"My Body is My Tool"... and the Pen is Mine! : An Exploration of Feminist Visual Practises

Reflective Pieces

ABSTRACT

During my research with women performers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, I adopted drawing as my primary tool for collecting and analysing data. I found that the best way to capture the value of theatrical performances was through an effective visual medium. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate the potential of drawing to be a feminist tool. My informants created whimsical and often absurd narratives of women's violation and dissent. With the help from my drawings, I shall put the themes of vulgarity and vulnerability into discussion with the ability of theatre to politically effect.

keywords: visual methods, empowerment, performers, theatre

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As an arts festival, the Fringe has a distinctive artistic character that is shared and transmitted across the city of Edinburgh. The Fringe provides an important outlet for artistic experiences and output, giving a platform to a range of provocative shows that verge on the absurd. The dignity of the city dissolves to make way for theatrical displays of comedy, cabaret, circus, and controversy. My research consisted of performances by women, which used varying theatrical devices such as comedy, cabaret and clowning to produce semi-autobiographical performances. One artist epitomised this unconventional genre of performance as: "Not traditional, a little bit cabaret, live art, a bit of a gig, absurd humour, a hotchpotch of stuff." Women working in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe used their emotions, experiences and embodiment to sell shows and spark conversations. Performers made empowering statements in their shows that they claimed to be *for* women, about *being* a woman. In doing so, conventional characteristics of femininity, were exhibited and

RE:THINK Journal of Creative Ethnography. Vol. 3, Issue 1, Summer 2021 ISSN 2516-8088 (Online) Supported by the University of Edinburgh.
http://journals.ed.ac.uk/rethink

deconstructed for the public. Women's genitals (figure 1), menstruation and body hair were put under the spotlight to the amazement and disgust of international audiences.

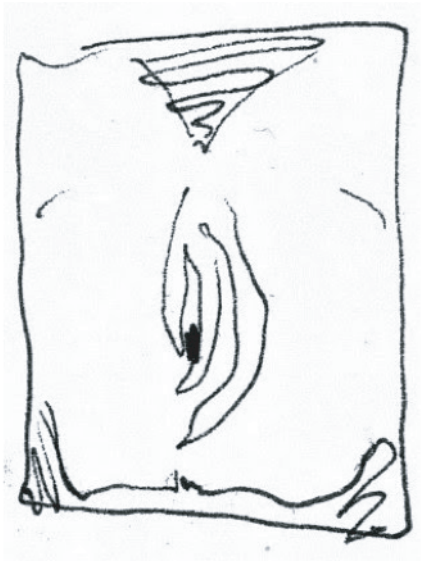


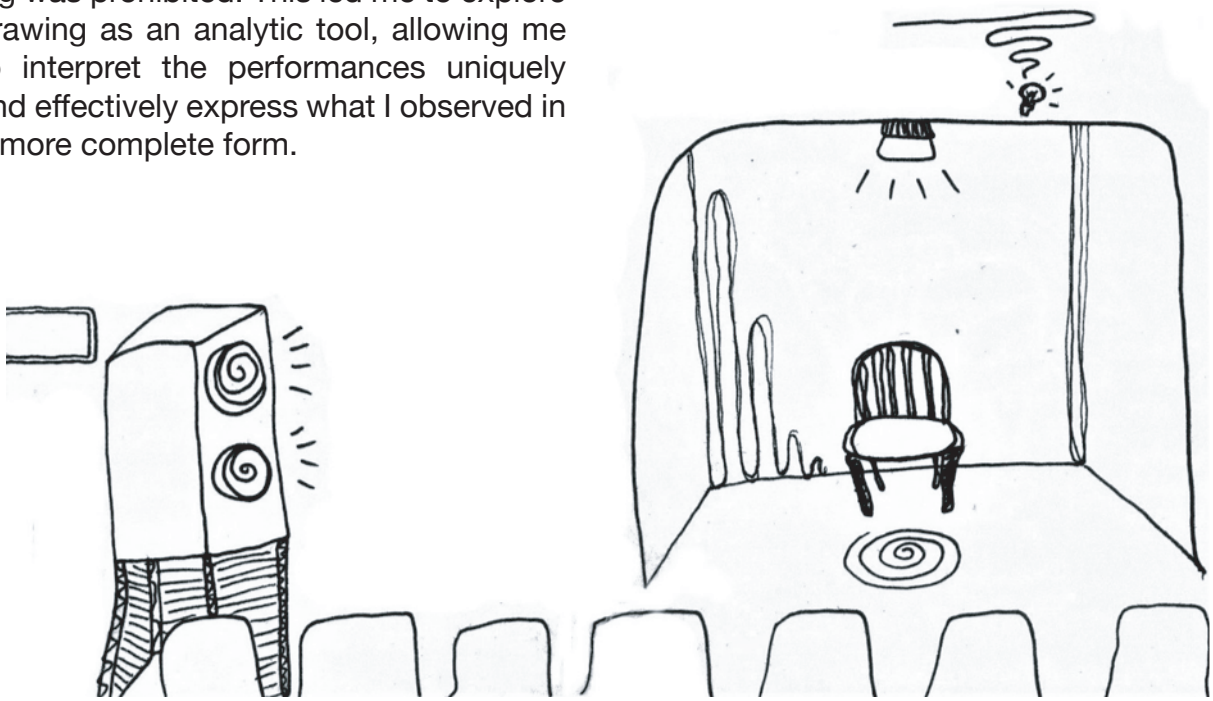
Figure 1: "Pussies" (drawing by author)

Due to the nature of live performances—especially performances of nudity— photography and video recording was prohibited. This led me to explore drawing as an analytic tool, allowing me to interpret the performances uniquely and effectively express what I observed in a more complete form.

One challenge that anthropologists face is bridging the gap between the world they experience and the world they are describing (Etmanski, 2007: 8). My drawings (see Figures 2 and 3) tend to have a cartoonish quality to them, which I feel portrays the playful nature of the Fringe.

The study of theatricality has urged anthropologists to expand their medium past just text to account for the live nature of performance (Flynn and Tinius, 2015). Thus, visual methods helped me minimise the distance between the research and myself by drawing out the exaggerated moments of performances and imitating the visual language used onstage (see Pink 2007: 109). Drawing emerged as a useful medium within feminist anthropology as it explores distinctive ways of narrating women's experiences and expressions of identity. Central to feminist methodological concerns is the researcher's position in the field and the issue of voyeurism (Foster, 2016: 55). Drawing encouraged

Figure 2: "Rose Theatre" (drawing by author)



my relational reflexivity, enabling me to destabilise vision as an inherently masculine technology (Mulvey,2009). Drawing gave me ownership of the gaze and allowed me to be reflexive of way I carried out my research, just as my women performers attempted to reclaim themselves from the heterosexual male gaze. My drawings, as aesthetic works of art, have an inherent purpose: to engage with the viewer, as art 'readily strikes a chord, more easily than words' (Chamberlayne and Smith, 2010: 5). Thus, I found that drawing made my ethnography performative as well as objective (Flynn and Tinius, 2015), giving a voice to the performers' narrative and moving the reader to reflect upon the world discussed.

Viewing the Female Body

The body has a dynamic and material effect on live audiences, producing knowledge and affecting the senses of others (Shepherd, 2006: 6). For performers, their physical display has a functional duty to attract and maintain the gaze of the audience, as a form of embodied labour (Dean, 2005). The performers combined an eclectic mix of bodywork and spoken word to resist or parody feminine norms and expectations. Selling loud and proud stories of women's empowerment and sexual liberation exemplified how feminist politics of agency and self-determination were endorsed within the praxis of the Fringe.

Mulvey (1975) views the role of women in the entertainment industry to be positioned as objects of male desire for male audiences; women's appearances are strongly coded with visual and erotic impact, signifying male desire (Mulvey, 1975:62). As a result, much of second-wave feminism has been concerned with the idea of sexual liberation. For the women I interviewed, performing provided an avenue for them to remake their bodies and create empowering safe spaces to share them.

Figure 3: "The Spiegel Yurt" (drawing by author)

By using the language of the body to be disruptive and demanding of the space, performers deconstructed the traditional docility of femininity. As one performer, an Indian-American immigrant, Arzoo told me: "My body is my tool; it drives my performance".

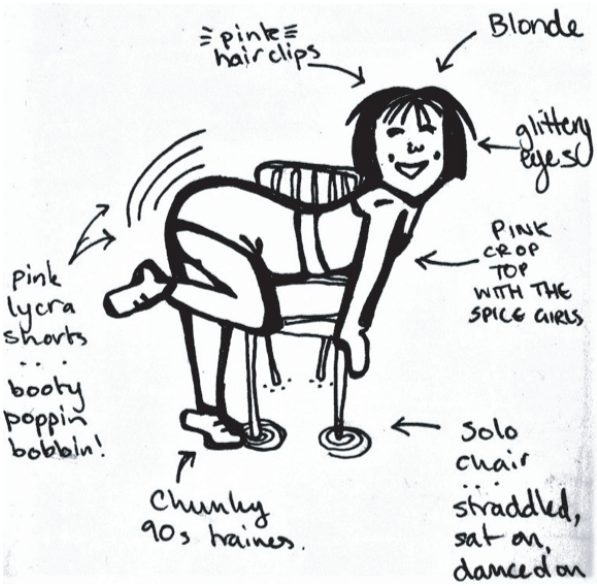


Figure 4: "Excerpt from fieldnotes" (drawing by author)

Catherine from Cyst-er Act used bizarre humour to juxtapose the shame and embarrassment women are still expected to endure in their lifetime, such as pain and sexual violations. Catherine drew on her own gynaecological conditions, disclosing the sheer amount that "women have to put up with." My drawing (see figure 5) of Cyst-er Act depicts the particularly controversial imagery of a priest's mitre upon Catherine's naked body, creating an image that is intentionally disruptive and full of symbolic meaning. Catherine deliberately invoked religious and gendered symbols to challenge social boundaries. On the surface, the religious motifs are symbolic of the patriarchal religious power (Seal, 2013: 296) that she then subverted with humour. However, I felt that the need for theatrical impact limited and even undermined important discussions of patriarchal power.

There is a tendency for popular culture to depict feminists as angry, unfeminine and hateful of men (Tomlinson, 2010: 3). These harmful stereotypes have deeply affected people's engagement with the movement and has served to delegitimize the uptake of women's anger as a legitimate response to social views of power (Frye, 1983:86). Many of my performers used the angry feminist stereotype as a parodic device, calling themselves "angry", "rowdy" or "ballsy". Tatiana, an American performer in her thirties took this in stride. Her show was an "ugly portrayal of sexual assault, misogyny and self-loathing," disguised as stand-up comedy. She played the role of a rape victim, unravelling onstage (see figure 6). For me this drawing represents the anguish I saw onstage. The colour red symbolises heartbreak and the spilling out of emotions. This picture juxtaposes Tatiana's vulnerable body onstage with what she calls her "feminist take on some classic jokes." This image is meant to be striking and unsettling, mirroring my reaction to the performance, and elucidating similar emotions.

Figure 5: "Cyst-er Act" (drawing by author)

Butch Princessa (figure 7) proudly asserted "I'm fat, I'm hairy, but I'm happy with that... I want to show others that they can be too" demonstrating that, whilst performers' sex appeal may be mobilised for commercial benefit, there was room for resistance. First luring the audience in with deliberate sexualised advertising, Butch Princessa would then unleash a pantomime of vulgarity. By bringing to light the "ugly" or "unconventional" aspects of being a woman in performance, the performer actively resists the commodifica-

tion of conventional femininity in the entertainment industry; reworking what is acceptable for a woman performer to do onstage, and thus what is commercially sellable.

Disgust was a popular trope amongst feminist Fringe performers. Much like second-wave feminist Judy Chicago (Red Flag, 1971), women performers deployed Blood-related shock tactics to ignite feminist conversations. (Figure 9) depicts the performer Ruby spraying herself and the stage with tomato sauce, laying in symbolic "menstrual blood" to the delight and disgust of a fully packed audience. Gasps and mirthful groans punctuated the audience. I believe this drawing captures the exhibitionism of the act; however, I did not want to frame it as something disgusting. As a woman, I wanted to reflect on the liberating quality of putting the menstrual experience centre-stage. (Figure 8) on the other hand is a depiction of a I felt that in this drawing the reader would be able to imagine themselves in the epicentre of the ribbons, wanting to capture the "live immediacy of performance" (Flynn and Tinius, 2015: 343). Both performances were playing with the menstrual taboo, by making fun of and celebrating it. Menstrual blood has typically been made invisible in European society, rendering it a concealed and private sanitary issue (Mauss, 2003 [1934]). However, by centring it within artistic practises, the performers conceptualized the experience of menstruation in creative and transformative ways. Blood is a powerful ritual symbol, and I used the colour red in my ethnographic drawings as I feel it has deep emotional resonance (Manica and Rios, 2016) and has the visual capacity to communicate powerful messages.

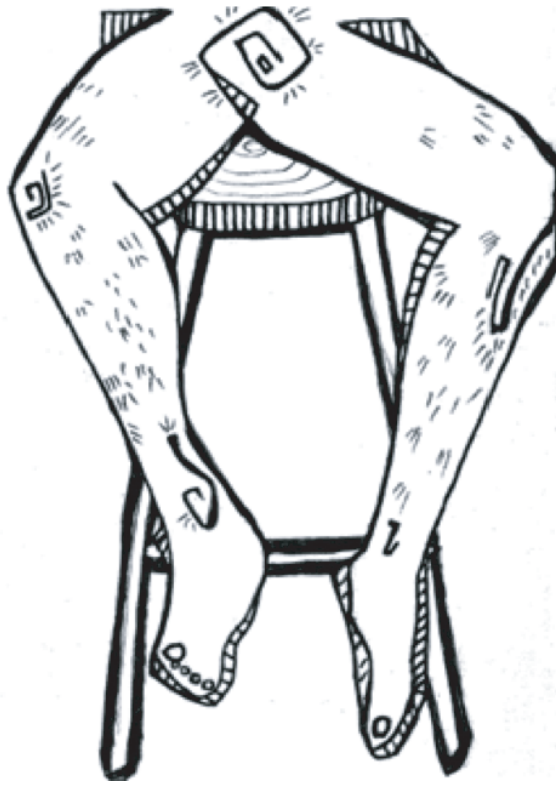
Contra, by Laura Murphy, a young English lesbian, offered a spellbinding mix of spoken word and aerial rope performance. In my artistic rendering (fig. 10), I hoped to stylistically capture the fluid and creative nature of her show. The scene evoked satirical Garden of Eden imagery, with a naked woman eating an apple, and

Figure 6: "Brandi's Comedy" (drawing by author)

a snake-like fixture behind her. In her performance, Laura became dangerously entangled in the rope we were led to believe she had control over. With her spoken word, Laura told the audience of her efforts to have agency within the heterosexual male gaze and used her rope as a metaphor for her struggles; was wrapped up in an appraisal of her naked form and strength and juxtaposed against her resistance to heteronormativity.

The show Cyst-er Act, (see figure 11), celebrated the "sacredness of the vagina which was once worshipped and then lost." Thus, in my drawing I used red to symbolise fertility. Whilst some might argue that an emphasis on gender bodily distinctions reinforces naturalised ideas of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). I believe that the performer of Cyst-er Act Catherine, calls for a re-evaluation of the female body, by appreciating its erotic

Figure 7: "Butch Princessa" (drawing by author)



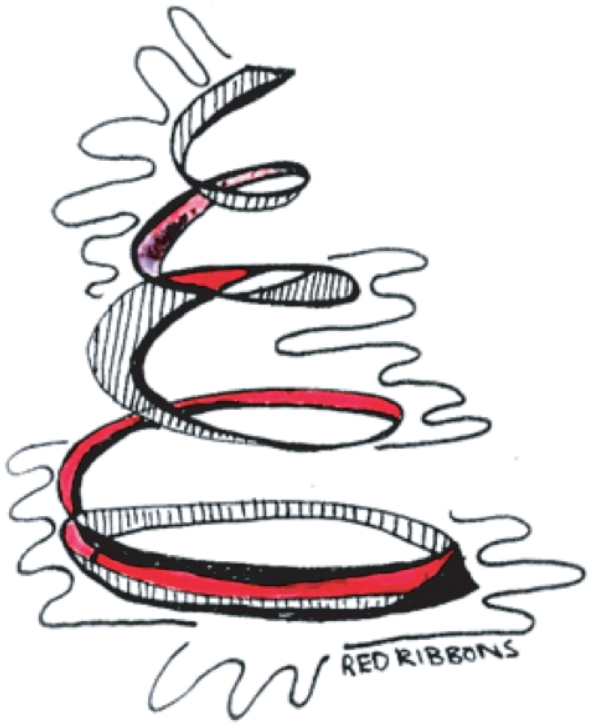


Figure 8: "Yuck Circus" (drawing by author)

power: "we need to reconnect our bodies to our own feelings of empowerment, which has nothing to do with the male gaze or being reproductive." Conventionally in the entertainment industry women not only had to appear attractive but also "sexually productive" (Adkins, 1995: 147). Catherine resisted this prescription by drawing attention to her naked body, actively engaging the audience in confronting their attitudes of the attractiveness of older women (Dean, 2005: 770). As a group of women in their forties, Catherine proclaims: "We want to show that we don't give a shit, so others might be empowered." Women are encouraged to engage with their bodies in a way that might encourage agency and empowerment.

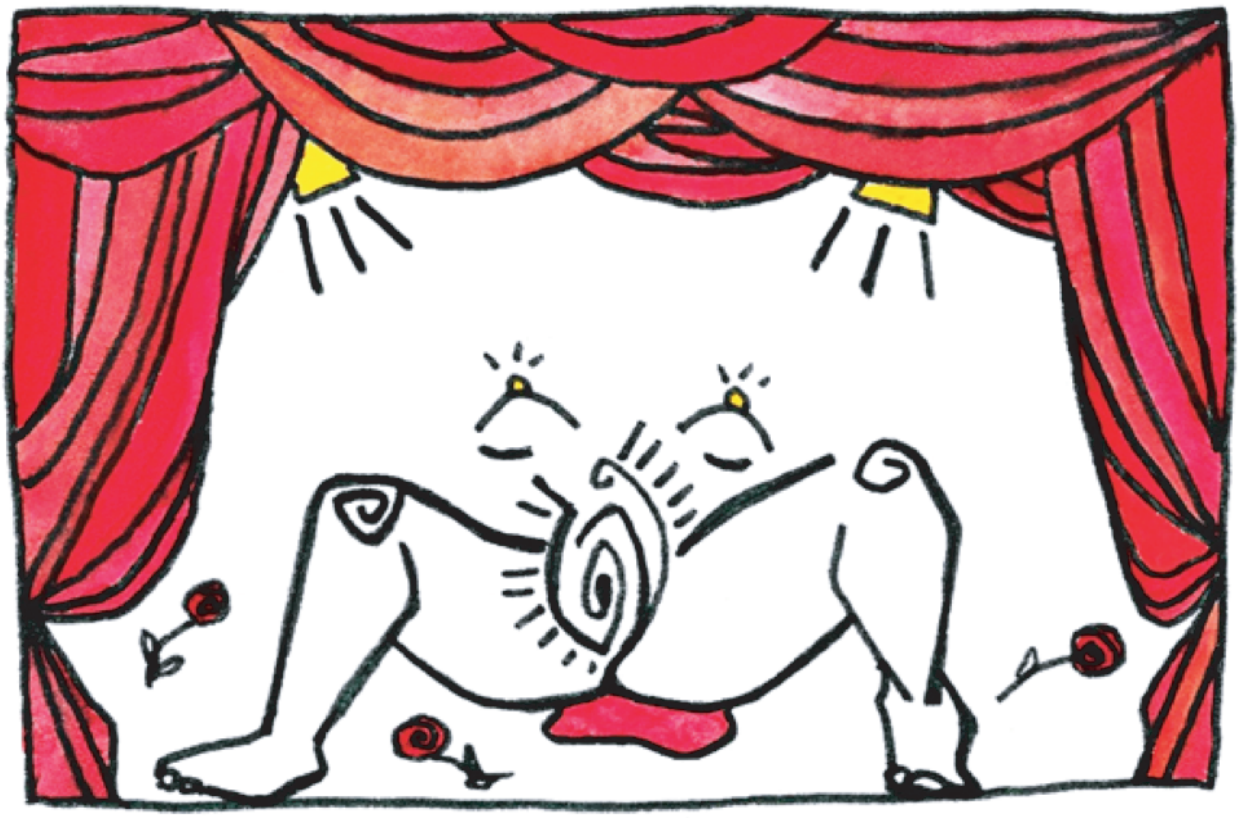


Figure 9: “Ruby Red” (drawing by author)

It is possible that these performances could still be framed within the heterosexual male gaze, as decorative objects to be gazed upon (Berger, 1990). However, I put forward that live performances of female nudity may only be rebellious on the surface, nakedness, especially when reproduced by conventionally attractive white women, only serves to reinforce “western” ideas of feminine beauty, creating a sense of individualised sexual liberation. Nonetheless, my informants exhibited a resistance to conventional feminine norms by producing shows that exposed the sometimes-ugly truths of being a woman, playing with the boundaries of appropriate femininity, including vulgarity, overt sexuality and anger. For me, the simple act of

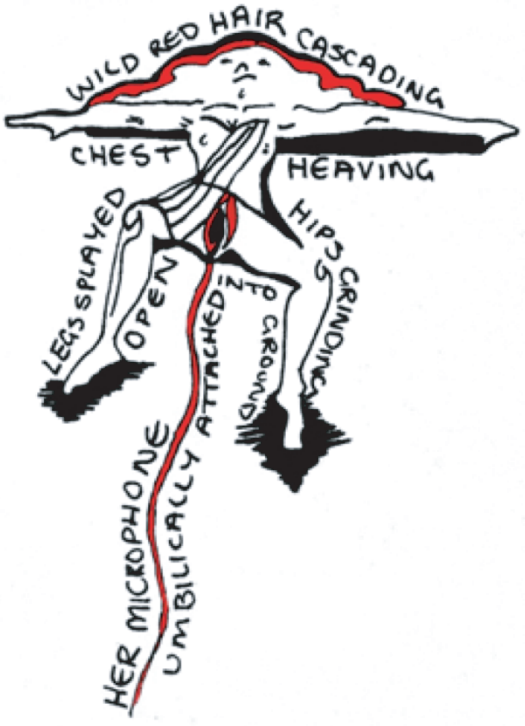


Figure 11: “Cyst-er Act excerpt from Fieldnotes” (drawing by author)

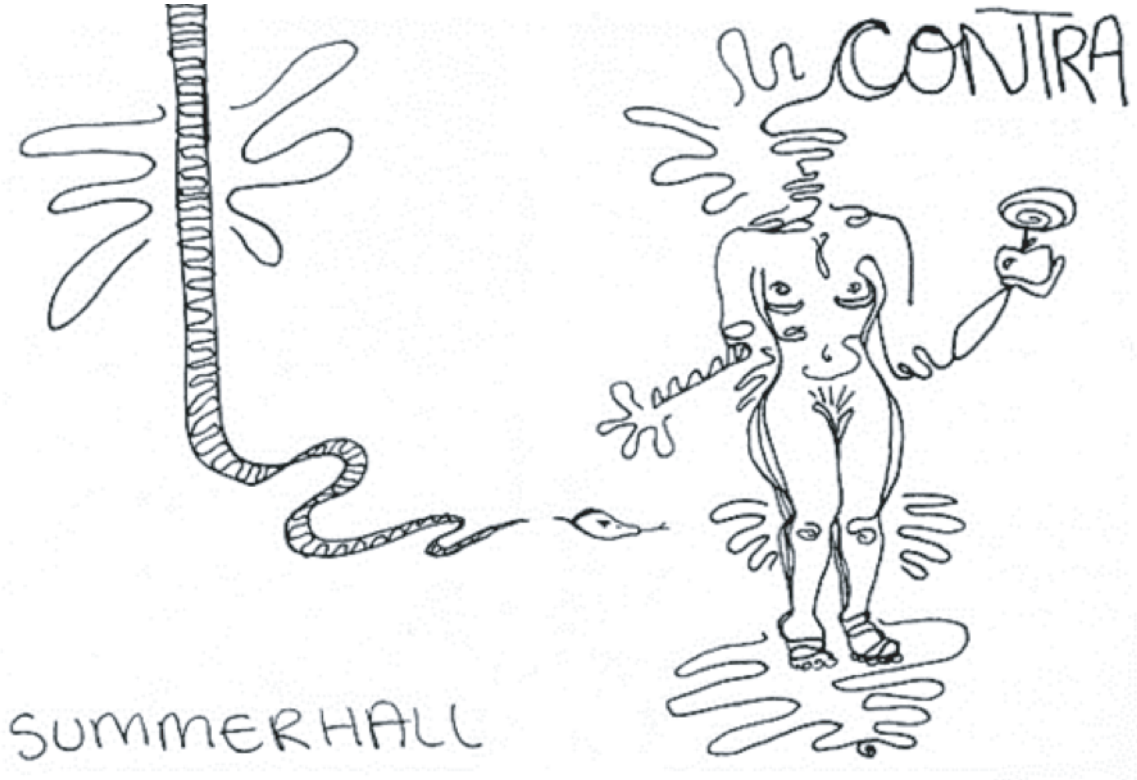


Figure 10: "Contra" (drawing by author)

putting pen to paper afforded me the courage to capture the raw and relatable emotions of women's rage and vulnerability.

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