

**The Showgirl
Manifesto
Dr Alison J Carr**

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Project Description



The Showgirl Manifesto brings together research interrogating female bodies on display, pointing to new possibilities for considering pleasure, agency, sexuality, entertainment and identity. This research is manifested through an academic publication; live performances; a collection of large-scale photographs of theatre interiors; and documentary videos of former chorus girls, as well as staging these through public events and exhibitions. The artworks produce new insights from examining the contexts of female performance and display, as well as speaking to former showgirls, and critically examining histories of the Weimar era through performance works.

Project Duration:

2017-2020

Funding:

£13,500 from Arts Council England, August 2017.
£2000 commission, S1 Artspace, September-December 2018.
Financial support (£10,000 and mentoring), Freelands Art Foundation, September 2018-September 2020.
School Research Funding - £5,547.

Research Partners, Consultants, Collaborators:

Routledge publishers
Temporary Contemporary, Huddersfield, 2018
Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, 2018
DINA, Sheffield, 2018
Theatre Deli, Sheffield, 2018
Cellar Theatre, Sheffield, 2019
Bloc Projects, Sheffield, 2019
NewBridge Projects, Newcastle, 2019

'Into the Spotlight', Blocspace, Sheffield, August 2019.

Research Aims & Objectives

Research Aims:

- Generation of new ways for considering female bodily display.
- Development of new (and repurposed) ways of discussing bodies on display that resist reduction / dismissal.
- Establishing a position that takes into consideration new technological ways of viewing (phone cameras, i-Pads, online, social media platforms, etc) and considers how this impacts on idea of the gaze and objectification.
- Producing artworks that value the testimonies of female performers and affirmatively frame their experiences.
- Examining contexts of performance in relation to how they frame / present the female body.



Bauhaus Bühnenchor performance at DINA in Sheffield,
25th November 2018.

Research Context, Methods and Process

The research brought together in *The Showgirl Manifesto* encompasses the academic book, *Viewing Pleasure and Being A Showgirl, How Do I Look?*, and practice-based research in the form of artworks (photographs, performances and videos) which extend the scope of the book while being consistent with its argument.

Viewing Pleasure and Being A Showgirl, How Do I Look? is an academic text that investigates female bodily display in performance contexts. It demonstrates new possibilities in considering female bodily display and agency, updating earlier texts and challenging contemporary positions. It takes an original approach to anxieties around female bodily display by developing insight from showgirls—professional women on display. From this I unpack a range of assumptions that emerge from art historical canonical narratives on representation.

The photograph series, *Ascending A Staircase*, presents the interiors of theatre auditoria in the North of England. Selected for their history of entertaining the masses, I am drawing attention to the architectural clues of the spaces that give some indication of how the viewer is primed for what they see. It is in these spaces that I wonder about the value of entertainment. Women have been enabled by these contexts and have used them to sustain careers onstage, with little opportunity to progress or evolve their personae. Furthermore, as spaces of live entertainment, stages do not conform to Laura Mulvey's discussion of cinematic viewing pleasure as the viewer's gaze is free to roam the stage. However, the gilding, ornate decoration, plush velvets, as well as didactic signs all influence our viewing.

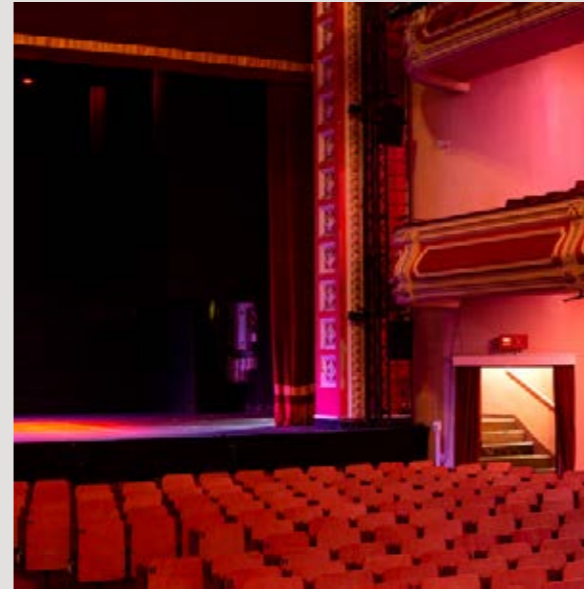
Ascending A Staircase represents theatre spaces composed imaginatively to point to the ways that theatres have offered female performers a space for their creative labour while also constraining the limits of that creativity. Thus, the work involves close reading of theatre spaces through photographing and a period of subsequent image deconstruction and reconstruction through post-production, cropping and printing. The series returns to photographing theatres

in an earlier project where I approached the task to see the spaces for the audience, which prompted my writing. This prior work enabled the recent work on theatre interiors to be approached with a more focused eye, composing the images to probe the historical contexts of performance: what did access to a career onstage mean? What kind of visibility did the theatrical stage offer? What were the limitations? I have approached this by focusing on the stairs either onto or off the stage. The stairs tend to be plain, while the architectural framing devices around the stage are ornate. The decoration occasionally contains female figures. From the visual clues of the architecture, women are invited in to the theatre to be looked at—but this offer is limited, the theatre is not a neutral space for the presentation of self. The stairs prompt a visual speculation on their metaphorical potential as portals for career or personal ascension. Additionally, the title, *Ascending A Staircase*, inverts the art-historical context of Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase 1912*.

The theatre photographs have been made through a refined process in which I walk through the theatre, locating visual signifiers that communicate what I want, composing a photograph that holds these signifiers. I use long exposure times and small apertures to ensure sharp focus across the photograph. From the photographs I have taken I select the one that has the most narrative potential and crucially, crop into a square. The square format arrests the image outside of linear time, film connotations, portrait resonances, and creates the right shape for enjoying a long, slow inspection of the space and signifiers I have composed. This refinement has taken many years of making hundreds of theatre interior photographs that did not tell the story I wanted to, but which were 'failures' that have sharpened my photographic eye.



Ascending A Staircase, Library Theatre, Sheffield, 1934



Ascending A Staircase, Victoria Theatre, Halifax, 1901



Ascending A Staircase, Hippodrome, Darlington, 1907



Ascending A Staircase, Paramount, Penistone, 1914



Ascending A Staircase, City Varieties, Leeds, 1865



Ascending A Staircase, Pomegranate Theatre, Chesterfield, 1879

Another element of the practice-based research is the experimental documentary short video, *Felicity Means Happiness*¹ documents an interview with the former showgirl, Felicity Widdrington, whom I had met during research for the book. Her capacity to tell a story was impressive, and yet the material I got was underused in the textual research. After some reflection I decided to film Felicity so that her telling her stories to me becomes the hook of the piece. I sought funding to tell Felicity's story through a video short documentary and successfully secured an Arts Council England grant to produce the piece (along with the theatre photographs and live performance). The video depicts the dynamic of two women talking together about their shared interests in dancing in the 1930s, our friendship and connection over my accumulated ephemera and artworks and her scrapbooks. The video places value on Felicity, a woman at the end of her life and physically frail, though warm and lively and ready to laugh. Using video I am able to contrast her bodily fragility at the end of her life with footage of a film she was in, in which we see hundreds of dancers tap-dancing, leaping, and jiggling their bottoms. This gives a holistic picture of a woman who has witnessed the horrors of WW2 which she hints at in the piece. I use oral history interviewing techniques in order to generate the maximal amount of insight and give my interviewee agency in the interview process. Video editing techniques highlight details of her story while giving new relevancy to the material through the inclusion of my artwork and insights.

1. <https://vimeo.com/271902611>
(password: smile)



The research was further extended through the production of the performance works, *Bubikopf*² and *Bauhaus Bühnenchor*³. While the photograph series examine popular entertainment contexts, my performances have mined histories of the avant garde of the Weimar Era. I use live performance to collage together historical research, presented through an art historian persona, in which I present how Weimarian Modernity impacted women, for example performance opportunities, ostensible independence, some creative possibilities.

The performances weave together academic research into Weimar entertainment presented through conventional art historical lecture methods—a slide show, a lectern, and an academic talking (me). Audience expectations are subverted through the fracturing of this mode variously through singing a commissioned translation of the song *Lullaby of Broadway* into German, stylised dancing/posing that draws on historical image compositions amongst a team of chorus girls, removing my academic authoritative dress onstage to stand in a pink slip while listening to the recorded words of a mentor discuss Freud's idea of the phallic woman, putting on another dress of the same shape in a commissioned pattern while I speculate the possibilities of crossover between the Bauhaus and the Weimar entertainment scene (could a Tiller girl go to the Bauhaus?).

The imaginative process of creation brings the fragments of historical fact into play through artworks that open up space for viewers to see anew contemporary sexist assumptions. The past is edited through creative processes making them relevant today.

2. Bauhaus Bühnenchor <https://vimeo.com/307876820>
(password: kickline)
3. Bubikopf: <https://vimeo.com/329339691>
(password: bobhead)

Bubikopf scratch performance at the Cellar, DINA, Sheffield,
9th March 2019.





Bauhaus Bühnenchor performance at DINA in Sheffield, 25th November 2018.



Bubikopf scratch performance at the Cellar, DINA, Sheffield, 9th March 2019.

Research Outcomes & Dissemination

Viewing Pleasure and Being A Showgirl, How Do I Look?

Carr, Alison J.

Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 978-1138285422

Felicity Means Happiness exhibition

Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, September 2018.

<https://vimeo.com/271902611>

(vimeo password: smile)

Felicity Means Happiness

Double-bill at Theatre Deli, 8th October 2018.

Development of website and social media presence to disseminate research, called Modern Showgirl.

<http://modernshowgirl.co.uk/>

Bauhaus Bühnenchor

Performance at DINA in Sheffield, Sunday 25th November

<https://vimeo.com/307876820>

(vimeo password: kickline)

S1 Artspace Construction House Commission

Bauhaus Bühnenchor is a live performance that experiments with the all-girl kickline. Using the kickline as a form with the potential to represent women's collective and creative force Bauhaus Bühnenchor imagines the experiences of Weimarian female art students and chorus girls as well considering the context of dancing in a troupe today. The piece is a collaboration between Alison J Carr and Lucy Houghton, a movement artist, physical performer and choreographer based in Sheffield.

Screening and launch

Glasgow Women's Library, 28th February 2019.

Bubikopf Scratch Performance

9th March 2019 at the Cellar, DINA, Sheffield.

Bubikopf is an art history lecture on gender that morphs, examining women in the modernity of the Weimar Republic with new opportunities to be independent in the city, to go to art school, perform in cabarets. Weaving together gendered forms of feminine visibility this piece spotlights and speculates women's entertaining, creative and avant garde work.

<https://vimeo.com/307876820>

(vimeo password: kickline)

Into the Spotlight exhibition

Blocsapce, Sheffield, August 2019.

Collaboration with a designer, Katy Aston and a costume maker, Becky Graham, to produce a scarf design and two dresses, to enhance the meanings of my performance work, 2018-19.



'Into the Spotlight', Blocspace, Sheffield, August 2019.

Showgirl Manifesto, Exhibition Notes

Showgirl Manifesto

This exhibition emerges from the recently published book *Viewing Pleasure and Being A Showgirl, How Do I Look?* by Alison J Carr. In the book, Carr contextualises showgirl experiences, framing their relevance for contemporary feminism as well as artists and performers. Accessibly written, the book interprets a range of live performances to develop a bold, original approach to bodily display and pleasure. The book's conclusion, 'Showgirl Manifesto', forms the inspiration for this exhibition. Presented on the wall of the Market Gallery, the affirmative text presents the sisterly connections between viewer and performer. The exhibition presented the work of Alison J Carr alongside other artists, which spoke to and extended the insights of the book.

Artworks

Sophie Lisa Beresford, *Pizza Shop Dance, 2008, video*

Pizza shop dancing is something I used to do when I lived in the centre of town in my student days. The owners really encouraged it, sometimes with free pizza. I danced and continue to dance because all the world is a dance floor. And our public dance floors need some reclaiming. Sometimes we would have a full on party in a certain pizza shop at night. At the time Bravo Pizza in Sunderland was one of the best after party places in town.

Alison J Carr, *Ascending A Staircase, 2018*

A series of photographs of theatre interiors. I compose photographs looking for the stairs that lead onto the stage. In this work I consider the kinds of access women have had to performing onstage. How have they been enabled or constrained?

Felicity Means Happiness, 2018

In the thirties, Felicity was one of the 'Bluebell Young Ladies'. She toured France, Germany, and Italy until WW2 was declared in Italy. *Felicity Means Happiness* includes Felicity, telling her stories, with the artist Alison J Carr showing Felicity her own artworks as inspired by 1930s dancers, including footage of an Austrian film that Felicity was in. The piece is as much about the connection between interviewer and interviewee as it is about the realities of dancing and travelling.

Julie Cook, *ELSC Files, 2018, photographs*

A collaborative project by photographer Julie Cook with the East London Strippers Collective. This work presents a body of evidence of the social activism of six women, juxtaposing this with the language of photographic portraiture.

Presented within the format of the police file, the content includes not just portraiture, but data harvested from social media as a site for participation, communication and public event organisation – challenging the historically conservative stigma and stereotypes that have characterised the public perception of this industry.

The work is important in the context of the loss of London subcultures and gentrification of Shoreditch, Soho and other less well-known contexts for public erotic entertainment for both men and women. The work builds on the theoretical and aesthetic interests of Cook and how women address a culture where public nudity is encouraged commercially on the one hand, but venally criticized on the other. Cook believes that striptease culture can support amateurs; encouraging the performance of sexuality and engaging with the complexities of voyeurism and contemporary issues of the female gaze. It is also a space for the public to see imperfection, rather than some far removed, digitally re-touched, virtuality.

Nwando Ebizie as Lady Vendredi, *Let Go*

Extending Afrofuturism into new and highly-charged myth-zones, this music video, directed by Meena Ayithey Lady Vendredi, channels high-energy synth-pop in contrast with its lyrics which chart a depressive spiral, delivering an anthemic call to let go.

Alice Finch, *Working in Heels, 2018, A1 Line drawings with Brusho pigment*

A timeline of Finch's stripper 9 to 5 day. Examining the ordinariness of the industry and the humanity that lies at the centre of her experience as a stripper.

Laura Gonzalez, *A Case of Seduction, 2009, photographs*

These photographs are the remnants of a woman's hysterical journey through contemporary shopping arcades with their obscene displays. She is seduced by the objects she photographs. Seduction eludes the grasp of those that confront it directly. It is always a matter of two and involves the getting of another to do what it wants; force and coercion are not part of its work and, instead, play with woman's free will. Sometimes, it is pleasurable.

Lucy Halstead, *2018, framed collage*

Halstead's collages are hand cut, there is often a visceral response to the found image that provokes an attempt to describe the sensation. The themes of the work are based in gender and the physical experience of the body. Fragments of narrative frequently appear and relate to her love of cinema and myth.

Sharon Kivland, *Ma Nana, 8 framed letterpress prints on fair calfskin, 2004*

The descriptions of the eponymous 'heroine' of Émile Zola's novel *Nana* are printed on fair-calf leather, the animal leather that is closest to human skin. Fair calf is smooth and the surface is absorbent. It is sometimes called bookcalf. They are the size of a carte de visite. *Nana* appears on the stage of the Théâtre de Variétés, as Venus, and

though she cannot sing or act, there is something most captivating about her. In a series of hallucinatory pages, the audience notes her attributes with a heady passion. Kivland has taken these physical observations / descriptions of Nana, changing 'her' for 'my', 'she' for 'I'. The descriptions of the transgressive body of that natural woman of the demi-monde, Nana, are returned to her through a simple change in pronoun – yet one also takes them for oneself, in an internalised reading.

Britten Leigh, Noella Deville, Buxom Blaze Burlesque Festival, Austin TX, 2018	Mone't Ha-Sidi, Buxom Blaze Burlesque Festival, Austin TX, 2018.
Chloe Nightingale, The Pole, 2018	Nightingale has created a piece of work that is a celebration of women's strength, determination and teamwork.
Isabella Streffen, extract from Fabulae: How It Begins, 2018	All of the things that stories conceal: they seem to lead one way, but actually lead another. They are never about that thing you thought they were about. The direction of this talk bends that way, and meaning slips along another path. Fabulae is a re-reading of classical mythology, with Roberto Calasso as Streffen's intimate guide.

Artist Biographies

Sophie Lisa Beresford	Sophie Lisa Beresford is a professional artist living and working in North East England. Her contribution to North East Culture has gained her two Journal Culture awards and International recognition. She creates art objects, music, performance and delivers inspirational speeches and workshops.
Alison J Carr	Alison J Carr is an artist and writer. She studied at the California Institute of the Arts, absorbing both the critical dialogue and the lure of the Hollywood facade. Following her sojourn to LA, she returned to Sheffield to do a PhD at Sheffield Hallam University where she had gained her undergraduate degree. She is a contemporary art and illustration lecturer at the University of Huddersfield.
Julie Cook	Julie Cook lives and works in Wales and is an artist whose work is photography based. For over 20 years Julie Cook has engaged with issues of voyeurism within personal and public spaces of the city. The E.L.S.C. FILES follows a number of books and work around the subject of the femalegaze. This includes the award winning Baby Oil and Ice, Striptease in East London, the Las Vegas Diaries, Some Las Vegas Strip Clubs, Beauties of Today and Olympia Moments Ltd. Julie Cook's work was recently included in a group show, Paris Texas, with

Ed Ruscha and Robert Rauschenberg in Dallas. The E.L.S.C. FILES is publicly available as part of the V&A National Art Library Special Collection.

Nwando Ebizie	Lady Vendredi is artist Ebizie's neo-pop shamanic, multi artform exploration into Afrodiasporic ritual and long form mythopoesia. It has included works of gig-theatre, music releases, ritual happenings and curations from Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro.
Alice Finch	Alice Finch is a final year BA (Hons) Contemporary Art student at the University of Huddersfield.
Laura González	Laura González is an artist, writer, Athenaeum Research Fellow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and an Ashtanga yoga teacher. Laura creates performances for galleries and festivals (Unfix, Buzzcut, Glasgow Open House and Market Gallery). She is the author of several books (including the monograph 'Make Me Yours, How Art Seduces') and has performed with various dance companies, including Michael Clark. Her work explores knowledge and the body of the hysteric.
Lucy Halstead	Lucy Halstead has previously studied BA Visual Culture and MA Illustration at Falmouth College of Arts. She is a practicing artist based in Bloc studios Sheffield. She has taught Fine Art and Graphics at Chesterfield College, and currently teaches yoga.
Sharon Kivland	Sharon Kivland is an artist and writer working in London and France. She has exhibited widely in and North America. Publications include A Case of Hysteria, Book Works, London, 1999, a work that led to many other books. Filigrane Editions, France, published a small book on her work Le bonheur des femmes, which began in the perfume departments of the grands magasins of Paris, where she retreated after walking the streets in pursuit of Marx and Freud, in the shadow of Lacan. It is a practice of refinement, enacted in archives, libraries, the arcades, and in the intersection of public political action and private subjectivity.
Britten Leigh	Britten Leigh is a photographer, ecdysiast and performance artist based in Vermont, USA. She is the Oral History Coordinator for the Burlesque Hall of Fame and is currently working on a photo series of rural burlesque artists in Vermont. Her book FLATLAND will be published in December by BronzeMan Books. She holds an MFA of Photography from Illinois State University, but is most proud of the "MFA in T&A" that the world of burlesque has provided her.

Chloe Nightingale

Chloe Nightingale is a final year BA (Hons) Contemporary Art student at the University of Huddersfield.

Isabella Streffen

Isabella Streffen is an artist who creates encounters with heritage sites through the intersections of art, literature and technology. She has illuminated Hadrian's Wall from end-to-end, flown prototype drones inside the Library of Congress, camouflaged tourists in Monet's garden, followed Sophie Calle around Venice, performed in cabaret en unicorne and gifted golden fruit to the deserving. She has a monthly column GardenLust with MAP Magazine, and is contributing editor for non-fiction at 3AM.

SHOWGIRL MANIFESTO

'BE PROUD AND SING IT LOUD!' – BEATRIX VON BOURBON
The showgirl is confident in who she is and what she does.

'SHE'S BLOSSOMING' – AMANDA MARQUARDT
Performing and viewing showgirl performances is sisterly, generative, and affirming. The best of showgirl culture conveys a sense of fearlessness and shamelessness through performance.

'36 FEMME LESBIAN SEPARATISTS IN LEOTARDS KICKING IN PERFECT UNISON IS A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE' – ERIN MARKEY
The kick-line of chorus girls gives us a depiction of women-as-many that is rare in our image culture; it is to be valued for providing a counterpoint to individualism. The spellbinding enchanting qualities of precision kick-lines are a potent symbol of female collective action.

'LET'S NOT HOMOGENISE' – BEATRIX VON BOURBON
The showgirl spectrum is wide. We must resist pitting differing styles of performance and showgirl against each other. All showgirls have something useful to offer. We can enjoy all of them and support each where support is asked for. May we find our own community within the showgirl spectrum. May we listen and learn from each other.

'YOU'RE FULLY IN CONTROL, YOU'RE SAYING I'M A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN' – ASHLEY FULLER

Showgirl insights and wisdom can be applied more broadly. All people interested in embodying femininity and resisting interpretations of femininity as superficial and artificial can draw inspiration and guidance from showgirls. The showgirl can lead us towards enjoying ourselves, our bodies, feminine excess without shame or stigma. The showgirl can facilitate pleasure.

'WE LOVE YOU LARA' – VELVET BURLESQUE AUDIENCE
Women deserve spaces that they can enjoy themselves in and experience pleasures in viewing and performing. Women are entitled to take up space in the night-time landscape. Suitable venues are often precarious and vulnerable to closing for a range of reasons. The survival of existing venues and the development of new ones is an issue we should all care about.

'MY ROLE AS SOMEONE WITH PRIVILEGE AND POWER, IS TO BE AN EMPOWERER, EDUCATOR AND A SHARER OF POWER, PLATFORM AND KNOWLEDGE' – RUBY JONES
Shows are an opportunity to broaden our understanding and appreciation of bodies and live shows. Producers and compères are activists when they take on their role with the agenda to increase the inclusion, visibility, and respect for all bodies including marginalised bodies.

Output Type:

Scholarly book, curation of exhibition,
original artistic works, performance,
creative body of enquiry