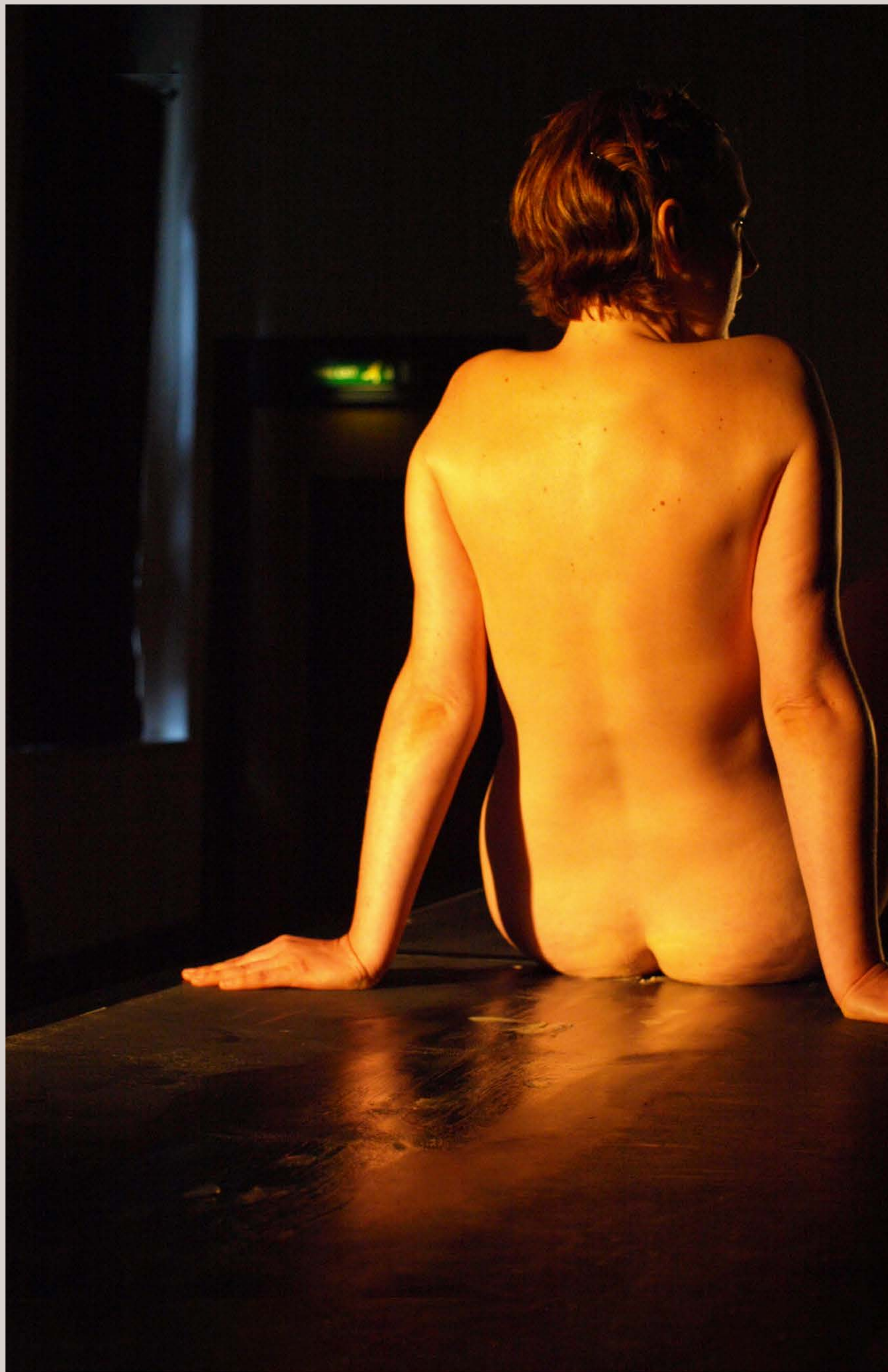




# PUSHING BUTTER

A collection of writings by female and non-binary artists on the art and life of the body.  
Inspired by conversations around Victoria Firth's THE BUTTER PIECE.





## Introduction

In 2011, approaching her 40th birthday, Victoria Firth created a live art performance called THE BUTTER PIECE. It came from an interest in female sexuality, the 'invisible' sexual responses of women and shame. In celebrating these reactions, the piece also considered how we 'manage' our comfort with ourselves by engaging or disengaging with the materiality of our bodies. The proximity of the audience also raised questions about how the female body is displayed and viewed. It was presented in 2012 both as a live performance and a durational work.

Now approaching her 50th birthday in 2022, Victoria has revisited the piece to see what a difference a decade has made to her body and to the context in which it is viewed. The reworked version also aims to investigate how you deal with your own archive and the process of ageing. Victoria's intention is to return to THE BUTTER PIECE in another 10 years' time, conceptualising it as an elongated interval performance and documentation of her body.

As part of the show development, Victoria has been writing an open journal about the experiences and reflections that have come up during the making process. She has also been in dialogue with other female and non-binary artists who work in a variety of contexts and forms and invited them to reflect on the themes of the piece, through the lens of their own art and experience. This is a collection of those writings.



## Preparing The Body

by Victoria Firth

I'm getting ready

I'm getting ready to show my body to an audience  
and in this case, naked.

In the same way I might prepare a costume, or set, lighting, other things the audience might see,  
I am preparing myself. I am preparing my body.

I want to say 'This is not about bettering my body', but that position isn't cut and dried.

In creating a physical performance, I do need to be stronger, I will want to access the full range  
of my physical expression. I definitely think about the aesthetic of the figurative form, how I am  
using my instrument.

It is possible that being more active might change my shape.

I might lose weight.

But, I have to check this rationale isn't being ridden by a desire to be more attractive in a socially  
prescribed way. To check that my preparation isn't masking a desperate dieting, gyming, tumbling  
race to the finish line of the show, where I am thinner, beautifuller and all my ex-girlfriends and  
artistic rivals kick themselves.

My way through is to think about being embodied.

Grounded, where the ground is an internal surface.

A place where I fill my skin, I am the right size, I can stand up inside myself with all my physical  
and emotional material.

And so I am training.

I am training by spending quality time with myself,  
sometimes exercising, sometimes not.

I'm looking at pictures of myself

I'm moving around

I'm being tactile when I can and noticing space when I can't.

I'm eating

I'm noticing what pleases my skin

I'm attentive to tiredness, tenderness

I'm taking up space

I'm noticing when I feel uncomfortable and not making it comfortable

I'm noticing when I feel groovy and not pissing on my own cornflakes

I'm not hiding.

To be intimate with a lover, a friend, an audience,

you first have to be intimate with yourself

And intimacy is about honesty, clarity, vulnerability.

So that's what I'm really training.



## 21 Years Later

by Ursula Martinez

This really is a very straightforward tale of my aging, female, performing body.

In 2000, I made up a cabaret act *Hanky Panky*, a striptease act, where I make a red hanky disappear and then  
reappear from an item of clothing, which is subsequently removed. Eventually, I am completely naked and I make  
the hanky disappear and reappear from a truly magical place.

I was 34 years old when I first performed the act. I was confident, I was fit, I was in my prime. Patriarchy would  
(and did) argue that I was already well over the hill, but that's coz patriarchy ain't got a sodding clue!

The act was a massive success and took me around the world several times over; from queer dive bars in South  
London, to private parties on exclusive Caribbean Islands, to big stages such as The Sydney Opera House.

I hung on in there for many years, always with curiosity about how long I would be able to keep going. Would I  
know when to quit? How would I know?

In my late 40's, I started to lose a bit of confidence. It's really straight forward and obvious: you put on a bit  
of weight, your skin loses elasticity and shine, your knees sag. All of this is normal and it shouldn't matter. And  
it doesn't. And I can't hide any of it if I'm going to get completely naked in front of an audience. But I was  
also worried that I might not be able to hide my waning confidence, and if so, the act, which requires uber  
confidence, would be compromised.

I set myself the goal to reach the age of 50, do my last performance and then quit. All of that went to plan. I did  
my last performance on a West End stage at the age of 50 years and 3 months.

Then a global pandemic happened. I had been out of work for over a year and somebody wanted to book the  
show again. The desire to get back on a stage, the need to earn a crust, to hang out with colleagues, to return to  
a familiar life, was strong...plus a post-pandemic sense of, *'Oh fuck it, who gives a toss when the world has gone  
to shit!'*

And so, at the age of 54 and 11 months, I agreed to perform the act again. It turned out that my old costume  
was a bit of a squeeze. I had the idea that rather than spend money on a new costume, I could spend the  
equivalent on a personal trainer. So I got into shape as best I could, fitted into my costume (just), and did the  
gig. It was fine. Maybe better than fine. Some people congratulated me in exactly the same way as they had  
always done. I daresay others must have thought I was well over the hill. But they used to think that 21 years  
ago. The only difference between 'then' and 'now' is that back then I didn't believe it for a second, but now I  
was going in with those thoughts myself!!!

Ultimately, it's the pressures from our patriarchal, heteronormative, able-bodied, youth-obsessed society that  
influences my thoughts and insecurities. As a proud feminist, I fight them. As a guilty feminist, I fall prey to  
them. It's a constant battle.

## A Body Speaking for Itself

by Gillian Dyson

Sitting in the dark, I watch an illuminated woman perform. She is naked, reclined on a platform. In the rhythm of the performance, I am overcome with the heat of my own middle-aged body. I peel off layers of clothing to manage the flush. Watching the performer, I am in a moment of knowing the heat of her body too.

Victoria is rocking her body forward, extending her legs, taking weight on her outspread arms to thrust her hips and pelvis forward in a shuffling motion on her buttocks. Between her thighs is a block of butter. She repeatedly levers to push the butter forward with her vulva. She moves along a stage, a proxy table, creating an oily slick as the butter melts in the radiant heat of her body. Victoria moves carefully back and forth along the platform, at times pausing to watch a video reproduction of herself on a projection screen; an image we all observe that replays a version of a similar butter piece, performed some ten years past.

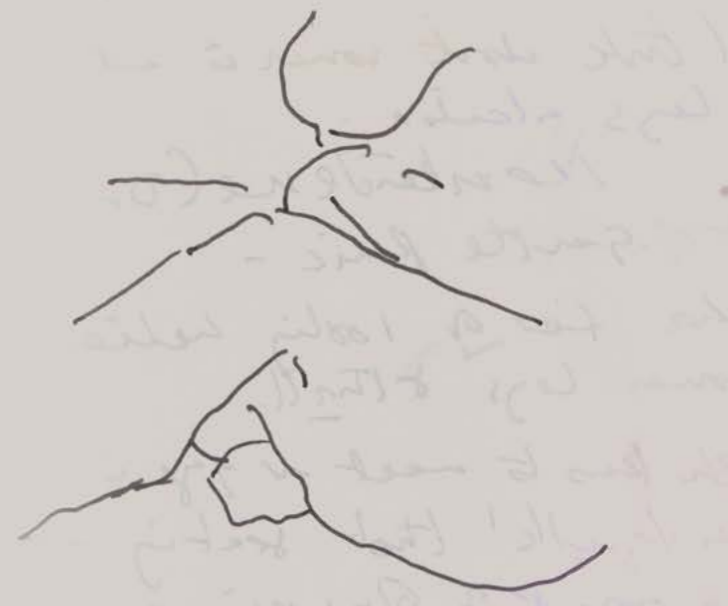
I consider the embodied archive of my own performance work, emerging from a sense of self that has been constructed in the relational and the domestic. Victoria is reworking, revisiting her own record of performance through the archive of her body. Drawing on my own history and practice, I recognise her decision to take a material from the banality of the domestic context, in this case butter, and redescribe the butter as the subject and object of her artwork. I also recognise that in doing so, she begins to redescribe the subject of her own body.

I wonder if my aging body flushes sympathetically with Victoria's? That our shared heat serves to break down and make formless the once homely subject? The heat of the aging, not yet 'old' woman is fierce. Perhaps scientific enquiry has not yet uncovered a function of this heat; to warm the body, to flush illness, to bring creative energy? A heat that does not disable but rather brings fervour to the penultimate years of life.

Victoria's work sits in a place of contradiction. She is both vulnerable and authoritative, abject and attractive, focused upon and ambivalent towards the task in hand. I am reminded of writing by feminist scholar Erin Striff, who talked about the way that women used their bodies in the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s. She argues that in these works, the female artist's body 'speaks for itself'. What I mean is, that when a woman appears on stage, her body too often becomes an object of the gaze, an object of desire. But as with so many feminist artists, Victoria's action is disruptive of the usual cultural associations with the female body. Her action is both highly theatrical and rather banal. Everything about it challenges my own sense of presence as I am positioned to witness the intimacy of this public exposure and attend to the materiality of the body.

I suggest that performance actions like Victoria's or my own, contribute to a destruction of the clean and proper body, in order to challenge notions of the feminine. As I watch the performance my mouth remembers salty, creamy, rancid butter and in doing so, triggers a memory of the taste of the body itself, the greasy, salty, and slippery. Thus, both my own and Victoria's hot bodies evoke the grotesque and the abject.

Ultimately, Victoria's action reduces the butter block, (a substance manufactured from the mammalian maternal 'leaking' body), shrinks it to a trace; a stain. Victoria's action is re-writing her body, not only in the sense of re-authoring the archive, the embodied memory of an action experienced a decade ago, but by smearing (literally and metaphorically). The familiar melts into insignificance in the heat of our bodies.





## My Mother's Cellulite

by Victoria Firth

I mentally prepared before comparing pictures of me ten years ago and now.

It wasn't enough.

I found it really difficult, especially looking at myself from the back. And I'd always considered my back one of my best features. I guess we look at our fronts more, so the rear view image was more shocking.

I knew I would look older, but I hadn't thought about what 'older' translated to. It was less about wrinkles and more about shape. The shape of me is different in space - sturdier and more irregular. I have swellings and indentations in places that used to be smooth - hills and valleys instead of plains. Or perhaps it's the same landscape after ecological change, so the undulations and river beds have become more epic.

Weight is definitely a part of what I see, and I expected this, but what I find repulsive is where I have the heavy, dimply, ballast of my mum. I have to do some work on this. . .

Why do I find features of my mother undesirable - is it because of her weight or her age?

Is it because of the relationship, her being my parent, or would it be the same with any older, or well upholstered, woman?

I think it is the relationship and lack of examples.

When I was young, the only women's bodies I saw were those in magazines, TV and film or my mother's. Such a fail-fail paradox. On the one hand, aspirational fantasies that I was physiologically programmed to never attain, on the other, an inescapable destiny that I was desperate to individuate from. Where were the alternatives? Where were they then and where are they now?

As an adult, I realise that my mum always looked great for her age. A certain amount of weight suited her and contributed to her youthfulness. And I believe I have become more attractive as I have gotten older - or maybe I have shifted my parameters of beauty. My skin is increasingly porous. More of who I am comes through. The inner informs the outer, instead of the other way around.

I look more like me and this 'me' is a product of my nature, my nurture and the congruence of myself.



## Queer Considerations

by Victoria Firth

Someone asked me if THE BUTTER PIECE was a queer work and I didn't know what to answer. So I started thinking about the queer work I see and the notion of 'the queer body' and I still don't know what to answer.

I do use the term 'queer' to describe myself, and I made THE BUTTER PIECE so that might make it queer by default. I'm also an artist but I am not sure everything I make is art - although when I intend it, it is. How do being and doing relate?

Sometimes I think my very identity is an action and vice versa. Sometimes it's totally irrelevant, or I want it to be, to ensure no-one feels the work isn't for them. But I also want to make it for some people in particular, and I want them to know it.

I made this first and foremost for women. THE BUTTER PIECE was definitely intended as a feminist action; my queer identity wasn't something I platformed back then. It is more visible and important to me now. I'm starting to realise I'm a bit of a late developer with both my art and my voice.

If I try and feel it out, queerness for me relates a lot to 'otherness', but in some contexts, I have felt 'other' as a woman, so it's hard to separate out difference and discrimination purely on the basis of gender or sexuality.

I can say that being in physically intimate relationships with women has been transformative to my sense of self and my 'self' is what I use to make performance. Intimacy with another female body has been validating, healing, informative, joyful. At times it has enabled me.

There's no overt queer content in this piece though. No words. Just what you see and hear and maybe smell. I find references that speak to the sense of my sexuality in that, but I don't know whether you will.

We could take queerness to mean the radical, the transgressive, and by this definition THE BUTTER PIECE is a sure thing. Queer in provocation, by putting a female body on display with my own agency.

Is it transgressive to be an audience to such an act then? Is it radical to look? Does that make you queer in those moments? Are we all having a collective queer experience?

I don't know, but it sounds like fun.

## Shifting the Gaze

by Holly Revell

You reveal or show yourself through your art, or so I've been told.

In my photography I've always seen my desire rather than myself and have often thought of my photography as a way of taking what I want but can't have, preserving and collecting my obsessions and those I admire. In my recent work, however, it's not only my desire that I am seeing, but also myself, and something is changing. The work is shifting the gaze and shifting me.

My current project, *People Like Us*, is about trans and non-binary identities from AFAB (assigned female at birth) perspectives. It is collaborating with queer folk and considering bodies which refuse to conform to cis expectations. I didn't anticipate looking so closely at other people's bodies, initially. I did not want to objectify them or be sensational, but participants have invited me in. They want me to take a closer look at them. They want to be seen.

The project is joyful and playful, using a mixture of photography and lighting styles to capture the messiness of gender and the vibrancy and individuality of the participants. It is a dialogue with trust and care at its heart. I spent over a year talking to potential participants before taking photos for this project, and the conversation continues during and after the shoots. Participants appreciate that I come back and make space to continue our adventure.

Photography is powerful. It can make things happen and contribute to change. The way I use the medium not only documents queer people and their bodies, but queers the process of photographing. I oppose traditional approaches to this subject which is so often shot through a straight lens, in a uniform style, despite the sitters' unique stories and experiences. Participants are not fixed in a single image or feeling.

Recently, this practice has pushed me into looking at myself, and is asking me to unpack my own identity. I can still see my desire in the portraits we make, but I'm starting to witness myself in the conversations that are guiding some of the shoots. The binaries of looking and looked at are becoming blurred. The photographed are reflecting back on the photographer and asking who they are.







## Spilling Selves

by Jade Blackstock

I've been interested in acts of compaction and materials that have gone through a number of processes or some sort of state change. It's partly to look at time - how substances that have been through such change, have their own time and appear to contain, struggle to contain or perform it. Some substances command certain movements when interacting with them. Performing with them often feels like enactments of intuition, messages or body memories.

When mapping out a performance, an important element for me is working with things that suggest tactility and a degree of motion. There's a strangeness in moving alongside things that change form, quicken in pace. Things that pause with reluctance, or stubbornness, or exhaustion. I want to both mirror and push against these things.

While making work, I want to share space with materials that in some way add pressure and an urgency. Substances which cannot wait to flow out of the vessel they are contained in. Ones that hold a motive, a crisis, or an impulse of abandon.

Spillage

Slippage

I keep going back to liquids and semi-liquids, especially edible and perishable ones because I'm thinking about what it's like to run away from and with yourself. What would it feel like to pour oneself out of a mould?

I wonder what it would be like; to be a heavy and purposeful and unthinking substance. That adapts painlessly to conditions if physicality and energy allow it; or practises refusal if not.

When I think about the relationship between my body/being, and other materials/beings, I think about spreading thin. Meeting, yielding and yearning.

Contact

While doing actions such as pouring milk from a bucket, spitting kidney beans, or tying a huge rope around a tree trunk, working alongside materials can feel like a dance of negotiations - a bargaining in which another thing with (a) body, is with me. What inspires me is the activation that happens when a material (which you think you may have chosen, but which probably chose you) touches skin.

Viscous honey, twine, warm water, smeared traces of chicken's blood. Specks of milk. Packed, dense indigo cakes. Squid ink. Rough, peeling outer layers of burnt bark.

In my performance work, I often use molasses. Its density and bittersweetness holds and releases energy that goes against my own body's understanding of time, freedom and movement. I am fascinated by this tension.





## The Material Facts

by Victoria Firth

The most difficult part is the beginning.

Removing the dress.

There's no way to take your clothes off that doesn't smack of taking your clothes off

and all that it denotes

I'm naked in it.

And the butter starts hard.

As I ease up to it, it doesn't respond easily

I have to give it my sure, smooth, slow movement.

And it responds by leaving oiliness up and around the spaces

Spaces you aren't supposed to be aware of in company.

It feels shameful.

Smeary

Like accidents and ignorance

Secretive - derived from

Secretions

Judgement

I feel hot

The outer surfaces of my skin tighten against the gaze of the audience.

Later is better.

The social context slips away and naked is the new normal.

Anxious tension gives way to pleasure as

The butter gives me it's soft, smooth, slow movement.

And I slide into it like a warm bath

and play.

We make long slides

short shunts

We can do what we like...

The end is a different kind of daring.

Clothes on, or off, doesn't really matter because we have arrived.

Exposure has melted into power

The risk is only falling

/ free /

Standing.

## Shame & Safety

by Victoria Firth

I made THE BUTTER PIECE because I wanted to confront SHAME.

We don't talk about how we get to know our bodies as children, about masturbation, about wetness, very little about periods.

I spent a long time thinking about my body, about how I wanted to explore it and the responses it made or didn't, about how those responses were wrong.

Rude

Messy

Leaky

Dirty

Shameful.

I thought I needed to close up and cover up.

I think this got in the way of my sexual potential as an adult.

Of my pleasure and my presence in my own body and my intimacy with others.

I eventually found a kind of sensual emancipation, probably around the time I made this piece, but personal journeys don't just stop at the good bits.

My body continues to change and have new experiences, many of which are similarly not talked about and fester as a result.

I wonder what the opposite of shame might be.

I've decided on safety.

For me, it's the security of trust with another.

It's social validation within a community and plain old information, that have allowed me to right myself.

To risk being seen.

To revel in being felt.

To uncover.

Open...

Want.

In order to eradicate shame and inhabit my body and pursue pleasure, I first need to feel safe.

Safe from embarrassment, judgement, ridicule, betrayal, blame. It's emotional safety.

If you believe women's bodies are precious and sacred, as I do, then maybe it's a kind of spiritual safety.

And as I write this I am mindful that before any of that there's the need to be safe from harm.

A physical and sexual respect that should be beyond the need to ask for it. Yet one that has not been, and is still not, afforded to so many women.

We need less shame.

We need more safety.

SAFE is the baseline.



## Tilling Shame (I used to ride tractors, now I make dances)

by Orrow Amy Bell

What if, like a ploughed field,  
Wide, furrowed, in chunky undulation,  
Smelling of iron and deep claggy loam,  
Our bodies could open

Could just spill out in simple, earthy fact -  
Skin folds, pits, lips  
Parting in rich,  
long creases

Digging down  
With curved tool  
In movement, in ritual, in art  
For one another to breathe and savour,  
To spiral to surface  
Richer soil, old coins, root fibres,  
Not shame

Legs, mouth, eyes, palms rolled open  
Turning inside out with heft-grounded curling waves  
Now more moisture can be held here  
Good, heavy wetness  
Muddy boots

We'd rest perhaps  
In the slow centrifugal fling of earth's core  
Widening  
Under a gaze  
As if under a bruise of outspread sky

And later, deeper,  
Deepening in darkness,  
The wispy fingers of future bodies  
Do their little sproutings  
And worms digest and synapses flash somewhere underneath





# PUSHING BUTTER

PUSHING BUTTER was conceived and curated by Victoria Firth and edited by Jodean Sumner. With writing from Amy Bell, Jade Blackstock, Gillian Dyson, Holly Revell and Ursula Martinez.

Images are by Coralie Datta and Matt Rogers. Drawings are by Gillian Dyson.

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# THE BUTTER PIECE 2021/22

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