Censorship of the Body

INTRODUCTION

The body, moreover the female, trans, crippled, or queer body, has always been one of the most contested sites of political enactment. A fact that is more pertinent in Irish society today than ever before, in light of the forthcoming referendum to repeal the 8th amendment on abortion rights. But beyond the governmental policing, there are also social and personal notions around controlling and politicising bodies. This essay aims to consider how these three forms of censorship are imposed on the body and to what cost.

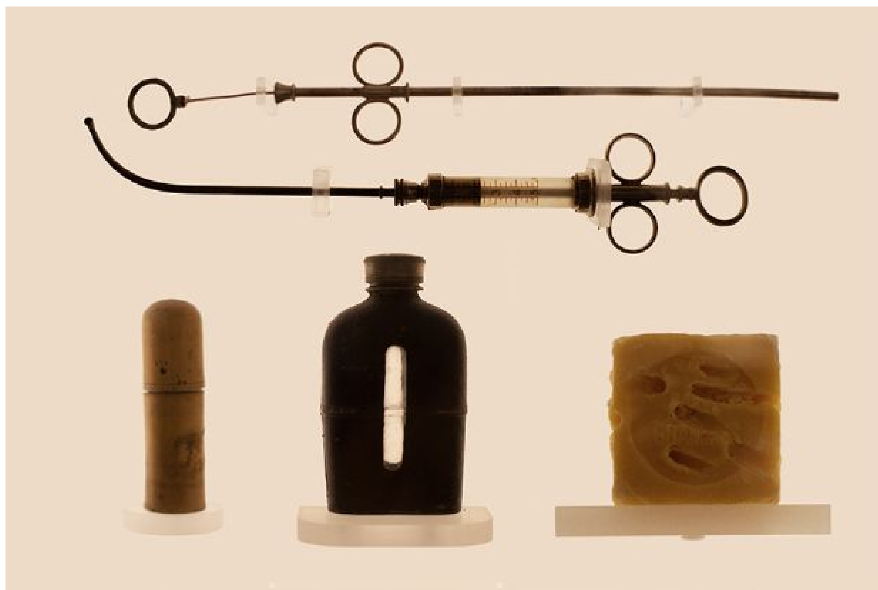

Fig. 1. 2015, Laia Abril.
http://www.laiaabril.com/project/abortion/

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

During a discussion on *The Personal and the Political* in 1979, Audre Lorde stated "Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women" (1984). Although Lorde appears to have been referring to the maternal bond created through the act of maternity rather than the act itself, her phraseology does pose a challenge. Given that she was presenting in New York, a state where abortion up to 24 weeks had been allowed since 1970, she may be forgiven for believing that women are afforded "social power" during pregnancy. However, in countries and states such as Ireland, where reproductive rights are restricted, one could argue that it is the "patriarchal structure" that imposes these restrictions, undermining women's "social power" over maternity.

Barcelona based artist, Laia Abril's 2016 photographic project, *On Abortion*, combines archival documentation, personal testimonies, portraiture, and historical medical instruments to create a compendium that highlights the damage that illegal abortion imposes on society. Similarly Sarah Cullen's 2017 project, *You Shall Have Exactly What you Want*, considers the psychological effects of crisis pregnancy in Ireland in the absence of legal abortion. Cullen's project adopts a more conceptual approach, using domestic spaces to reflect the narrative. Despite the differing styles, both works emphasise the impositions imposed on women's "social power" by the dominant "patriarchal structure". Indeed, Abril's work is intended to form the first chapter in a larger, ongoing body of work titled *A History of Misogyny* which is intended to document the wider dominant "patriarchal structure" by drawing visual comparisons between the historical and the contemporary (Abril, 2015).

Fig. 2. 2017, Sarah Cullen
http://www.source.ie/graduate/2017/dublinstba/dublinstba_student_05_28_39_12-05-17/dublinstba_student_05_28_39_12-05-17.php#topbigimage_hold

CONTRACEPTION

Abortion is not the only area of reproductive rights where political "patriarchal structures" are at play. Beatriz Preciado outlines how pharmaceutical industries "radically modified traditional definitions of normal and pathological sexual identities." From 1941 scientists began extracting the oestrogen and progesterone hormones from pregnant mares which later became the synthetically produced Norethindrone, Searle & Co. later introduced the commercialised version of a contraceptive pill. The chemical components went on to become the most used pharmaceutical molecules in history (2008, 26-28). Preciado goes on to explain:

> Although the Pill was an effective form of birth control, the FDA rejected the first version . . . because the agency's scientific committee felt it threw doubt on the femininity of American women by suppressing their periods altogether. FDA standards led to Searle's production of a second pill, commercialized in 1959, that was equally effective but could, unlike the first, technologically reproduce the rhythms of a natural menstrual cycle . . . (2008, 190)

The history of the Pill serves as only one example of how women's sexuality and reproduction has been dictated by patriarchal, often misguided, decisions. To conceive of the notion that restricting women's menstruation would impede on their "femininity" seems farcical on two counts; firstly that a bodily function, often

referred to as "the curse", defines femininity; and secondly, the notion of femininity as a constructed notion of behaviour, as outlined by Judith Butler in her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*.

Fig. 3. Deleted photograph from Instagram by Dragana Jurisic, 2018
https://www.facebook.com/dragana.jurisic.54?hc_ref=ARSMStWDKJo7Rgo7N2_nKKgiY9BMRfEc4YGO5PZakQxpq9TO53JUnpeBrTIatikMnms

SOCIAL MEDIA

Beyond the political power play, there would appear to be a more virulent "patriarchal structure" within society as a whole, generating inequalities in female performativity and visibility. This is most noticeable in the likes of advertising, the film industry, and most prevalently but not always as immediately visible, within social media. On the 11th May this year, photographer Dragana Jurisic had her

Instagram account deleted without any prior warning. When she contacted the company to report that her account had been hacked, they informed her that the account had been deleted due to her infringement of their usage policy, citing fig. 3 as one of the offending images (Da Silva, 2018; Jurisic, 2018). On their website, the company's point 2 of the terms state:

> You may not post violent, nude, partially nude, discriminatory, unlawful, infringing, hateful, pornographic or sexually suggestive photos or other content via the Service. (2013)

Amid the online outcry, which included the hashtags, #whereisdragana and #reactivatedragana, were a couple of more notable critiques. On her own Instagram page, fellow Irish photographer and friend, Kate Nolan, reposted Jurisic's image alongside a post by Kim Kardashian, drawing comparisons between and questioning the non-censoring of soft porn images as opposed to the censorship of artistic images, fig.4 (Nolan, 2018). Meanwhile, The Guardian and Observer Newspapers' photographic writer wrote:

> If you are searching for the brilliant feed from Dragana Jurisic @dragana23 it has been permanently expunged by the Instagram Stalinists who think it is acceptable to censor artists and, in this instance, a feminist artist. (2018)

Fig. 4. Comparison images as posted on Instagram by Kate Nolan
https://www.instagram.com/p/BiuavhEFjY7/?hl=en

PRECEDENT

Jurisic's case is just the most recent in a long line of social media censorship issues. Often the social media companies will retract their decisions, citing computer algorithms for the mistake, as was the case back in February this year. Facebook banned an image of the prehistoric nude statue, *Venus of Willendorf*, eventually after several appeals by art activist, Laura Ghiandi, who tried posting the image as part of an advertisement, and complaints from The Natural History Museum of Vienna, the company reinstated the post claiming that their ". . . advertising policies do not allow nudity or implied nudity but we have an exception for statues" (Facebook 2018 cited in Ma). But Facebook has also recently been taken to task for not retracting a ban. In February 2016, they lost a court battle against a French school teacher, Frederic Durand-Baissas after they deleted his account for posting an image of the Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting, *The Origin of the World*. The prosecuting lawyer stated "On one hand, Facebook shows a total permissiveness regarding violence and ideas conveyed on the social network. And on the other hand, shows an extreme prudishness regarding the body and nudity" (Cottineau 2016 cited in Independent.ie)

PERSONAL CENSORSHIP

So, within this discourse on public censorship and "patriarchal structure", how and where does personal censoring of the body factor? The dominant force within a desire to censor oneself must come from the desire to identify. In defining identity, Carla Kaplan states: "From popular culture to the reinvigoration of identity politics to the rise of new nationalisms, we see a persistent desire *for* identity, however much identity may be constructed, illusory, and unstable" (2007, 126, italics in original). Despite this instability, she believes that the notion of identity and the acknowledgement of its multiplicity may be outweighed by the desire to resolve it (2007, 124). As such, it is difficult to differentiate what parts of our bodily identity

we retain or let go of. Do we simply resign ourselves to what we have or do we struggle to change it either physically or simply in how we present it?

CONCLUSION

If we choose to represent ourselves, does this struggle for self-identity come at a cost? Preciado argues that we can not be the "self" independent of politics or economics and that the body is merely a tool for the "pharmacopornographic" industry. Therefore any alterations we desire to make are already dictated by political structures:

> One could say that two clearly distinct regimes of power-knowledge traverse the body and that they construct the nose and the genitals according to different somato-political technologies. Whereas the nose is regulated by a pharmacopornographic power in which an organ is considered to be private property and merchandise, the genitals are still imprisoned in a premodern, sovereign, and nearly theocratic power regime that considers them to be the property of the state and dependent on unchanging transcendental law. (2008, 116)

Alternatively, if we choose *not* to reconstruct ourselves, surely through our struggle to self-identify, we must present ourselves within the public sphere and face the repercussions of our declaration. Within whichever side one's identity falls, it would appear as though the body is bound within a system of socio-political enactment.

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