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To cite this article: Olga Kopenkina (2021): Forever banned: Aliza Shvarts' exploration of technologies of gender, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, DOI: [10.1080/0740770X.2021.1985277](https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2021.1985277)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2021.1985277>



Published online: 04 Dec 2021.



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Forever banned: Aliza Shvarts' exploration of technologies of gender

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In her new work, “Anthem,” exhibited in the group show “In Practice: Other Objects” at the Sculpture Center in 2019 – a decade after her undergraduate “abortion” thesis project was notoriously censored by Yale’s School of Arts¹ – Aliza Shvarts explores power relationships and the construction of gendered and sexual subjects in the #MeToo era. The work puts on display a series of rape kits issued by US states², many of which feature the states’ heraldic and official stamps. (The installation is one component of a larger research project Shvarts, a doctoral candidate in Performance Studies at NYU, has undertaken with the rape kits.) The kits contain charts, forms and diagrams, swabs and containers for collecting and preserving the bodily material of alleged rape victims for use in police procedures that will establish evidence of the sexual assault. Even in our hyper-visible world, the mundane existence of such matter-of-fact collecting kits is largely unknown to most people, though it can be occasionally glimpsed on TV crime shows. The 2019 documentary TV series “Lorena” revisiting 1993 infamous trial of Lorena Bobbitt feature such a kit.³ In contrast to televised forensic dramas that often demonstrate empathy for victims, Shvarts exhibits a hefty number of these objects in a rather clinical fashion, along the gallery walls of the tunnel-like basement area of Sculpture Center, inviting viewers to examine each item in detail.

Deceptively neutral in its display, “Anthem” harks back to Shvarts’ earlier forensic work, *Untitled/[Senior Thesis]*⁴, which featured visual “evidence” of the original events surrounding her 2008 Yale thesis project. Unreleased film footage and a poster depicting a post-miscarriage scene, centered around an unidentified female, explored a thin line between the corporal aspect of Shvarts’ actions and the allegation of “being a fiction.”⁵ These visual traces in Shvarts’ ongoing performance investigations calls up notions of “queer ephemera” and queer “invisible evidence” which challenge the laws of what “counts” as a “proper proof,” as articulated by theorist José Esteban Muñoz.⁶ A potential evidence of performed “abortions,” the picture of a woman in a bathtub marked by the

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blood stains serves as a form of queer self-enactment (a “queer act”) that, according to Muñoz, claims indeterminacy and performative polyvalency as essentially queer.⁷ Moreover, given a national controversy that the original project inspired, it also serves as a tool to challenge the dominant institutional ideologies.

In “Anthem,” Shvarts links queerness, to the history of feminist art and its representations, while disturbing their essentialist understanding of politics of gender.⁸ In the 1970s, artists, such as Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, Aviva Rahmani, Faith Wilding, and others, broke down binary constructions, in which a woman was usually marked as Other, by focusing on the physicality of women’s “speaking” bodies, while exploring female subjectivity through personal testimonies and narratives. With a reverence for this tradition, Shvarts, however, disrupts this essentialist grammar of 1970s feminism and begins to nuance a political history involving the production of differences between the sexes through language and objects that perform (rape kit). She replaces the questionable conflation of woman and gender in her work through an exploration of the “technologies of gender.” This study of techno-bodies and techno-genders, originating with Donna Haraway’s cyberfeminist theory⁹ and culminating in Paul B. Preciado’s seminal book *Testo Junkie* serve to position gender as a product of a politically regulated system of signification, in which technologies, such as medicine and law, along with artistic production, filmmaking, and digital media, serve as paradigms for the gendered production of the sexual subject.¹⁰ Shvarts’ interest in rape kits lies in its linguistic performativity: how physical experience, such as a sexual assault, is translated into legal language and how the vocabulary used in the kits is constitutive of the “truth” told by survivors (which we have been witnessing in 24-hours news cycle since the beginning of the #MeToo campaign.¹¹)

Shvarts allows the viewer to discern that the terminology used in kits is not fixed, and varies from state to state in naming the types of sexual intercourses, events and its subjects. In the text accompanying the exhibition, Shvarts specifies that the federal government does not legislate any specific guidelines and standards for the use of terminology relating to assault. Oddly enough, the vocabulary of rape kits tends to oscillate between gender-neutral and feminine terms, despite the fact that men are, as well, victims of rape. Moreover, it often slips into euphemisms, or interchangeably uses of words “victim” and “patient”, “sex” and “assault” creating different versions of reality. The exposure of the language of rape raises a broader question regarding the rhetoric of gender and the biotechnologies of its control explored in Shvarts’ previous work. How do we talk about *rape* as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, in the aftermath of the #MeToo campaign? While no longer attempting to wipe out this word (along with others, such as *incest*, etc.) from our museum wall texts¹², we should, however, understand that it’s not only that rape targets the “feminine” subject, rape is the means of constructing gender, particularly, “female,” although men and other sexual and pre-sexual bodies can be victims of sexual assault as well. Therefore, as Shvarts literally demonstrates, rape is read as a script, whose main intention is to imprint gender on the victim. This gendering is one of the technologies used by a hegemonic (masculine) power for the purpose of sustaining the hierarchies of victimization and domination. Exposing the language of rape kits as a social performance is opposed to just seeing them as silent artifacts in some biocapitalist amusement park¹³ we all inhabit. Just like turning a gossip about a possible serial abortion into its

“real” story, Shvarts puts biocapitalist technologies of gender on trial, interrogating them against the grain of a feminist history of art and abiding queer activist politics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Olga Kopenkina is a New York-based independent curator and art critic. Her curatorial projects include *The Work of Love*, *The Queer of Labor*, upcoming at Pratt Manhattan Gallery, 2020 (previously, co-curated with Yevgeniy Fiks at Franklin Street Works, Stamford, CT); *Feminism is Politics!* at Pratt Manhattan gallery, 2016; *Future Queer Perfect* (with Yevgeniy Fiks) at Station Independent Project, 2016; and others. Kopenkina is a contributor to publications such as *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, *ArtMargins*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Modern Painters*, *After-image*, and others. She teaches at Department of Media, Culture and Communication, in Steinhardt School at New York University.

Notes

1. For her participation in the 2008 BFA thesis show at Yale’s School of Arts, Shvarts proposed to exhibit material evidence of a nine-months-long project, during which she had multiple times inseminated herself with donors’ sperm, then induced a bleeding. The school officials interpreted it as self-induced abortions and banned her from the show. According to Yale’s official spokesperson Helaine Klasky, the final decision to ban the piece was based on the argument that the school “had been unable to determine with clarity whether Ms. Shvarts had in fact undertaken actions injurious to her health in carrying out her original project” (Available at: <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2008/04/30/breaking-stalemate-shvarts-submits-new-senior-art-project/>).
2. *Anthem’s* goal is to display the kits issued by every state in the US. in order to represent the country as a whole (hence the title “Anthem”). If a kit could not be obtained from a particular state, Shvarts substitutes a mock container of a standard size and style with a note indicating that that particular kit was unavailable.
3. *Lorena*, a documentary series produced by Amazon, directed by Joshua Rofe, premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, revisits the famous 1993 John and Lorena Bobbitt scandal, when Lorena cut off her husband’s penis with a knife after enduring the physical and emotional abuse at his hands.
4. Shown at her solo show “Off scene” at *Artspace* in New Haven, curated by Sarah Fritchey, in 2018.
5. The latter was reiterated many times by anxious school officials, such as Yale’s spokesperson Helaine Klasky, whose statement was included in the work, and repeated by the press and social media commentators
6. Muñoz (1996).
7. Full quotation: “[Tony Just’s photograph] is not an image that is epistemologically framed and grounded, but performatively polyvalent. The fundamental indeterminacy of the image made me feel that its ephemerality and its sense of possibility were profoundly queer” (Muñoz 1996, 6).
8. In works of artists such as Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, Aviva Rahmani, Faith Wilding and others.
9. Haraway (1991).
10. Preciado ([2008] 2013).

11. The final edits for this article were made during the widely publicized trial of Harvey Weinstein, in which several witnesses gave chilling testimonies of sexual assaults committed the Hollywood tycoon.
12. Exhibition “The Un-Heroic Acts: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women’s Art in USA,” curated by Monika Fabijanska for Shiva Gallery at John Jay College in fall 2018, received favorable reviews and was named by *Hyperallergic* one of the best shows of the year. In contrast, 1993 exhibition “The Subject of Rape”, organized by students in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Studies Program was met with disdain (Holland Cotter’s criticism at NYTimes is an example: <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/13/arts/review-art-at-the-whitney-provocation-and-theory-meet-head-on.html>)
13. Paul B. Preciado describes a “technoliving park,” created by popular media industry, in which normative “artifacts”, such as pornography and masturbation, co-exists with pharmaceutical and biotechnical means for assisted reproduction, which constantly redesigns the frontiers between genders ([2008] 2013, 124–125).

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