs the distinction between couture and costume.³³ Couture designs are one of a kind, high fashioned clothing, seen on runways, whereas costumes are designs made for theatrical purposes, and considered low art. As well, no distinctions are made in the video between actual fashions created by commercial designers and the in-house costumes. The yellow dress worn by Beyonce, designed by Atsuko Kudo, receives the same screen time and hierarchies of presentation as the Haus of Gaga costumes. *Telephone* equates designs by Thierry Mugler or Viktor&Rolf to costumes made out of coke cans, cigarettes and paper mache.³⁴ It would also be difficult to describe many of the outfits as functional, wearable fashion. Maura Edmond describes the strips of yellow police caution tape and sunglasses made from lit cigarettes as “visually dramatic views”³⁵ rather than outfits.

During Gaga’s live stage performances and music videos, she combines stage props and costumes. For example, in the music video for *Telephone* Gaga wears a hat that is shaped like a telephone. It appears to be non-functional, and used only as a costume. However, later in the video she removes the phone from her head and uses it to make a call, in turn, transforming the costume into a prop. Andrew Sofer states that in theatre props exist only in a state of suspended animation, they involve actual embodiment and motion on the stage in order to spring to life.³⁶ With this in mind, the telephone hat thus remained merely a costume until Gaga removed it from her head and used it as a functional object.

Gaga not only uses fashion to create spectacle in her music videos, but displays such at award shows and even when participating in everyday mundane activities. Society's obsession with celebrity culture makes for events such as the Academy Awards, Grammys and MTV video awards highly telecast and popular events. Lady Gaga's red carpet entrance to the 2011 Grammy awards was nothing short of strikingly visual and mystifying. She arrived on the red carpet after being transported out of a bus from inside an egg-shaped craft. This vessel (as it is called by designer Hussien Chalayan) transported Gaga from the red carpet into the Staples Center, where she remained until her Grammy stage performance when she appeared to break open the shell and "hatch." This spectacular arrival became one of the most creative red carpet entrances seen in decades. Gaga garnered more attention from journalists and television personnel than any other celebrity on the red carpet that night, and could not even be clearly seen or identified due to the dark translucency of the vessel. The red carpet component of award shows is primarily used for celebrities to have their picture taken, to be interviewed, and to ultimately promote themselves as well as the designer of the dress they are wearing. By remaining in the egg-shaped vessel, Gaga denied both the chance for interviews and photographs to be taken, which are normally sought after by most celebrities. Again by being hidden, with such an elaborate entrance, she created greater media frenzy by essentially, doing nothing. Gaga continually reinvents making a spectacle out of a spectacle.

Lady Gaga's shocking fashion statements do not just manifest at award shows, performances and music videos, but they arise in her everyday lifestyle. Gaga knows that

when she ventures into the public there will always be cameras in her face snapping pictures.³⁷ In an interview with Anderson Cooper she says, “You will never see me in sweatpants.”³⁸ Through her devoted attention to detail, this allows her to control how the media portrays her, and keeps her in the spotlight because of her art. Unlike other young celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears, who create numerous amounts of bad publicity by stumbling out of bars, and getting arrested, Gaga directs media attention away from her personal life and focuses it on her unique fashion apparel instead. Her choice to wear bizarre outfits also functions as a form of advertisement for the designers that she is wearing. Most of the designers that work in collaboration with the Haus of Gaga create dress that can only be seen on a runway by a minority of couture fashion industry personnel. By contrast, Gaga’s image can be seen everywhere in the media and this allows for each fashion designer’s work to be seen by millions, and by a range of different people, that in other circumstances would never know who the designer was, or have seen any of their work.

Fame as Spectacle

In today’s society, celebrities are worshiped and valued equally (if not more) than political and religious leaders. As mentioned earlier, Lady Gaga has over eleven million followers on Twitter, and millions of devoted fans attending her concerts and purchasing her records. The twentieth-century inventions of radio, television and the Internet have produced a society full of celebrity worshipers. These technologies have created a twenty-first-century society dominated by media and the consumerism that this media

promotes. Western society looks up to celebrities as heroes, and value their opinions and beliefs. Numerous television shows have been made that follow celebrities daily (*TMZ*) or discuss and analyze celebrities, from their personal lives, career choices, and dress (*E! Hollywood Insider*), not to mention the dozens of magazines and tabloids devoted to covering celebrities' every movement. P. David Marshall in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, explores the sociological entrancement that society has with celebrity culture, and examines why they have such a strong impact in our lives. He discusses how celebrities maximize their success through the relationship with the audience, by the level of intimacy they obtain with them. In his case study of popular music performers, he explains that they are best able to appeal to their fans' emotions, thus creating the closest possible celebrity/audience relationship.³⁹ Gaga is evidently aware of this tactic of attaching one's self emotionally to one's fans, for she makes it a point to address her fans and establishing a personal bond. On numerous occasions, in television interviews, and award show thank you speeches, Gaga blesses and thanks her fans. She even has the words "Little Monsters" tattooed on her arm, which references the name she gives to her fans. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* she states,

We [my fans] have this umbilical cord that I don't want to cut, ever. I don't feel that they suck me dry. It would be so mean, wouldn't it, to say, "For the next month, I'm going to cut myself off from my fans so I can be a person." What does that mean? They are part of my person, they are so much my person. They're at least 50 percent, if not more.⁴⁰

In several interviews Gaga admits that she studied the art of fame, therefore she is aware of the significance of the fan and celebrity relationship. Yet, Gaga's connection to her fan base does not appear forced or superficial. One of the subculture groups that Gaga

makes a large impression on is the gay youth community. Gaga is able to connect to them much in the same way (arguably even more) than Madonna did over twenty years ago. She creates a community for them, where they do not have to feel like they are outsiders. Gaga often describes that there were many times in her life when she felt like she did not belong. In high school she was often called a “freak” and bullied because of how she dressed and how she acted. Gay individuals, especially gay youth, know what it feels like to be bullied, and teased because they are not considered part of society’s norm. Not only do Lady Gaga’s songs preach about acceptance and love, but she also calls out to these individuals, these “little monsters,” in her concerts. She liberates her fans, and embraces individuality, or the “freak” within: “Tonight all the freaks are outside, and I locked the doors!”⁴¹

Debord describes the spectacle as “not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”⁴² While he argues that the spectacle is used in order to connote oppressive social control, through illusion or, as Walter Benjamin calls phantasmagoria,⁴³ Gaga devises her persona as an art form and spectacle, to control her image. As an activist against Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT), attending the National Equality March, and has performing for the ceremony in Washington D.C., Gaga uses her celebrity status as a political authoritative figure. In 2010, just days after appearing in a meat dress at the MTV video music awards, Gaga posted a video online, in an attempt to repeal DADT. The purposely low-tech, under-produced, homemade video featured Gaga in a suit and tie, pleading with fans to make a determined effort to engage their local and congressional representatives to repeal

DADT. Gaga's *performance* in the DADT video illustrate the truth about politics, which Megan Vicks describes as, "what are politics other than a huge spectacle that everyone takes seriously?"⁴⁴

Gaga's work is about life in spectacular culture and what response may be made. Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, asserts that within spectacular culture, the image is privileged and the public submits to the immense power of those in control of the image.⁴⁵ Gaga's video may have made her project more unambiguous and less underlying political, but it still sought to create a widespread image that may be democratically engaged with by a public.⁴⁶

Gaga's fame has differed from other current female performers in that she has molded herself into a position of authority within the spectacle.⁴⁷ Gaga eliminates the line between reality and illusion by suggesting that our current reality is illusion and visa versa.⁴⁸ As Gary Leonard writes, "reality, in an age of mass media, seems to be a convention that is formed in opposition to whatever polarized point of view we choose to view as 'artificial'."⁴⁹ For example, in 2010 at the MTV music awards, Gaga performed the song *Paparazzi*. The performance began with a string orchestra, and dancer on stage. Gaga then sings, "Can't read my, can't read my, no, he can't read my poker face. Amidst, all these flashing lights I pray that fame won't take my life." She lies on the floor, dressed in white lace. Her dancers slowly help her to her feet while she begins to sing. She wears a headpiece that has two feathers attached, and the dancers remove it. Blood then slowly pours from her chest and drenches the white fabric. A wheelchair with a masked woman dressed in white is rolled onto the stage, and soon exits. Gaga then belts out, "I'm your

biggest fan I'll follow you until you love me," while more blood runs down her stomach. A dancer comes to her side and lifts her, she is then hoisted onto a rope and suspended in the air. She hangs from the rope with one arm and lifelessly stares into the audience and cameras as the performance ends. Victor Corona believes that this appeared to be "an attempt to pre-empt the tale of a tragic celebrity demise that has now become a fixture of pop lore, as in the deaths of Princess Diana, Judy Garland, Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe."⁵⁰ In an interview with *Elle* magazine Gaga mentioned "I feel that if I can show my demise artistically to the public, I can somehow cure my own legend. I can show you so you're not looking for it. I'm dying for you on domestic television—here's what it looks like, so no one has to wonder."⁵¹

The song *Paparazzi* comments on the instability of the public gaze in regards to Marshal's discussion of celebrity power. Especially considering the use of paparazzi in contemporary culture. The paparazzi most often capture images of celebrities performing the most ordinary activities, such as walking their dogs or shopping.⁵² These images lie in an area that separate the stars from the sacred and glamorous, to the profane and ordinary.⁵³ However in regards to Gaga, her separation lies between the merely mundane and the monstrous and outrageous. This strategy allows her the ability to "solidify the degree to which Gaga can associate subcultural membership with her music and thereby activate enduring allegiances."⁵⁴ As Marshal states:

The star's cultural power depended on a very close affinity with a specific and loyal audience. The star, then, was actively engaged in the construction and differentiation of audience groups, in terms of style and taste, and in authenticating their elevated position. The popular music star, more than other forms of celebrity had to be a virtual member of his or her own audience in order to sustain his or her influence and authenticity, and the commitment of the fan.⁵⁵

The motif of the “monster” allows Gaga to attract other self-identifying outcasts, to her music by hoping to empower the “monster” within them.⁵⁶ By attempting to self-empower her fans through the celebration of one’s Otherness, it creates a powerful function of public and televised spectacles. During an interview with Barbara Walters, for her 20/20 special “most fascinating people” of 2009, Gaga declared that she hopes to “liberate” her fans from their fears so they can “create their own space in the world.”⁵⁷

Influences and Appropriations

Along with Lady Gaga’s persona, her work, costume, and performance at times are appropriated from designers, performers and artists. Even though she began her career as a musician, with the help of her creative team, she integrates so many aspects of art into her performances that many, Gaga included, consider her to be a performance artist. Gaga fuses art, fashion, performance and music together in her work and in her life.

While there are many comparisons to be made between Warhol and Gaga in terms of artworks, beliefs and personae, Gaga in many instances appropriates his work as an homage for the inspiration he has had on her performances. During the interludes of Gaga’s first tour, *The Fame Ball*, Gaga projected several short films that make direct reference to Warhol. Gaga rationalized the appropriations because “I consider what I do to be more of an Andy Warhol concept: pop performance art, multimedia, fashion, technology, video, film. And it’s all coming together, and it’s going to be a traveling museum show.”⁵⁸ The show began with a video introduction called “The Heart,” where Gaga appeared as alter-ego Candy Warhol. The video showed her dressing up and

displaying the symbol of a pink heart on her t-shirt, and she says “My name is Lady Gaga, and this is my Haus.” During interludes of the show, other videos featured Gaga as Candy Warhol, brushing her hair, and finally wearing television glasses that read “Pop Music Will Never Be Low Brow.” The text is a reference to Warhol, who sought to make popular culture (which was often considered low brow) into fine art. Her alter ego Candy Warhol references the Warhol superstar Candy Darling. Gaga as well makes reference to Warhol in her song *Paparazzi*, when she sings “Don’t stop for anyone, we’re plastic, but we still have fun.” This lyric is a reminder of the quote by Warhol, “I love Los Angeles, I love Hollywood. They’re beautiful. Everybody’s plastic, but I love plastic.”⁵⁹

In regards to the contradictions between high brow and low brow, both Warhol and Gaga make efforts to erase the line between the two. They both attempt to transform what society deems as low brow into fine art. However, they accomplish this in opposite ways. Warhol used imagery of popular culture and ordinary, everyday consumer products in his work to blur the boundaries of what was considered popular culture, and what was considered fine art. Gaga on the other hand, displays what most would consider *fine art* and parades it as popular culture.

First, considering Lady Gaga’s fashion choices, headpieces and footwear, it would be difficult to determine the difference between high brow and low brow art. Whether she’s performing at an awards show, doing a live television interview, or strolling the streets of New York City, Lady Gaga’s outfits look like they belong on a runway. If examining just her headpieces alone, we can begin to regard them more as sculpture rather than functional wearable fashion. In late 2010 she was photographed stepping out

of a limo in London to eat dinner at a Mr. Chow's restaurant, wearing a hat made by Philip Treacy. The hat was shaped like a lobster was adorned in silver glitter and jewels, and appeared to be better suited in a Salvador Dali exhibit, rather than atop Gaga's head. During a benefit party for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Gaga wore a headpiece designed by the architect Frank Gehry, while playing a piano painted by artist Damien Hirst. Alongside her were ballet dancers who also wore outfits designed by Frank Gehry, designer Miuccia Prada and filmmaker Baz Luhrmann.⁶⁰ At the event, she told *The New Yorker*, "The objective is to always be making something that belongs in a museum. Even what I'm wearing right now."⁶¹ She also stated that she enjoyed exposing her fans to a type of art that they may not have seen before: "To have all of these very amazing art lovers — a very high-brow art community — to be engaged in the commercial community and blend the two together ... having my fans watch the video and be exposed to a level of art and a level of install that they may have never seen before, it's so beautiful."⁶² Gaga can be regarded as a contemporary Pop artist. However, unlike Andy Warhol and other Pop artists who transformed popular culture into art, Gaga inverts that process.

Besides her unique headpieces, Gaga's footwear has also received a lot of attention. More specifically, a pair of shoes designed especially for her by the Japanese designer Noritaka Tatehana. The black platform shoes have no heel, and that means Gaga must walk on her toes and maintain her balance to wear them. It seems appropriate to address the performance art of Vanessa Beecroft when discussing Gaga's shoes. Beecroft's performances often enlist nearly nude female models, standing in outrageously high heels

for hours until their feet bleed, to be gawked at by spectators.⁶³ Like Beecroft's women, who perform the cultural expectations for models and allow viewers to see the intense physical suffering⁶⁴ (usually hidden behind the scenes) that their roles require, Gaga (as a performer of fame, as mega-pop star) permits the world to watch her "suffer" for her pop stardom daily, as she costumes her feet in impossibly heavy and monstrous footwear. Gaga literalizes what is considered sexy for women—high, high heels—to a grotesque degree. As well she creates a performance out of her daily life. Her life is the platform for her art.

Iconography has been important to Gaga. She has studied Warhol's process of creating an icon via repetition, most notably through her use of biblical imagery. While most believe that Gaga employs religious iconography to shock the audience, this in fact is not the case. The imagery Gaga uses is "very old, and very catholic," but she appears to be supporting a new sort of religious acceptance and tolerance by seizing the old symbols and re-appropriating them.⁶⁵ For example, in her 2011 music video *Judas*, the sheer beauty of these very-familiar images is made anew. *Judas* is filled with Christian iconography, but Gaga herself explains that it is only controversial inasmuch as it contains "Christian Lacroix and Chanel in the same frame." Instead Gaga re-appropriates said iconography to showcase her new religion which is about acceptance, in this case, she is free to celebrate many of the meaningful and beautiful symbols of Christianity in all their richness.⁶⁶

Gaga's most blatant fashion appropriation is also her most controversial. At the MTV video music awards in 2010, Gaga wore an outfit made entirely out of meat. The

dress was made by designer Franc Fernandez, and is a direct appropriation of Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's 1987 piece *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*. Both works featured an outfit sewn together made out of meat. Gaga wore her dress to the MTV video music awards, and Sterbak had her dress displayed at the National Gallery of Canada both on a model and on a manikin. Gaga's dress did not completely replicate the design of Sterbak's, however, both are extremely similar in length and style. The difference in the two dresses arises in the type of meat used. Sterbak used fifty pounds of raw flank steak that quickly desiccated, while Gaga's dress was composed out of a dry cured meat called matambre. Sterbak's dress emphasized the contrast between vanity and decay—a graphic reminder of the aging process.⁶⁷ Both dresses created much controversy. Immediately after being displayed in Ottawa, outraged politicians and food-aid agencies claimed Sterbak's dress was a waste of food and taxpayers' money, and could not be considered a work of art.⁶⁸ Gaga as well, received criticism but from animal rights activists. Her response and reasoning behind the dress was revealed on the Ellen Degeneres show:

Well, it is certainly no disrespect to anyone that is vegan or vegetarian...as you know, I am the most judgment-free human being on the earth. However, it has many interpretations. For me this evening, if we don't stand up for what we believe in and if we don't fight for our rights pretty soon, we're going to have as much rights as the meat on own bones. And, I am not a piece of meat.⁶⁹

Along with her meat dress, Gaga also attended the 2010 MTV video music awards with four U.S. military soldiers that were dispatched under the “Don't Ask Don't Tell” (DADT) policy. She followed up her meat dress antics with a speech at a rally in support

of repealing the DADT law. She declared that “equality is the prime rib of America” and everyone should have the right to wear a “meat dress.”⁷⁰

In the previous section, Lady Gaga’s persona was discussed in reference to Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali. Another avant-garde artist whom Gaga has undoubtedly studied and appropriated is the French Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp. Francis M. Naumann states that, “Duchamp adopted a highly individualistic approach to the art-making process, one wherein each creative effort was conceived with the intention of consciously defying convenient categorization.”⁷¹ Duchamp explained, “It was always the idea of changing...of not repeating myself. Repeat the same thing long enough and it becomes taste.”⁷² He regarded such repetition as “the enemy of Art.” Gaga as well took note of this, as she constantly reinvents herself, her performances, fashion and image.

Perhaps Duchamp’s greatest influence on Gaga occurred in the construction of his alter ego, Rose Selavy. Duchamp created Rose in New York City in 1920. While the reason for her creation is somewhat ambiguous, Duchamp told an interviewer that, “I wanted to change my identity.”⁷³ He created writings, and art work, and photographs, signed by her, and convinced others that she actually existed.⁷⁴ Man Ray photographed Rose on several occasions, posed in a rather affected manner, sporting samples of the fashionable, though perhaps somewhat conservative clothing of the day.

Lady Gaga first appeared as her alter-ego Joe Calderone in the September (2010) issue of *Vogue Hommes Japan*. Unknown to the world at first that Gaga was actually Calderone, his photos shocked many as his image quickly spread through the Internet. However people immediately noticed several resemblances between Calderone and Gaga:

their noses, eyes, and thin lanky bodies. Soon it was speculated that Gaga *was* Calderone. Joe claims to be a mechanic from Sicily (although he has perfect *lady-like* hands, and not a single muscle in his arms), and his photo shoot with *Vogue* was the first time his picture had been taken.⁷⁵ Quickly it became clear that Joe was in fact Lady Gaga's alter-ego.

After appearing in *Vogue Hommes Japan*, Calderone did not return until Gaga's music video *You and I* in August 2011, and then again weeks later at the MTV video music awards (VMA). At the VMA, Lady Gaga was nowhere to be found, and instead Jo Calderone showed up in her place. Calderone opened for the VMA with a short five-minute monologue, and then performed *You and I*. Calderone also accepted all of Gaga's wins on her behalf.

While not only borrowing from past artists, Gaga has integrated so many different forms of art, fashion, and dance into her lifestyle that one could consider that to be her art. Gaga is conscious of everything she does, and everything she does is intentional. As she claims in the *60 Minutes* interview with Anderson Cooper, "I'm a true academic when it comes to music, when it comes to my style, my fashion. There's nothing that I've ever put on my body that I didn't understand where it came from, the reference of it, who inspired it, there's always some sort of a story or concept I'm telling."⁷⁶ Almost everything that Gaga does has been appropriated or referenced something or someone. However, Gaga transforms the costume, the performance or the imagery she's appropriating into something new. Picasso once said that good artists copy, great artists steal. Gaga studied the artistry of others, but she is a creation all her own as she blurs the roles of pop star and artist.

Otherness, Transgender, Identity Politics

Since the beginning of her rise to stardom, a prominent aspect in Lady Gaga's agenda is the mission of embracing one's Otherness. She strives to help those that feel disenfranchised by society, and those that believe that they do not fit in. Her campaign, (and name of her third album) *Born This Way*, liberates her fans to be who they were born to be, and accept whom they are. Gaga accomplishes this liberation through the petition of universal acceptance, heightened by the fact that Gaga promotes a world that is no longer concerned with binaries of gender. A world that recognizes the fluidity of gender as being something that is constructed, rather than biological. Through the examination of gender as a performance, the construction of identity and the theories of Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway, this section address the question: How does Lady Gaga's fashion and performance embrace self-othering and transgending while promoting a post-gender society?

Lady Gaga has a large following of gay fans. In an interview with *Out* magazine, Gaga discussed her upcoming Monster Ball tour with Kanye West, who at the time was about to go on tour with her: "I just want [Kanye] to be clear before we decide to do this together: I'm gay. My music is gay. My show is gay...And I love my gay fans and they're all going to be coming to our show."⁷⁷ In the same interview, Gaga credited her success to her gay fans, and discussed how gay culture shaped her work: "I very much want to inject gay culture into the mainstream...It's not an underground tool for me. It's my whole life."⁷⁸ This comes as no surprise regarding *The Monster Ball* and its allusion to drag balls and drag culture. For each performed song, Gaga changes into elaborate

costumes, referencing the costumes of drag queens. A drag performer from the film *Paris is Burning* describes drag queen costumes of the 1970s as imitating costumes of Vegas Show girls: bright, colorful, detailed, over the top, and flashy; much like the costumes that Gaga appears in on stage.⁷⁹

When Gaga appears on stage or in a music video, she performs as Lady Gaga, a persona of many different kinds of gender and identities. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* traces the multitude of discourses surrounding sex/gender, and ultimately addresses their problems. Butler begins her critique by underscoring the difference between sex and gender: sex is biological, whereas gender is culturally constructed. She then argues that the problem with the sex/gender distinction is that sexed bodies cannot be understood without gender. Fundamentally, sex and gender are both equally culturally created. In that way, the two are inseparable, and must be examined together.⁸⁰ Ultimately she argues that gender is performed rather than biologically determined. Butler introduces the idea of performativity in the first chapter when she states "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed."⁸¹ Much later, in chapter 3, Butler addresses the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed, parodic performances such as drag effectively reveal the imitative nature of all gender identities: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency." "[P]art of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender."⁸² Gaga certainly performs in drag. When she

does, she often drags other famous women who have inspired her: Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, and so on. At other times, Gaga performs drag much like a drag queen with Vegas-show girl outfits, extreme amounts of makeup, and wigs. Recently, in June 2011, Gaga performed her new single *Hair* on the Paul O'Grady show. The performance was simple and consisted of her seated at a piano singing acoustically. She also appeared wearing a green dress, and completely bald. This does not really come as a shock. Gaga changes her look daily, it was never a question of if she was wearing a wig, so it would make sense that to make things easier she would have extremely short hair (or no hair at all). However this reveals that Gaga is *always* in drag. Not only when she performs, but when she is in public as well. While drag queens are only in drag during performances, and out of drag in their daily lives, Gaga blurs the boundaries of gender performance and drag.

Although Gaga's persona and performance constantly disrupt the categories of gender, the question arises whether she performs as a gendered woman or as a being that exists beyond gender—masculine, feminine, both, neither, or everything in-between? There are many similarities to drag queens, who also problematize fixed notions of gender, and display how all genders can be created through performance. However, Gaga's performances may not be relevant to the category of gender at all. She creates a *gender-less* performance that refuses to be distinguished by a division of gender. Lesley Kinzel believes, "Her performance presents a gendered body that not only exhibits the split between biological sex and culturally-constructed gender, but moreover thwarts attempts to be controlled or defined by gender."⁸³ If one takes, for instance, her Kermit

the Frog outfit, designed by Jean Charles de Castelbajac that she wore during a television interview in Germany, her performance of gender can be questioned. Gaga donned an outfit covered entirely in frog heads. Frogs, like some other water creatures, can change their gender without hormonal or surgical intervention.⁸⁴ Whether or not Gaga displayed such an outfit to make a statement about defying categories of gender, it still becomes fascinating to see her continuously defy structures of gender.

One of the perplexing aspects of Lady Gaga is her paradoxical identity. More than just controlling her identity, she gives birth to it.⁸⁵ “Birthing Identity” is perhaps an oxymoron, because Gaga’s identity is both natural and constructed simultaneously. On the one hand Gaga performs her identity through costume, acting, poses and fictions—all of these “non-essentialist, non-foundationalist, non-immanent modes of identity.”⁸⁶ On the other hand her identity is inevitable, true, “born that way” and real—essential foundational and immanent identity.⁸⁷ For example, when Gaga stated “This is what I’m really like. This is exactly what I’m really like,”⁸⁸ she obscured the boundary between natural and constructed identity by making no distinction between Stefani Germonatta and Lady Gaga.

What does Gaga’s identity have to do with gender politics? For one it puts performance identity in the same space as essential identity, giving freedom to identity—you can be whomever you want to be—but also legitimizes identity—it’s true because you were “born this way.”⁸⁹ By embodying this autonomous identity through her own wants and desires, but also recognizing the always already of being born that way, Gaga

creates a method that releases identity from “cultural and essentialist dictates, and conversely empowers one to determine their own created/natural identities.”⁹⁰

In the latter part of the twentieth century, there has become a global shift towards polymorphous gender and sexual identities.⁹¹ Gaga advances this trend, as she promotes a new kind of gender—what she claims to be a group of monsters—not ingrained in such binaries and identities. In her recent single *Born This Way*, Gaga speaks out about the prejudices against the gay community and different races. She preaches for universal and unconditional acceptance. Her music video for *Born This Way* is full of symbolism, appropriation and allusions. The video begins with Gaga narrating *The Manifesto of Mother Monster* in which she conceives the birth of a new race within humanity, one with no prejudice, no gender—essentially “monsters.” The imagery in the video contains a surrealist aesthetic, inspired by Salvador Dali and Francis Bacon. Both of these artists produced work that contained a grotesque monster aesthetic, full of dark hues and unsettling images. Gaga’s costumes in *Born This Way* reveal her transformation into a gender-less monster. Rick Genest makes an appearance along side Gaga who is dressed in an identical tuxedo. Genest, also known as “The Zombie Boy,” has a tattoo of a skeleton/zombie completely covering his face and body. Gaga’s make-up mimics his tattoo as a statement that she decides what she believes is beautiful, not what the media forces society to believe.

Born This Way reveals yet another transformation in Lady Gaga’s image. Appearing in the music video, live performances, and television interviews are tumor-like intrusions on her face and body. She explains the reasoning behind the prosthetic makeup

by saying that women often try and enhance their bodies, whether it is by wearing shoulder pads to enlarge their shoulders or blush to accent their cheekbones. Gaga wanted to make these enhancements a permanent part of her body and emphasize what makes a woman beautiful to a grotesque degree.⁹² These alterations of the female body reference the work of the French feminist artist Orlan. Orlan is a performance artist who uses the procedure of plastic surgery to make *carnal art*. She transforms her face in order to defy the commonly held standard of beauty.⁹³ While Gaga does not go to the extremes that Orlan does, and permanently alter her body, both still represent the feminine body against the common notion of beauty in a disturbing, monstrous way.

While some of Gaga's costumes are considered controversial, bizarre, and explicitly sexual, they transform her into something that appears mutilated and unnatural. Take for example Gaga's Armadillo shoes designed by the late Alexander McQueen. McQueen is known for his future-driven couture visions that merge the animal and "natural" in gorgeous but grotesque ways. His Armadillo shoes are shaped like a lobster claw and appear as if they are fused to Gaga's body, turning her into something unnatural.

A humorous example of Gaga's efforts to unsteady gender is the crotch shot of her in the music video *Telephone*. In the scene where Gaga angrily jumps up onto the jail bars, legs spread, a guard walks by and says, "I told you she didn't have a dick." To which another replies "Too bad." Of course, this is a reference to the numerous rumours that Lady Gaga is intersexed. Such rumours of hermaphroditism had been circling for quite a while, and it was a rumour Gaga never really cared to address or dismiss:

I love the rumor that I have a penis. I'm fascinated by it. In fact, it makes me love my fans even more that this rumor is in the world because 17,000 of them come to an arena every night and they don't care if I'm a man, a woman, a hermaphrodite, gay, straight, transgendered, or transsexual. They don't care! They are there for the music and the freedom. This has been the greatest accomplishment of my life - to get young people to throw away what society has taught them is wrong. Gay culture is at the very essence of who I am and I will fight for women and for the gay community until I die.⁹⁴

What is most sublime about this scene in the music video is that it is nothing more than a tease. Gaga's genitalia is blurred out, and evidently displays nothing. There could be a vagina there, or a little bit of penis,⁹⁵ we cannot be sure. Gaga reliably drives critical conversation about gender as an identity and reality that cannot so easily be pinned down.⁹⁶

What also provides a challenge to categorize Gaga is the fact that she performs many kinds of gender: trappy vixen, angelic feminine, and then her alter-ego Joe Calderone. Calderone is just another mind-twister that Gaga has created. There are many possibilities that Joe could represent. Cheryl Helm's article, "Contemplating Jo," addresses the many speculations that arise from the existence of Jo Calderone. First is the possibility that Gaga is once again referencing the rumours that she is intersexed.⁹⁷ The only problem with this hypothesis is that the so-called "critics" only see the transgressive image of Gaga as a woman, not as a male, which they argue and claim her to be.⁹⁸ Gaga exists to them as a drag queen. Even though some of them believe she is a male, they see her as a male to female, not as a female to male.

Secondly, there is the possibility that Gaga is performing drag.⁹⁹ This could be true, but the difficulty with this theory is that often when one performs drag, the drag persona is a reflection of a self-image of the person performing the drag, in a near

autobiographical way.¹⁰⁰ If comparing Madonna once again in drag (as she appeared in her music video *Express Yourself*) to Lady Gaga, the difference is that Madonna never fully gives up her femininity. Madonna's drag characters always look like a woman in drag, whereas Gaga as Joe does not. This argues against the speculation of Gaga performing drag because none of the classic drag cues are anywhere to be seen.¹⁰¹

Thirdly, it is quite possible that Joe is the mirror image of Lady Gaga. In many ways Joe is the reverse image of Gaga: he is the male to her female, the brunette to her blonde, Sicilian to her American-Italian, dark-skinned to her white skin, and working-class origins to her upper-class origins and the handsome to her ugly.¹⁰² As well the same features of Gaga (that some claim to be *ugly*, i.e., her nose), reinforce the masculinity and handsomeness of Joe.

Next, perhaps Joe is Lady Gaga as a gay man. In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine Neil Strauss wrote, "When she uses words like "fierce," or describes her sexual conquests of beautiful men, one sees why the hermaphrodite rumors about her have been so persistent: She seems, at times, like a gay man trapped in a woman's body."¹⁰³ Joe could conceivably be the closest Gaga can get to actually being a gay man.

Finally, it is rather possible that Joe Calderone is nothing more than Gaga dressing up as a male for a photo-shoot. This is very similar to Marcel Duchamp, and his alter ego Rrose Selavy. The theories behind Gaga's alter-ego may be puzzling as to why she created him, but the addition of Joe pushes the boundaries of sexuality and gender yet again. For example, his opening monologue at the 2011 VMA awards established Calderone as Gaga's on and off again boyfriend. Portraying herself as a male, and as her

own boyfriend again (as Calderone), in her 2011 *You and I* video as well, blurs and confuses distinctions between gender and sexuality.

What also makes it difficult to pin Gaga down into a gender category is her performing of genderless cyborg, robotic, alien creatures. The cyborg is an organism with both biological and artificial parts. In Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," she uses the cyborg as a metaphor for the postmodern feminist. Cyborgs contain no gender, therefore as women they can no longer be segregated from men or seen as inferior. Gaga's performance of a genderless cyborg can be seen once again in the music video *Telephone*. In this video she fashions several headpieces mimicking a telephone. The telephone in today's society acts as an extension of the human body. Gaga wears the telephone as a helmet, as her hair forms the receiver. Almost everyone today owns a cell phone or telephone, so it has become an ever-present, organic part of the contemporary human body.¹⁰⁴ The telephone is both restricting and freeing, and Gaga portrays both in the music video.¹⁰⁵ Freeing, in regards that it is the telephone that frees her from jail (calling Beyonce to break her out), and acts as a communication device between friends. The telephone is represented as restricting because it stutters and freezes, and when this happens so do the people using it. In the video the telephone acts as a dictator, which all of the humans become moved by its ring.¹⁰⁶ At one point Beyonce even begins to move in robotic mechanical motions. Gaga's video addresses the idea that the telephone is an integral part of the human body, a part that people cannot function without, and in the end are controlled by it.

Many criticize Gaga and argue that she objectifies herself with her excessive sexuality. One of the pop stars that Gaga is constantly being compared to is Madonna. Both Gaga and Madonna are notorious for their overt sexuality. While both are strong females comfortable at expressing their sexuality, Madonna never gives up her femininity. Gaga on the other hand, pushes her sexuality to the brink where it turns from sexiness into something grotesque. In the photo shoot for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Gaga embodies many signifiers of a sex object: curves, blonde, and nudity. But her curves are exaggerated and somewhat disturbing, and the plastic bubbles make her look misshapen and tumor-ridden. In a sense, Gaga turns herself into an object, but often makes that object monstrous, or even grants that object a bias of its own. Therefore she exhibits strength and power through her self-objectification. However, unlike Madonna, Gaga's strength and power are not really tied up with womanhood, she is an individual who transcends typical categories of masculine and feminine. She exemplifies the post-gendered individual.

Fame and Monster Culture

In June 2010 after attending Lady Gaga's concert *The Monster Ball*, it became clear that Gaga was fusing the roles of pop star and artist. Her show contained the theatrics and aesthetics beyond the traditional pop rock concert. But why should anybody care about Lady Gaga? Firstly, Gaga created a massive, platform in an age of corporate-driven massive platforms.¹⁰⁷ She has reached a level that very few artists attain. Her performances have the potential to affect millions of people. Having said that, most

importantly she is the principle driving force behind her work, not promoters or record labels. Her message of being who you were born to be no matter how disenfranchised you may feel from society, is not only preached by Gaga but practiced by her. When Gaga first started performing back in New York City, she performed in underground and burlesque clubs. Gaga strove to be different and not to let others tell her that she did not fit in, and she would never make it if she were adamant about being so eccentric. She carries this message on to her fans, who feel the same way. Gaga became the first star in a long time to make a legitimate connection with her fans, most particularly young LGBT fans. Through music and specifically her concerts, she creates a space of love and support for people who cannot find support anywhere else. This functions so importantly in today's society because many LGBT youths do not receive the same amount of support and representation in the media as their heterosexual counterparts. The suicide rate of LGBT youths is one of the highest of all demographic categories in North America, and more specifically transgender youths because of bullying due to society's taboo of gay and transgendered individuals.¹⁰⁸ Gaga not only advocates for these youths by teaching them to embrace their Otherness, but she fights for their rights politically, by attending Equality marches, and DADT repeal rallies.

Second, Lady Gaga integrates low brow art with fine art like Warhol and other pop artists of the 1950s and 1960s. Making a statement to never be caught in "regular" clothes, Gaga wears couture fashion in public on a daily basis. She gives credit to designers, expanding their creations and art beyond the realm of fashion shows and high couture runways. For example, the late Alexander McQueen, who was well-regarded in

the fashion and art world, is now considered a household name. Gaga helped to propel artists like McQueen into the realm of popular culture, blurring the boundaries between high and low art. As well with the help of her design team The Haus of Gaga, create costumes that can be replicated by her fans, once again muddling the lines between high versus low art. Like Warhol who sought to make popular culture *cool*, Gaga attempts to make pop music *cool*.

In conclusion, it is useful to examine Jeffery Cohen's seven theses on Monster Theory, given that Gaga's aesthetic foregrounds Otherness through the trope of the "monster." Cohen's first thesis is that the monster dwells at the gate of difference, whether it be culturally, politically, racially, economically, and sexually.¹⁰⁹ As demonstrated throughout this paper, Gaga's sole purpose is to embody difference. Through externalization, Lady Gaga's persona and identity manifested through her performance and image are so different from the norm that it can be read as monstrous. She incorporates monstrosity and Otherness through the various dimensions of sexuality, race, politics and culture.

Second, in Cohen's Monster discourse he describes the monster's body as a cultural body.¹¹⁰ If looking deeper than the physical manifestation of Lady Gaga, one can regard that she is a representation of cultural politics. Cohen goes on to say that the monster's body is a cultural text, bearing the symbols that allow the monster's meaning to inhere.¹¹¹ Lady Gaga brings social taboos to the surface with a purpose such as homosexuality, transgendering, and explicit female sexuality. Thirdly, Cohen says that the monster serves as a warning or boundary-marker for cultural and social taboos, areas

meant to be unexplored, or inappropriate acts and identities.¹¹² Lady Gaga expresses this theory through her very open and expressive sexuality, specifically shown in her music video for *Lovegame*.

Cohen's fourth thesis states that the monster threatens to reveal that difference is arbitrary and that it is created through political and motivated processes. Once again, Lady Gaga embraces one's Otherness, and pushes for other's to embrace it themselves as well. Gaga states,

This is who I am and it took a long time to be okay with that. A lot of people feel like you don't fit in, you wanna be like everyone else, but no really. Sometimes in life you don't always feel like a winner, but that doesn't mean you aren't a winner.

Cohen's fifth thesis declares that the fear of the monster is really a kind of desire. He writes that monsters are portrayed as hateful, destructive and evil, and therefore are unable to be cast out.¹¹³ This, however, is not the case with Gaga, since she focuses on positivity and love; but she can be feared for other reasons. Cohen also says that the monster is both the abject and object of desire, threatening to undermine our identities by exposing that our experiences exceed the ways in which we identify ourselves.¹¹⁴ Lady Gaga's massive cultural presence allows people around the world to escape the social norms and restrictions they deal with everyday.

Cohen's sixth thesis, that the Monster is the harbinger of category crisis, explains that the monster can be a force of social upheaval, which is one reason they are feared.¹¹⁵ Lady Gaga is exactly that. She calls herself an "artist of liberation." "That's where the work is, it's in culture, in society, with the people. I don't care what people think of me. I care about what they think of themselves."¹¹⁶ She told Oprah Winfrey everything she

does is for her fans. “I want them to free themselves and I want them to be proud of who they are and I want them to celebrate all the things they don’t like about themselves the way that I did and be so truly happy from inside.”¹¹⁷ She threatens society, if everyone loves themselves, will they care about who society says they should be?

Finally, Cohen’s last thesis, that the monster always escapes, implies that even when a monster is defeated and killed there is a powerful sense that there will always be another monster coming.¹¹⁸ Lady Gaga’s *Paparazzi* performance at the MTV Video music awards, best exemplifies this thesis as Gaga portrayed her demise on stage. Overall, Cohen’s seven theses explicate the particular embodiment style of Lady Gaga and her provide insight into her popularity and influence, especially as she transformed from Stefani Germanotta to an exemplary instance of the contemporary monster.

This paper has argued that Lady Gaga has become successful through the creation of Otherness by adopting strategies developed in artistic experiments in persona and performance. As the first hypermodern pop star, Gaga’s brand of celebrity has created the glance of the spectacular that people look for in trying to escape from the dullness of everyday life.¹¹⁹ Her fashion designs created by top fashion designers, and the Haus of Gaga, expose individuals to a form of art that they might never have known. As fashion blurs the boundaries between art and design, Gaga blurs that boundary even more with her sculptural headpieces, footwear and costumes. Ultimately, her fashion has parlayed the subculture of her “little monsters” into a new ideological race – that of post-gendered beings.

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