

Art & the Public Sphere
Volume 3 Number 2

© 2014 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/aps.3.2.119_1

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Mundane, private, visible: Performing ordinary bodies in Intimate Exposure Projects

ABSTRACT

The physical body locates an intersection of public communication and private subjectivity that is particularly interesting when used to convey messages of lived experience to the public through art. This article creates a definition for 'Intimate Exposure Projects' (IEPs), which seek to use a body coded as private to represent personal experience to a public viewer. Exploring fine art photography, live performance and the media, this article argues that, despite some crucial problems with feminist thought and intersectional identity, these IEPs are evidence of people's desire (particularly women) to break down damaging notions of a body unsuitable for public view in order to make bodily narratives less fictional.

KEYWORDS

physical body
subjective narrative
photography
media
lived body
performance
feminism

The relationship between the physical, visible exterior of the body and our immaterial sense of self and personal experience is one of the primary tensional forces within performance as well as the cultural construction of privacy and exposure. While the physical body is considered personal and private in many contexts, there are also many theoretical paradigms within which the body is an inadequate sign for the interior self. In other words, our psychological experiences are, at worst, essentialized through the use of the physical body as a symbol; it's too biologically isolated and fails to account for the breadth of inner experience that is in no way accurately represented by the body.

On the other hand, the body simply cannot be discounted as a source of visual narrative about our lived experience. Each physical body exists in a highly specific context, and makes choices (some more, some less) within the restrictions of that context. In one sense, people make decisions about how much of their body to expose to the public, and often what is kept private is considered more 'personal' – and I'd like to argue, sometimes that more personal part of the body can become an interesting sign for the subjective, interior experience. Both those experiences and those bodily views are intimate when revealed, and in this case both are revealed by a measured choice.

In her book *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz asks: 'Can depths, the interior, the subjective, and the private instead be seen in terms of surfaces, bodies, and material relations?' (1994). In the cases discussed here, the exterior body is precisely the language used to communicate the private and subjective. Iris Marion Young pushes the discourse around the role of the exterior body, noting that even within limited choices available, people form 'their own habits as variations on those possibilities, or actively trying to resist or refigure them' (2005). It is the resistance and refiguring that interests me particularly, and this article will address acts of bodily performance that modify and rework intimate subjective narratives of self by using the body as their apparatus.

To give an example, in early 2014 I attended a theatre festival where a group of undergraduate theatre majors performed a devised work under the guidance of a renowned performance artist. During the performance, the student performers lined up across the stage and removed their clothing, repeating lines such as 'This is me/this is who I am'. Eventually they were completely nude, repeating the same text. Their bodies were understood to confront the audience with a *genuine* identity, something more real than their words. The authenticity, in this case, was inextricable from the fact that the nudity was both intimate and explicit. In other words, it was not meant to appear casual or usual. In that way there is a performative link, at times, between the exposure of something intimate/explicit with that which is perceived to be authentic. In this case, it is also the fact that the bodies were understood to be ordinary, everyday bodies that were normally kept private. Had they been read as public bodies, their function as a source of authenticity would be compromised – but as student performers their bodies are essentially private, so the exposure functioned in a different sense.

This article will theorize the role of the everyday body in performance, specifically a performed body that signifies a 'real' person and their ordinary, daily reality. Using the term 'Intimate Exposure Project' (IEP) to define these performances, I will argue that they are active and relevant attempts to enunciate the daily realities of the body to combat potentially harmful fictionalizations of that body. In performance this can often be located within the live exchange, which connotes the strongest sense of 'realness' – however, live performance is often heightened and/or extraordinary, perhaps because the gathering of audience and performer can be considered a unique, purposeful event. This article explores expressions of the everyday 'real' that can fruitfully take place in static images and online, where people are able to impulsively and easily access the performance, thus making the one-to-one exchange more personal. That is not to say that they are not still heightened in some way, even if they are accessed through static images. Because many of these examples took place around or within a heightened experience, like birth or asking someone to expose their body that typically would not, they tend to overwhelm the possibility of formal performance, protecting the impression of

the ordinary. In order to capture the concept of the ordinary body, it's useful to begin with the socially constructed dichotomy of Private and Public:

<u>Private</u>	<u>Public</u>
mundane	spectacular
moderate	explicit
real	fictional
invisible	visible

In this system, the Public Body is circulated visibly in public space and media, designed to be seen, a spectacle in that it is special, set apart or prepared for consumption. The idea that this particular Public Body is both explicit and fictional means that because it is visible, it is not ordinary – it is not a private, regular body but a body for circulation. The counterpart in this model, the Private Body, is defined diametrically as a body that is mundane and everyday (not designed for consumption), therefore kept invisible and considered real rather than fictional. This simplified system is not necessarily helpful for defining those two bodies, but serves a purpose in highlighting the nature of the Body in the performance of the Ordinary. In other words, the event during which the Private body is revealed within the context of the Public body in a way that maintains its 'realness':

<u>Private-made-Public</u>	
<u>mundane</u>	spectacular
<u>moderate</u>	explicit
<u>real</u>	fictional
invisible	<u>visible</u>

In this sense the ordinary, everyday body is performed publicly to combat the ubiquitous fictionalized versions of the body performed in the Public sphere. Women's sexual bodies are often caught between these paradigms, where they performed as public mostly in a fictionalized form, meaning the genitals appear homogenized and filtered through a normative lens or the lens of pornography. The anti-spectacular body, the mundane body, provides productive visibility, productive failure, and in that way fixing and fetishizing is resisted. Amelia Jones describes images that exemplify the 'crossing of visual codes' by being 'naked but desexualized' as one way to undermine fetishism (1998: 159). The idea of exposing the explicit body but resisting the dominant discourse of sexualization captures the private-made-public body. Jones asserts that it is because art like this is created and performed 'in relation to the long-standing Western codes of female objectification [...] they unhinge the gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production and interpretation' (1998: 152). These are important considerations because the images share some territory with the explicit imagery of pornography. If a performance of the private-made-public body, the ordinary body, moves too fully into the context or function of pornography, it ceases to be a mundane object.

When working with the definitions set out above, it is important to recognize that the body always already crosses the boundaries of this discriminatory grid of private and public. Furthermore, the concepts of private and public have been challenged within feminist theory, specifically in terms of refocusing on pluralities and intersectionality over binaries and labels. Further, there

has been a tendency to essentialize the public/private divide in the service of oppression and inequality. For example, in many cultures, including developed countries, menstruation and menstrual blood have been defined as private. This seemingly reasonable definition actually serves to marginalize and isolate women who do not have access to reliable sanitary supplies, or women who need time off to deal with crippling cramps. Recently, a young woman ran the London Marathon without a pad or tampon, and the comments about the images show a deeply entrenched belief that menstrual blood is private, and that often means menstruating women are kept out of the public eye. To complicate the matter, many things considered 'objectively' public: travel, networking, public speaking can become artificially linked to masculine qualities, regardless of who performs them.

Inasmuch as the public/private divide has been deconstructed within theory, it continues to work on women's lived experiences in disheartening ways. Young points out that 'It is not clear at this point what lived problems the theory [of deconstruction] addresses or how the concepts help people understand and describe their experience' (2005). In fact, feminist performance and feminist analysis of performance often use these falsely constructed binaries as a source of critical friction in their work. If menstruation were not arbitrarily considered private, for example, projects that show menstrual blood publicly would not communicate the same narrative. In the 28-day performance project titled *Casting Off My Womb*, Casey Jenkins uses white yarn stored in her vaginal canal to knit a continuous piece that captures her menstrual cycle as the yarn absorbs her menstrual blood before it is cast on to the work. The result is a physical, public expression of a 'private' event. Further, this works best when the divide or classification has been or is still naturalized and divorced from its political and personal implications – viewers are then forced to confront their own programming. Grosz summarizes the body as

the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidedly at the pivotal point of binary pairs. The body is neither – while also being both – the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychological or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined [...] in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed.

(1994: 23–24)

It is this element of the conversation that raises much of the questions and complications for and of the implicit and stated goals of each of the IEPs detailed in this article. They all seek to challenge and advance the liminal status of the body and both celebrate and question its role as a part of a binary system.

I am using the term IEP to describe a kind of documentary project that aims to address the social structures that keep some aspects of the individual bodily experience hidden and private, and that sits at the intersection of subjectivity and performance. Although I discuss primarily contemporary images, these projects are part of a tradition that goes back to at least the 1960s. They are typically photographs that aim to expose subjects like women's bodies after birth and women's genitals – both of these examples work to combat the fictionalized female body perpetuated in media and pornography. Exposure is at the heart of this definition, and there is a contingency of meaning around

that term that swings between implications of power and vulnerability. In many of the cases I discuss, although vulnerability is one aspect of the exposure, the more persistent goal seems to be a kind of forthrightness, and the power that can potentially emerge. Young defines the 'lived body' as 'a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context; it is a body-in-situation' (2005). These projects use exposure to try and communicate directly and repeatedly about the lived body and its situational existence.

IEPs can be divided into exposures that are initiated and executed by the subject, and those that are executed and presented by another party. Each format brings up different issues of agency and potential objectification. In other words, sometimes the exposing image is taken by a person of their own body, and in other cases the exposing image is a photograph taken by an artist of a separate subject. In both cases it is the power and agency of the image's subject that is emphasized. Although live performance can also be an IEP, in many ways the static image is more 'available' to the non-artist, who can in some sense more accurately capture the 'ordinary' body. Figurative photography seems to imply that the static image of a body is the 'Body as Object' (Reeve 2011: 7), a potentially Cartesian paradigm that separates the mind and body. At the very least it does not necessarily imply the body of the spectator as a participant, but displays the body of the subject/object. The photography projects described here fall on different parts of a continuum in this respect. Some are object-oriented, and some more able to break down potential objectification by being built upon the participation of the participant. In the 'Body as Object' paradigm, Reeve writes, 'Each object will, in turn, be seen to have a clear boundary' (2011: 7). I would argue that the nature of IEPs is to explicitly break down this boundary. The question is, does this move into the Body as Subject (Reeve 2011: 11)? How foregrounded is the viewer? Are we 'valuing the subjective experience of the body and our experience in that body?' (Reeve 2011: 11).

The post-birth body, in its Public incarnation, is largely fabricated. Artists and social commentators have endeavoured to bring the Private incarnation of post-birth bodies to the public eye, creating Intimate Exposures that try to make those bodies visible. Rineke Dijkstra is a Dutch portrait photographer who created a series, shot in 1994, that captures mothers just after giving birth to their first child. The three photographs capture a woman one hour after giving birth, another after one day, and another after one week. She notes that she 'didn't want to photograph the mothers like mothers [...] It was [...] about all these emotions they had been through' (Dijkstra 2003). Further, Dijkstra discusses the ability of photography in circumstances of high emotions or physical danger (she also shot matadors exiting the bullfighting arena) to transcend people's desire to perform for the camera or perform themselves as they wish to be shown, and get an image of what they perhaps do not consciously perform, something honest and uncontrolled/contrived. This is critical when the IEP is captured by an artist, of a subject, because it helps to maintain an honesty and exposure that is not manipulative. Like some of the other projects described in this article, one of the tactics of the IEP is to isolate the body from other elements – to perform it plainly and solely, perhaps as a way of making the body 'more' ordinary. Dijkstra discusses why she isolates the figures in the image, free from other signifiers of the subject's personal life – in that way people can identify more with the experiences, rather than being distanced by the specifics of the subject's life.

Dijkstra describes the responses of women, who told her ‘this is really the way it is but nobody ever shows it, and I can recognize myself in it. And the men were all like, you can’t show a woman like that. I mean, it was quite surprising, this reaction’ (Dijkstra 2003). Each of the images tries to capture the intimate and ordinary moments and days after giving birth. There is perhaps no other female physical event so wildly theatricalized as birth, but it takes a thoughtful photographic eye to see the persistent, repeated reality of women who have birthed children: the recovering body (signified by blood, hospital dressings or a visible incision). These women are not performing ordinary life so much as allowing it to be exposed. The reaction of some male viewers that women should not be shown this way speaks to our desire to spectacularize the female body – because the ordinary female body is so much more transgressive. Dijkstra’s work can be seen as an abstraction of Edinborough’s concept of the Resilient Body, in that ‘The quality of resilience refers to maintaining coherence and stability when under duress’ (2013: 112). In this sense it becomes a kind of lived endurance art.

Dijkstra’s work forms a kind of foundation for more recent installations that are displayed primarily online. *A Beautiful Body Project* is an online platform and series of books by Jade Beall, ‘dedicated to women & body image, dedicated to sharing stories about motherhood, aging, cancer, stillbirths, miscarriages, weight-gain, weight-loss, dysmorphia, and beyond’ (2013). I am interested in the photographs she has taken of the post-birth body as a testimony of the everyday/mundane body of the reproductive body. These images elucidate the scars, looseness of the post-birth body, but also document the body of a woman who miscarried every one of thirteen pregnancies, but who became a mother another way. These images are paired with the story of each woman, situating them in a literal real of the person’s life. In this way they differ greatly from the isolated images that Dijkstra presents. *The 4th Trimester Bodies Project*, for another example, also shows ‘real’ post-baby bodies. One article describes the post-baby body as being presented in a ‘harmfully inaccurate’ way – this project proposes to work against that image. This particular project aims to ‘normalize, embrace, and glorify’ women’s bodies (Beusman 2013).

Project Bush, by Mother London, is an exhibition where women who visit can have their genitals photographed and anonymously displayed. On the website, they describe it as

a call to action for women to stand up to the pressures of modern society and present their bushes in all their glory. Whether waxed or never tended, young, old, black, brown or white, we want to display London’s lady gardens in all their variety, and demonstrate the choice that many young women – particularly – may not realise they have when it comes to waxing.

(Mother London 2013)

Here’s where the IEPs I am discussing start to address the fictionalized version of genitals presented in pornography, and want to expose the real, ordinary genitals of women. This seems to often hinge on pubic hair, but with the project described later, also on the size and shape of the labia. In the case of *Project Bush*, the images are distributed/shown in a gallery setting, which differs from projects that use the Internet to create a space for this private-made-public body.

These isolated, anonymous images of women's genitals bring up some of the theory surrounding medicalization. Bouchard discusses some attendant issues to representations of the 'anatomized body' (2009: 163), which seems an apt comparison in this case because of the biologically graphic nature of some IEPs. The question becomes, are these IEPs a mediatized-medicalized vision? Or the intimate cultural-personal communication they aim to be? They certainly recall the trope of the medical text, with the organ or feature visually dissected from the rest of the body, presented plainly with a view to show structures. Bouchard might deem this a 'pathological' view of the body, in that 'The pathological viewing position refuses the normative in favour of a fragmented, partial and, to a certain extent decontextualized sight of picture/object/body' (2009: 166). I think this is a potentially destabilizing criticism of the IEPs like *Project Bush*, and the *Large Labia Project* (described later). Bouchard goes on:

Close proximity to the object of study, allied with intense looking found a new emphasis during the early modern period as the scientific methodology of empiricism took root, focusing on observation and sensate knowledge as 'truthful' providers of requisite knowledge. The importance of keen observation around the pathologized body had been signaled by Hippocrates as the most fundamental diagnostic tool for the medic.

(2009: 167)

Bouchard's 'haptic visibility' outlines the haptic aspects of vision when the proximity between viewer and images is collapsed so that 'the viewer negates the illusions of representational strategies' (2009: 168). She continues, 'As distance between image and viewer collapses, so do distinctions between subject and object that usually define relations between art and spectator' (2009: 168). This is a significant concept because the IEPs described here are presented in a form (on a personal screen in front of an individual viewer, likely in a private space), that is usually close in proximity. This acts in opposition to a traditional gallery presentation, but also reflects and refracts the most common medium for pornography, again creating a confusing slippage between art, haptic visibility and pornography. In this way the *Large Labia Project* rhymes (conceptually) with the delivery and imagery of pornography, even as it aims to counterpoint the fictionalized, pornographic anatomy. I think that this becomes so difficult to organize because of the wide array of fictionalized bodies available within pornography, especially specialized or fetishized forms.

Bouchard also discusses Annie Sprinkle's performance of *Post Porn Modernist*, which partially consists of the audience being invited into a visually 'haptic' encounter by viewing Sprinkle's cervix through a speculum. Another example of the sometimes-uncomfortable overlaps between IEPs and pornography, in this case Bouchard argues that Sprinkle was working to 'demystify the female body by establishing objective and scientific "truths" about its nature' (2009: 72). I find this an interesting connection because of the link to a sense of objectivity or 'realness'. Finally she writes of Sprinkle's work that 'It is as if this extreme voyeurism will not satisfy desire but overload it with sight, destroying the pornographic effect and overlaying it with surplus' (2009: 174). This description may help to define the relationship between IEPs of genitals and pathology/pornography. If we situate these IEPs in the realm of

the lived body, or as an expression of that situated physicality, the images avoid scientific ‘abstraction’ (Young 2005). In fact, using Young’s argument, rather than being anatomized or pornographic, these IEPs could be considered acts of self-making and communication using the facticity of the body. Her description below is worth examining in full:

The person always faces the material facts of her body and its relation to a given environment. Her bodily organs have certain feeling capacities and function in determinate ways; her size, age, health, and training make her capable of strength and movement in relation to her environment in specific ways [...] Her specific body lives in a specific context—crowded by other people, anchored to the earth by gravity, surrounded by buildings and streets with a unique history, hearing particular languages, gauges, having food and shelter available, or not, as a result of culturally specific social processes that make specific requirements on her to access them. All these concrete material relations of a person’s bodily existence and her physical and social environment constitute her facticity. The person, however, is an actor; she has an ontological freedom to construct herself in relation to this facticity. The human actor has specific projects, things she aims to accomplish, ways she aims to express herself, make her mark on the world, transform her surroundings and relationships [...]

(2005)

IEPs are an act of ontological independence; the exposure and vulnerability are specific to the lived body of the person being exposed and are acts of choice. Looked at this way, they can never be medical in a negative sense.

This exploration of Intimate Exposure within the Public sphere takes the concept of the naked body as an exposure and focuses exclusively on the genitals, where (like *Project Bush*) the public hair and labia are used to denote the ordinary, everyday body of the women who have taken the pictures. In the Introduction to *Carnal Aesthetics*, Papenburg and Zarzycka write that transgressive imagery ‘denotes the confounding of the boundary between ethics and aesthetics extending to the disruption of normative cultural frameworks and the breakthrough into new theoretical ground by way of exploring the transformative potential of alternative perceptual modalities such as multisensoriality, sensation and affectivity’ (2013: 6). It works to ‘significantly reconfigure the relationship between the viewer and the image, which disrupt and can potentially transform the representationalist paradigm’ (2013: 6). This approach may be part of the defense of works like the *Large Labia Project*. Curious about the project, I sought them out online. The frank images triggered a strong reaction: discomfort, interest, curiosity. I had such a conflicted set of reactions that I realized the project was pointing out some ingrained conceptions and biases.

The *Large Labia Project* uses the Internet to allow women to post pictures of their genitalia to combat performed nudity and fictionalized genitals. It reserves a space for women to perform publically the normal/daily/routine reality of their bodies. Privacy is challenged as this most private area is made visible (and therefore normalized). Already the *Large Labia Project* is prompting larger political and social debates concerning pornography, privacy and empowerment. Can the female genitals ever be presented publically as the everyday body? Does privacy in this case protect or oppress women? How

does this type of nudity differ from the live explicit body? Does either really reference or capture the routine actions of women's bodies in daily life? The attention was so intense, in fact, that the curator of the site has since shut it down to new submissions. This is partially because her original model was to respond publicly and personally to every image sent, affirming and complimenting the image.

Some of these questions seem to be brought up again with the controversy surrounding another IEP, the cover of student newspaper for the University of Sydney, *Honi Soit*, which featured the genitalia of eighteen female students, with the goal of challenging 'censorship and stigmatization of women's bodies by showing vaginas in a non-sexual way' (Beck 2013). The covers were quickly censored, and an uproar ensued. Interestingly, the editors of the paper point out that it is rare to see 'an ungroomed vulva in an advertisement, a sex scene, or in a porno' (Anon. 2013). In that way they are also seeking to perform the ordinary body, the real body, and note that although art exhibitions have taken on this aim, distributing it via a magazine cover reaches even more people (the same might be said of the *Large Labia Project*, being distributed over the Internet). The criticisms of projects like these can be seen through a less explicit project as well. Mamamia's *Body Positive* project asked women to photograph themselves without make-up on. The question people asked was whether this promoted/cultivated a positive body image or not. The crux of the problem was that the images were taken to promote the intimate exposure of the actual, every day face, but got heckling instead. Tracy Moore writes that the images cannot be taken as honest expressions of everyday existence and beauty because we are 'force-fed a steady diet of fictional female bodies'. This underscores the goal of the IEP to combat fictionalized representation and therefore bring attention to the every day. One critic noted that 'the work of "body positive" feminism is to make mass culture commodify a wider range of female bodies' (Razer 2013a) and further that 'the problem with [the project] is that it implicitly courts approval of images of women' (Razer 2013b). Schneider writes that 'At base, the explicit body in much feminist work interrogates sociocultural understandings of the "appropriate" and/or the appropriately transgressive – particularly who gets to mark what (in) appropriate where, and, who has the right to appropriate where' (1997: 3). Part of the crux of these issues around Exposure Projects is that they may transgress our implicit boundaries of who is allowed to expose something intimate, and who can perform their private body publicly.

Most public exposure uses the sensational and spectacular to prompt circulation and importance, while Intimate Exposures use a sense of the ordinary and quotidian to prompt circulation and importance. In other words, IEPs trade on the sensational aspects of the ordinary, specially the hidden or private, in order to capitalize on the private-made-public. The aim of performing the ordinary body through IEPs brings up many questions: are the images productively transgressive or just essentializing? Is the anatomized, dissected body a negatively medicalized or decontextualized version of the body? Does exposing the sexual organs of women (or their reproductive bodies) reinscribe the normative essentialization of women as sexual and reproductive? Are these projects reinforcing a white, cis body as ordinary? (The projects discussed here have relative homogeneity in terms of race and age). The question at the root of these concerns is whether the discourse is too visual/biological/restricted? Or transgressive/productive? Grosz warns against representing sex by essentializing it to a sexual characteristic – and indicates

that the body should be seen within its sociocultural–biological matrix of meaning. It should not, in other words, become ‘the norm by which all others are judged’ (Grosz 1994: 22). Do these projects replace one damaging norm (porn and media) with another? Do these IEPs capitalize on the ‘authentic’ in order to sell or circulate? Wherein the quotidian becomes the normal, which becomes the normative/natural/regular?

Schneider talks about PatraKa’s ‘binary terror’, or the ‘terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning’ (1997: 13). Do these examples avoid exploding the binary because they reinscribe the dichotomy of porn and everyday life? Or do they invoke this binary terror because they exist as a public everyday life, where everyday life/private is in opposition to porn/public? Ultimately, these projects seem to grapple with persistent questions of embodiment, power and objectification. Alan Read writes that ‘An evaluation of performance and the quotidian takes as its object the neglected and the undocumented [...] the practices to be articulated are ones which have escaped the professional and the prominent’ (1993: 2). Certainly the IEP is a format seeks to empower the quotidian, and make prominent one interpretation of the ordinary body.

These instances of exposure are abutting powerful but implicit cultural legislation over how and where women’s explicit bodies can be seen, and in what ‘condition’. Perhaps most powerfully, this legislation is in part responsible for defining *who* has the cultural capital to perform these exposures. In other words, in many ways the women creating, curating and exposing do so from the standpoint of potential or literal cultural, racial and socio-economic privilege. It leads me to wonder about what an IEP would be from a less privileged point of view. What unique circumstances would contextualize it? For example, if white middle-class women are breaking neo-Victorian boundaries by exposing their ordinary body, might it call on uncomfortable rhymes with fetishization and anatomization to expose bodies of colour, queer bodies, differently abled bodies or sites of trauma? These issues are certainly troubling, but more so if we expect the acts to solve or reconcile the body and exposure (which of course nobody can do). They do, however, puncture the framework of the fictional body within the public eye, and in doing so actively seek to articulate the ordinary existence of bodies that are primarily performed publicly as fictions.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Hagen, L. H. (2014), 'Mundane, private, visible: Performing ordinary bodies in Intimate Exposure Projects', *Art & the Public Sphere*, 3: 2, pp. 119–129, doi: 10.1386/aps.3.2.119_1

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Journal of Writing in Creative Practice

ISSN 1753-5190 | Online ISSN 1753-5204
3 issues per volume | Volume 6, 2013

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- Writing, ethics and practice



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