



Article

Performing Fat Liberation: Pretty Porky and Pissed Off's Affective Politics and Archive

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Abstract: This article uses collaborative auto/ethnography to explore the circulation and potentiality of affect in the live performances and archive of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPOd), a Toronto-based queer fat activist performance art collective active during the late 1990s and mid-2000s. Drawing on video and audio recordings of five PPPOd performances alongside other performance ephemera and a series of conversations relating to these archival objects among the article's three authors, we identify and theorize our affective responses to and situated recollections of these performances, both in their current form as archival objects and as historical live events. We argue that PPPOd's archival objects/live performances disrupt the constellation of affects that constitute fat hate (e.g., fear, loathing, shame) and set in motion more affirmative affects (e.g., playfulness, pride, desire, love) that contribute to micro-worldings and prefigurative fat politics, as ephemeral as these might be. In capturing these fleeting moments of radical possibility, PPPOd's activism and archive offer opportunities for touching and feeling a future where fat lives are more livable.

Keywords: fat; archive; art; fat activism; affect; Pretty Porky and Pissed Off; performance art; queer; world-making; fat hatred



Citation: Taylor, Allison, Allyson Mitchell, and Carla Rice. 2023. Performing Fat Liberation: Pretty Porky and Pissed Off's Affective Politics and Archive. *Social Sciences* 12: 270. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12050270>

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 16 November 2022

Revised: 29 March 2023

Accepted: 30 March 2023

Published: 2 May 2023



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1. Introduction

This article engages with the artful politics of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPOd), a Toronto-based queer fat activist performance art collective that was active from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. We use a carnal methodology focused on bodily experiences and sensations such as feeling and touching, explored via collaborative auto/ethnographic insights from live performances and affective analyses of the collective's archive, to get closer to the affects circulating during PPPOd performances and their effects on performers and audiences, emphasizing the potential of fat performance art to disrupt and transform sensory (e.g., felt, tactile, kinesthetic) experiences of fat. Drawing on video and audio recordings of five PPPOd performances alongside other performance ephemera¹ and conversations relating to these archival objects among the three authors of this article, we theorize our affective responses to and situated recollections of these performances, both in their current form as archival objects and as historical live events. Teasing out the affects produced by these archival objects/live performances, we meditate on the force of affect in determining the transformative potential of fat performance art to activate new and vibrant sensory fields surrounding fatness. Rather than offering grand claims about all fat performance, we remain tangibly focused on the artifacts from five performances by PPPOd, getting close to, touching, and feeling these archival objects and moments in time. Our investigation into the force of PPPOd's fat performance activism finds that the archival objects/live performances disrupt the constellation of affects that constitute fat hate (e.g., fear, loathing, shame) and set in motion more affirmative affects (e.g., playfulness, pride, desire) that contribute to micro-worldings and prefigurative fat politics, as ephemeral as these might be.

2. Context

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPOd) a fat activist and performance art collective, based in Toronto, Canada, aimed to set its audiences on fire—to incite a “queen sized revolt.” PPPOd consisted of core members Allyson Mitchell, Tracy Tidgwell, Zoe Whittall, Lisa Ayuso, Joanne Huffa, Abi Slone, and Mariko Tamaki with contributions from many others, including Gillian Bell and Ruby Rowan. From producing and performing shows centered on fat dance and drag across southwestern Ontario, to direct actions and teach-ins where they passed out flyers and treats to highlight the issues of fat hate and their effects on those who embody fatness; to developing zines, writing articles, and engaging in other cultural production to resist fat hatred; to hosting fat girl clothing swaps; to lecturing and leading workshops on size acceptance, PPPOd sought to bring fat people together in politicized, fat-affirmative spaces and offered fat people and their experiences greater visibility and “new possibilities for imagining fat” (Cooper 2016, p. 69). Within the fat studies literature, PPPOd has often been celebrated as a germinal example of Euro-Western queer fat feminist activism (Cooper 2016; Ellison 2020; Johnson and Taylor 2008; Rice 2014, 2015; Tidgwell et al. 2018).

The *Archiving the Ephemeral History of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (Archiving PPPOd)* research project preserves PPPOd’s legacy. Led by Allyson Mitchell, with the support of Allison Taylor, the project sources a range of materials—including audio and video recordings of events, interviews, and meetings; print materials such as posters, meeting notes, and creative writing; and objects such as visual art, crafts, swag, and costumes—from group members and affiliated community members and partners. These materials are largely unconventional, informal, and personal, and many of the items capture the ephemeral. The materials have been digitized, and Taylor and Mitchell are currently working towards making them publicly accessible via an online archive. With funding through the SSHRC Partnership Grant, *Bodies in Translation, Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life* (BIT), this archival project takes interest in the potential of activist arts to provoke social, cultural, and political transformation—or world-making. With the support of grant co-directors Carla Rice and Eliza Chandler and research associates, in particular former PPPOd member Tracy Tidgwell, at the *Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice* (University of Guelph), the *Archiving PPPOd* project offers a rare glimpse at the possibilities engendered by archives created *by* and *for* fat activists and scholars.

The *Archiving PPPOd* project finds theoretical footholds in Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003) work on the gay and lesbian archive, which conceives of how the archive might exceed “conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration” (7), because fat people, like queers, have struggled to preserve our histories “in the face of institutional neglect” (8). Because “symbolic annihilation” largely characterizes the representations of fat people in mainstream archives, assembling unconventional, informal, personal, and ephemeral materials on fat activists and activism into a “fat community archive” safeguards against the systemic erasure of fat resistance from the historical record (Pratt 2018, p. 236). A fat activist archive also makes it possible to map out how, in different times and places, fat people “conceive of our collective past, how we understand and record our present, and how we imagine our futures” (Pratt 2018, p. 236). While Pratt’s (2018) work is a jumping off point for us in framing this article, it is important to note that there are exciting fat activist materials available in Canadian archives such as the Toronto ArQuives, Library and Archives Canada, and the Canadian Women’s Movement Archive in Ottawa. Fat activist materials are also held in U.S. archives, including the Schlesinger Library at Harvard, the Mazer Archives in Hollywood, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, and the John J. Wilcox Archives in Philadelphia, to name a few. Each of these repositories makes it possible to trace fragments of past fat activism. However, not all of the named archives digitize their materials or make them available online and some of these archives exist in institutions of higher education with complex infrastructures that may make access intimidating or off-putting to those who are not attached to universities.

The collection of objects in the PPPOd archive includes many of the historical and root texts influencing this group, as well as the objects and texts that they themselves created (e.g., zines and a special guest edited issue of the magazine *Fireweed*). Further, the archive contains the process-based ephemera that the group used to conceptualize as well as reflect on the art they were making, and the direct action and teaching that they were undertaking. For example, the archive contains performance documentation, brainstorming notes, video documentation in change rooms before performances, and recorded conversations after performances. The archival documentation also includes video, audio, and photographic recordings of meetings that may help future researchers to understand more deeply (and affectively, as we argue) the intentions, failings, triumphs, day-to-day administrivia, and even drudgery, of art and activist processes. Adding another layer, the archive also contains documentation of television spotlights and radio interviews that indicate how PPPOd's work was being represented in popular media at the time. This complex gathering of materials offers multiple entry points and perspectives into PPPOd's history and allows for complex insights in analysis.

In our affect-suffused encounters with the PPPOd artifacts, we acknowledge that archival objects “represent far more than the literal value of the objects themselves” (Cvetkovich 2003, p. 268), because they produce a range of emotive experiences, from melancholy, nostalgia, and indignation, to comradeship, disappointment, and fantasy. As we demonstrate in this article, these affects are central to the world-making potential of the PPPOd archive. We theorize the flows of affects coursing through our bodies as we interact with PPPOd archival materials by drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2004a) socio-political exploration of the work of affect in creating, sustaining, subverting, and resisting cultural economies, both hegemonic and counter cultural. Rather than orienting to emotions as internal psychic states—as perceptions and sensations originating from and contained within bodies—Ahmed (2008) understands emotions as “sociable” if nebulous forces that arise from and circulate through our embodied relations in the world, which move us to feel with, for, and against others. Here emotion indivisibly entangles with cognition for, as Ahmed notes “to hate or to fear is to have a judgment about a thing as it approaches” (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, p. 99); and the judgment-tinged affects generated in cultural encounters across power and difference help to establish the sensory boundaries and relationalities of bodies and collectivities. Emotions thus circulate between individual and social bodies, binding certain people together and casting others out of the body politic; and emotions are powerful in mediating knowledge, influencing what knowledge gets produced and which claims to truth are accepted, greeted with ambivalence, or denied/opposed (Ahmed 2004b; see also Rice et al. 2022b). Ahmed's monist understanding of affective economies as entangled emotive-cognitive forces that are socially shaped and acquire intensity as they circulate helps to explain why fat (and non-fat) peoples become attached to hegemonic and oppressive knowledge; and it also explains why, given their corporeality, emotions stigmatizing fatness are difficult to cast off. As we narrate our carnal (i.e., embodied and felt) encounters with archival objects, we invite readers to feel the clashing affects surrounding fatness that PPPOd performances set in motion, and vicariously experience how the group artfully received and remade these affects through performer-audience encounters (see Hoang (2018) for further discussion of carnal methods).

3. Methodology

We engaged with five recordings (four video and one audio) from the PPPOd archive that document moments of live PPPOd performances. Each of us watched and listened to these independently, and then we met together over Zoom four times to discuss our layered responses. The discussions centered on our intimate contact with each object, generating visceral descriptions ripe with the feelings, sensations, and memories that we collectively analyzed. After stewing in the affects the artifacts stirred up, we reflected on our different positions in relation to the archive materials and the collective as a whole, and how these positionalities affected our engagements with the archival objects: Mitchell as

a producer-artist creating and participating in the performances, Carla Rice as a fangirl and audience member at performances, and Taylor as a next-generation researcher viewing the recorded performances a number of years later. We recorded and transcribed our discussions and analyzed the transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Threaded throughout our discussion are insights derived from “performance autoethnography” (Chalklin 2016a), by which we mean Mitchell’s critically reflexive recollections of “the affective, intersubjective and corporeal levels of experience” (Chalklin 2012, p. 110) generated whilst viewing the PPPOd performances. This is layered with Rice’s felt memories of participating in the performances as a fat activist and PPPOd follower, and Taylor’s emotive experiences of watching these historical performances in the present moment. To better reflect our weaving together of both audience and performer recollections, we refer to this aspect of our method as a *collaborative* performance auto/ethnography. What follows is an experimental attempt to describe and theorize our carnal encounters—emphasizing the felt, visceral, and material—with the selected artifacts from the PPPOd archive. By attending closely to our affective encounters with these ephemeral, digital objects, we aim to enhance, nuance, and deepen our embodied readings of the archive, and provide readers with a different mode of engagement with artifacts than that which is typically offered in archival research.

4. The Artifacts

4.1. *Blubber*

Blubber was a body positive cabaret put together by PPPOd, sponsored by the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Eating Disorders Coalition and performed at the River Run Centre in Guelph, Ontario in February 2001. The video documentation² starts with emcee Roy Mitchell provoking and rousing the audience members with promises of boundary-pushing performances by PPPOd, locally-known performance artists, writers, musicians and poets, a fan-favorite drag king troupe, and the musicians Queen Size Shag. What unfolds on the footage is an hour-long show featuring a dozen or so performers and over 100 fans shouting, laughing, hooting, and dancing to a curated playlist, films, songs, jokes, choreographed performances, poems, stories, and live drawing projections, alongside a craft sale of items made specifically for the event. PPPOd named the show *Blubber* to pay homage to and reclaim the young adult novel of the same title by Judy Blume which was popular in the 1970s, when the troupe members were growing up. PPPOd prefaces the show by contextualizing how the book was one of the only representations of fat (white) girls in popular culture that several members of the group could relate to with its bittersweet representation of othering, bullying, and self-realization.

4.2. *Big Judy*

PPPOd mounted *Big Judy*, another cabaret-style show at George Brown College in Toronto, Ontario on 23 and 24 March 2004.³ Arts curator Anna Camellari, working for the Mayworks Festival of Working People, invited PPPOd to develop and present this show for several Toronto venues, including George Brown College, York University, and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, the self-proclaimed largest and longest-running queer theatre in the world. A grant from the Canada Council for the Arts supported the show’s development and presentation. PPPOd members borrowed the title, *Big Judy*, from the name given to the “plus size” mannequins used for fashion design at the time. As a performance, *Big Judy* takes shape as a composite of the mostly white collective’s most translatable and dramatic coming-of-age experiences, and as a character, Big Judy comes alive as a singular fat girl whose life experiences the collective knits together from relatable or affecting autobiographical vignettes. The scenarios follow a chronological order of fat experiences, such as bullying in the schoolyard, fat shaming by a mother in a change room, visions of pop star fame, and dreams of fulfilling careers, friendships, and queer love affairs. The live performance consists of accumulative storytelling through soliloquies by each troupe member which are stitched together with choreographed dances using props such

as mannequins, skipping ropes, music, and slides. Kaleb Robertson choreographed the dances and co-shot the video documentation with Lukas Blakk.

4.3. *Double Double*

PPPOd originally performed the show *Double Double* at Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre on 9 November 2002, following this up with another performance at the MIX underground film festival in New York City on 23 November 2002 as part of the *Baby Got Back* fat film program. Christina Zeidler shot the video documentation.⁴ As we discuss the artifact's contents, Rice recalls attending the show when it was staged at Buddies Theatre, the archival video telescoping her back to being a spectator, whooping, whistling, laughing, clapping, and stamping in sync with the raucous crowd whose collective energy to dislodge and defeat fat hate seemed boundless on that riotous night. Dwelling in the affect-tinged recollection that still sends shivers down her spine, she realizes that this was one of the first shows to introduce her to the affective power of fat performance.

4.4. *NOLOSE*

The archive also contains video documentation⁵ of PPPOd and King Size performance troupe members as they journey to perform at the National Organization for Lesbians of Size Everywhere (NOLOSE). Originating as an organization exclusively for lesbians of size, NOLOSE had expanded into a community of fat queer and trans people seeking to end fat oppression when they invited PPPOd to perform at their semi-annual conference in Chery Hill, New Jersey from 7–11 July 2004. Archival documentation of the event includes unscripted footage of the road trip to NOLOSE punctuated by singing, dancing, eating, flirting, and crosstalk in the two-car queer convoy travelling from Toronto to New Jersey and back, with dance sequence rehearsals in gas stations and picnics at various pit stops along the way. The footage also captures the PPPOd NOLOSE live performance, which they titled *Slim Down Road Show*, with members Tracy Tidgwell, Allyson Mitchell, and Kaleb Robertson, as well as performances by King Size. Gigi Basanta documented the performance. The performance video stitches together choreographed dance pieces and lip sync performances and features a special collaborative tap dance number choreographed by Keith Cole and performed by PPPOd and King Size to Eminem's *Lose Yourself*. The video also contains footage of various conference events and moments of unscripted conversations, where a mic carrying PPPOd member cheekily interviews random conference attendees about their thoughts and impressions on PPPOd's and King Size's performances. The comments from the pumped-up attendees echo Rice's affective experiences of PPPOd performances: attendees not only delight in PPPOd's commitment to their craft, but they also revel in PPPOd's commitment to shattering the false and limiting assumptions about what a fat body can be and do. The footage ends with documentation of the road trip returning to Toronto, culminating in a picnic in a field off the highway as the sun sets and the travelers' snack, feed each other suggestively, mug for the camera, and hang out.

4.5. *Sudbury Super-Size Sunday Night*

Also part of the archive are audio recordings⁶ of PPPOd members processing their performance of *Sudbury Super-Size Sunday Night* at Thornloe University Theatre at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario on 30 November 2003; their workshop *Using Your Body to Make Social Change* for the *Myths and Mirrors* Youth Theatre Group also held in Sudbury on that date; and their invited guest lecture for an undergraduate Women's Studies course sponsored by Professor Suzanne Luhmann and the Department of Women's Studies at Laurentian on 1 December 2003. During the recording, the crew eats lunch with Dr. Luhmann and two students from the undergraduate class they spoke to. The guests and hosts discuss the PPPOd members' experiences of publicly performing to a lukewarm audience the night before and then presenting to a more warmed-up class of undergraduate students the next day. They banter about the food they eat and their experiences in the classroom and theatre.

This artifact is especially intriguing given that it is accompanied by two other objects: email exchanges between dissatisfied audience members and PPPOd after the performance.

5. Analysis

5.1. Fat Hatred

Rinaldi et al. (2020) argue that “fat hatred circulates as an affective economy . . . it flows across, attaches to, and comes to define or value different bodies” (37). While fat hatred is nefarious and omnipresent, it can be difficult to pinpoint or identify. In most documentation of PPPOd performances the audience is seemingly on board and supportive. Mitchell recalls audience responses ranging from loud applause and laughter in the right places to uproarious screaming and whooping. Rice remembers being in those audiences and participating in performances with wild abandon. However, Mitchell also recalls moments when audiences were not on side. Amongst rowdy crowds some attendees engaged in back talk and made snide remarks expressing distaste. Most frequently these moments happened when PPPOd performed for captive audiences in spaces such as classrooms, where attendees could not always choose to opt out without consequence. Mitchell describes how these audiences at times met PPPOd performances with confusion and discomfort that morphed into disgust and dismissal. She recalls one classroom performance of *Big Judy* that felt like the young people were thinking something along the lines of “what the fuck? This is stupid, this is gross, who are these old ladies?”

It is in the archive’s artifacts that the fat hatred circulating in PPPOd’s activism becomes especially clear. In the audio documentation of PPPOd members debriefing the *Sudbury Super-Size Sunday Night* event with the co-sponsoring professor and students, we hear performers and hosts wonder about the audience’s coldness, which seemed to form an invisible wall of sullenness in response to the performance. And, shortly after the performance, PPPOd members received emails from two disgruntled audience members. The critiques issued by both were that the dances were unprofessional, the performers failed to memorize their lines, and that they, as theatre patrons, did not “get” the message of the performance. One writes in their email that PPPOd’s performance was not “celebratory” or educational enough, stating, “I left [the performance] feeling like I witnessed a group telling us they are angry and there was no sense of closure . . . They are pissed off [and] just another activist group.” In agreement, the other critic writes, “To think that our tax dollars are funding this . . . It’s time to stop telling the story and get on with it, how long are you going to be angry and stay wrapped up in content?”

This negative feedback “landed with a thud” for PPPOd members, as Mariko Tamaki wrote in her response to one of the emails. When we, co-authors of this article, gathered years later to review the archival artifacts, we concluded that while correct in many senses, particularly when one considers the relational and reciprocal nature of the audience–performer dynamic—when a performance falls flat for an audience, it falls flat—much of this critique could still be attributed to fat hatred (and even activist disdain). We understand the feedback as surfacing affects constitutive (at least in part) of fat hatred (e.g., loathing, disgust, hostility, disdain, fear) woven throughout the dominant discourse about fat circulating at the time that still have a stronghold in normative culture, including discourses upholding hegemonic standards of health, productivity, ability, and desirability. When enough people with enough authority carrying enough of these affects come together, their force amasses and unleashes, taking the joy and pleasure out of PPPOd’s work. This entangled cognitive–affective response from audiences, rooted in fat fear and hatred, has a political function: to absorb PPPOd’s prefigurative political praxis—its enactment of livable fat life now and otherwise—back into the bounds of neoliberal self-responsibilization narratives, thus thinning out PPPOd’s thick potential. Rather than sitting with the affective–cognitive complexities of the performance, the spectators quoted above insist that PPPOd deliver a neat lesson on fat discrimination: they presume that there is a right way to identify and deconstruct fat discrimination (i.e., ignore it, get on with it) and to exist as a fat person—as a “good fatty” (Gibson 2022), a fat person who, despite not losing weight (or gaining and

losing it and gaining it again), dutifully subjects their body to food deprivation and other restrictive dictates in order to perform as a well-adjusted, self-accepting, “healthy” fat person, as someone who otherwise adheres to all possible social norms.

Our carnal reading of the PPPOd archival ephemera suggests that the visceral materiality of fat played, and in our intimate encounters with the objects, continues to play a significant role in mapping the circulation of affects in PPPOd’s performances. The PPPOd members put their fleshy bodies on display in ways that directly contradict popular messaging about how fat bodies should be seen, sensed, and known. This elicits constellations of both abjecting and desiring emotions, and a comingling of the two, creating an affective atmosphere that is perceptible in audiences and can tip in different directions, towards audience joy and pleasure, and/or discomfort with and resistance to PPPOd’s performances. These conflicted affective responses surface in the viewers’ e-mails where they hold PPPOd’s performers to the standards of professional actors and artists, and to conventional white middle-class notions of what constitutes well-staged storytelling (DeMars and Tait 2019); in doing so, the attendees dismiss the jarring affects and ideas stirred up by the performance rather than sit with the discomforting feelings it generates.

We understand the patrons’ discomforting affects as socio-politically produced in the confrontation between hegemonic expectations about what a “good” or “healthy” (fat) body is and fat people’s thick desires for something otherwise and yet-to-be, sensed in the PPPOd performers’ staging of their unresolved, resistant, pleasurable, and prideful embodiments and experiences. The critics, desiring closure, could not receive or accept the message sent by the visceral storywork—that the force of fat oppression, in discursively and viscerally casting unwanted bodies out of the body politic, far exceeds individual-level efforts to overcome or defeat it. This seems to shake up the two attendees enough to protest the radical space and generative possibilities for fat life that PPPOd puts on offer. Indeed, PPPOd strongly resisted the homogenized, hyper-individualized, and medicalized understandings of the good fatty, and the associated “it gets better” narratives (Berlant 2011) circulating at the time in favor of a queer politics of contradiction, anti-assimilation, and non-closure. Their performances centered less on celebrating fatness than on working through the intense emotions arising from difficult experiences at the nexus of fatness, queerness, and other axes of oppression. Rather than staging progress narratives about “overcoming” trauma or enacting a social justice vision of utopia, Mitchell describes how PPPOd used performance “to work through feeling bad most of the time”, drawing on dance, personal narrative, spoken word, visual props, singing, and storytelling to convey experiences of ambivalence, pain, and defiance. The performances staged experiences of shame, loathing, and anger, but also emphasized joy and pleasure in fat embodiment, and, ultimately, the political importance of holding complexity. PPPOd’s happiness was “happiness in alterity”—a happiness that did not deny or push away the harm caused by the imposition of a certain standard of the human body as part of a system of corporeal supremacy, but rather the joy, love, and desire that performers channeled, felt, and embodied when they loosed their smart, incisive, absurd critique carnally onto the sensory fields of spectators (Chandler and Rice 2013). We thus understand the two e-mail exchanges as representative of some audience members’ decisions to retreat from, rather than embrace, the potential of fat performance art and collective activism to “undo” us (i.e., our sense of ourselves, our culture’s normative standards). Jennifer Nash (2019), drawing on Judith Butler, theorizes this undoing as willful or intentional vulnerability, as “the experience of ‘coming up against’ the bodies of others, [the] practice of intimate proximity to others . . . [that] requires us to embrace the fact that we can be—and often are—‘undone’ by each other” an undoing that can take the form of “grief and mourning, desire and ecstasy, solidarity and empathy, and mutual regard”. Nash (2019) points to the possibilities and limits of counter-cultural world-making through the type of performance that we next discuss: performance-based worldmaking in spaces of alterity that asks the spectators to become actors who both receive and contribute to the affects that the performance sets in motion. If enough spectators and performers do not open up to their own undoing, the collective shuts down the potential to

experience alternative fat existences. It is “the decision to embrace rather than retreat from the possibility of our potential undoing” (Nash 2019) that enables liberatory politics and possibilities for social transformation.

5.2. World-Making

Despite having to contend with audience discomfort and hostility, for Mitchell this deflating reception also “reinforce[d] that we were doing what we needed to do.” The goal of public performance was not to elicit affirmative responses (though those were life-giving), rather it was to bust a seam to allow more breathing space for fat bodies. When PPPOd formed in the mid-to-late 1990s, prior to widespread internet availability, few people had access to alternative representations of fatness, so the work of changing representational fields and carving out a fat-desiring space in a bid to change fat peoples’ lives was a key group aim. Like the disability arts (Rice et al. 2017), fat-activist art finds power in taking back the spectacle-making of the fat body, taking hold of the spectacle, turning tropes of fatness on their head, setting prohibited or forbidden affects in motion (desire, love, joy), and keeping under question fat oppression (rather than the fat body) through subversively staging the absurdities, contradictions, problematics, and clashing world-senses in a play to open space for something new or otherwise. PPPOd saw their engagements as opportunities to intervene in local cultures and reach people situated wherein who were open to different ways of thinking and feeling, with an overarching aim to transform normative spaces into spaces of radical potential. Indeed, PPPOd’s performances took place, at times, in conservative spaces saturated with fat fear, shame, and distaste, including public health spaces, university-based, industry-driven fashion programs, and outpatient and inpatient eating disorder treatment centers. For Mitchell, the possibility that PPPOd performances might create a paradigm shift for those present made the riskiness of exposing herself to fat hatred in order to set in motion fat desire/pleasure to advance fat-affirmative politics worth it. For Rice, PPPOd’s dramatization of the contradictory affects swirling around fatness contributed to dislodging/displacing the affective edges of stereotyping which offered spectators new subject positions, and with these new ways of being fat and of being in the fat community. For Taylor, in the footage lie glimpses of alternative affective possibilities for fat bodies to those of (self-) loathing and isolation that she so often feels in the present; the performances make her feel hope, joy, and connection to a past and potential future legacy of radical fat embodiment.

Through our carnal engagements with the PPPOd fat archive, we found that in staging fat agency and desire, and in taking those energies to new places and people, PPPOd performances created occasions for world-making, for experimenting with previously unconsidered ways of being in a fat body as a prefigurative fat liberation politics. By staging the undiscovered possibilities of fat embodiment, PPPOd engaged and implicated the audience in micro-acts of worlding with an impassioned commitment to cultivating livable fat lives. Fat studies scholars such as Chalklin (2016a) and Hernandez (2020) demonstrate the world-making potential of fat performances using the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) notion of a queer utopia. Muñoz queers utopia to push against fantasies of the “future perfect”—the hegemonic vision of utopia that white masculinist philosophers have built based on the tenets of sameness, order, and reason, and that has depended on the elimination or assimilation of all bodies, individual and social, that exceed or transgress its hard-edged orderly bounds (Rice et al. 2017, p. 217). We understand PPPOd performers as intervening in this thinned-out utopia in order to thicken the narratives and affects of fatness and, by extension, to thicken spaces and futures for fat people, even if fleetingly, as part of a political commitment to fat queer liberation. We also take our conceptualization of world-making, in part, from the dance scholars Klein and Noeth (2011) who argue that the “world” is neither fixed nor given but in a constant process of creation, “made when actions and language bring forth [new] meanings”. World-making, they assert, does not refer to “one world”; rather, “different way[s] of worldmaking provoke different, interlocking worlds” (Klein and Noeth 2011, p. 8). In this account, performers

and audiences come together to make and re-make worlds over the span of a performance, joining in co-creating micro-worlds in which the participants and audiences want to live (Rice et al. 2022a). As Hernandez (2020) writes in her performance autoethnography of a fat women of color burlesque troupe, “the cowitnessing of fat flesh onstage makes it possible to be hopeful about a fat future in which [audiences] too can engage in a fat-liberating present/future” (109).

The world-making generated via PPPOd’s performances occurred through the coming together of many different forces and energies, human and nonhuman. For instance, the assemblage of music, lights, and other visual and sound elements woven into the performances sometimes worked in conjunction with the energy and exhilaration radiating from the PPPOd performers’ bodies to create a perceptual-affective wall of caring, loving resistance that shielded the troupe members from potential audience or off-stage hostility. At other times, audiences, opening to the affective, kinesthetic experiences that PPPOd members set in motion, also contributed to growing those affective experiences in ways that thickened the space for fatness, if only for the duration of the performance. For example, audience members felt the performers’ excitement and euphoria, and often began moving in their seats and wheelchairs, on makeshift dance floors, cracking jokes, telling vulnerable stories, and flouting bodies, and parts of bodies, that those present knew the wider world reviled. Rice recalls feeling the intensity of this euphoria, its bursts and exuberances, and how it dissipated over time. In moments of euphoria, she felt the affective wall that protected PPPOd from the harmful affects begin to dissolve as audience members warmed up, and the performers’ carnal energy would take over the space, bringing audiences into a sensuously fat bubble with them. There was a clear chemistry between performers and audiences, comprised of all the different elements of the performance, resulting in spurts and sprees of world-making.

Kinship played a central role in PPPOd’s artful world-making. Mitchell describes how the group met regularly to process their experiences of fat oppression and to reflect on the personal and political impacts of their performance activism. Whether on car rides back from performance venues, or in regular meetings, or at clothing swaps, PPPOd members centralized the sharing of space, feelings, and experiences as critical to their wellbeing and activist artistic practice. The kinship that members felt relates to the intimacy created when fat (or otherwise marginalized) people come together, find comfort and familiarity in sharing experiences of embodied being, and exchange stories of surviving in a world that imposes a supremacist body standard that utterly fails to welcome difference (Chandler and Rice 2013). This kinship can further forge what Mitchell calls a “protective critical mass” where “you create this atmosphere by moving together in your bubble of kin, protecting each other from taking those gazes in, sardonically, satirically, saying ‘fuck you’ to the fat despising world.” The affective kinship ties that PPPOd members enacted on stage did shut out some harmful hegemonic affects circulating around fatness during performances. Yet the group did not bond to each other or to audience members solely, or even primarily, through affect-laden experiences of injury and alienation. Desire figures prominently in PPPOd’s interactions with spectators and each other, as seen in the NOLOSE footage, which oozes with flirtatious energy and carnal cravings, and the “full-on fat crushes” that members felt for each other. From the up-close shots of members giving each other sexy and loving looks, to the micro movements of hands stroking faces or fixing hair, to the sensuous consumption of sweet, salty, sticky, and acidic foods, desire is free-floating. Everybody feels it: desire for each other’s fat, desire for queer bodies, desire for each other’s arm rolls, desire for food, desire for love, desire for care, desire for freedom.

Viewers can likewise access the worlds created by PPPOd’s performances via the archival footage. The recordings include group members walking through the back halls of venues like Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, spending time in dressing rooms, flirting, joking, planning, and pep talking. Other clips capture the group nervously exchanging energy in a classroom at Sheridan College before the students enter; they rehearse, joke around, flirt with each other and camera operators, and while the tech is being sorted,

they plan and plot in palpable excitement. In moments when the camera focuses on their performances you can hear the audience screaming, hooting, and clapping, and sometimes even drowning out the actual performance dialogue. Viewers of the video recordings may not have been present originally, but they gain entry into background moments, such as the preparatory moments before the members step on stage and moments when they come on stage that capture the intensity of the initial audience response. For instance, Taylor, not present at the live event, in watching this footage years later, feels an intense desire to have been in the bubble. As the performance euphoria envelops her, she feels a sense of carnal kinship with fat-activist histories, and pride in being fat. Taylor feels that it is impossible for her *not* to be infected and affected by the joy emanating from the screen, as she was transported via video from today to that moment in time. As Cooper (2016) writes of finding fat activist materials in an archive, for us, the PPPOd archive “put [us] in touch with past lives, people [we] knew vaguely, and past instances of [our] own activism . . . [we felt] part of something bigger than [ourselves], and this enabled [us] to think of . . . fat feminism and fat activism as entities that travel and shift over time and space” (as cited in Pratt 2018, p. 236).

Relatedly, Mitchell, in relaying how she had goosebumps just viewing and talking about the footage, and Rice, in reliving the spine-tingling moments of participating in a PPPOd performance, demonstrate how past moments can touch us in the present and future. Affects from those moments not only stick to the object, they also stay in the body: the body remembers and becomes an archive in and of itself. In this way, we can think about goosebumps or tingles as the body’s testimony, as testifying to its history and the history of other unwanted bodies, as testifying to what they know, what they carry, what they want. Goosebumps and tingles bring us back in time to those spaces and moments of queer fat world-making and re-ignite feelings of longing and hope in the present for alternative futures and worlds.

Ultimately, PPPOd’s performances facilitate an emotional intensity, both celebratory and anguish-infused, that encourages the release of pain and, with it, the possibility for catharsis amongst audiences. This “cocktail of contradictory and ambiguous affect in which joy, delight, excitement, misery, anger, and indignation [can] co-exist . . . is exactly where [fat performance art’s] queer potential lies” (Chalklin 2016a, p. 93). PPPOd’s performances thus liberate queer fat desires by dramatizing the systemic trauma that fat people experience and flipping it to create access to the desires denied to those same people: desires for connection, visibility, and (other ways of existing in) fat bodies.

5.3. *Feeling Bad*

Performing the undoing of fat hatred in front of live audiences had its repercussions for PPPOd members. Mitchell remembers needing to withdraw and retreat after the exhausting emotional and physical output of a performance. At other times, PPPOd members might have absorbed the negative feelings emanating from audiences or perhaps even projected those feelings onto audiences by, for example, automatically attributing an audience member’s lack of enthusiasm for the performance to fat disdain or hatred. For PPPOd members, as for audiences, fat activism could be scary; it took guts. PPPOd had to “feel” their way to understanding when, how, and with whom their performances produced the desired effects—creating social change by broadcasting their messaging to various groups of people and demonstrating alternate ways of embodying fatness.

Like the troupe members, supporters, allies, and audiences also experienced the affects of fear, anxiety, (self-)hatred, and exhaustion circulating around PPPOd’s performance activism. As an early active supporter of PPPOd, Rice recalls feeling intense anxiety in response to invitations from Mitchell to join PPPOd’s artful street activism (which involved approaching strangers to hand out DIY “queen-sized revolt” stickers or asking them provoking questions, such as, “Do you think I’m fat?”) when the group was first forming in the 1990s. From a working-class community where she was schooled in the respectability politics embraced by heteronormative families such as her own, Rice responded to the

invitation to join in PPPOd's boundary-crossing street activism with anxiety, fear, and even dread of the threat it posed to her aspirations to middle-class professionalism. In one conversation, Rice spoke candidly about how, at the time of the invitation, she was striving to embody the figure of the middle-class white professional, given that the dominant image of the professional reflected (and continues to reflect) a hard-edged "expert" mode of embodiment (Rice et al. *Forthcoming*). She "couldn't imagine doing a PPPOd demonstration because it was violating everything that I was trying to become". PPPOd's leaky and self-described embarrassing tactics posed a direct challenge to Rice's embodiment of professionalism and, more broadly, to white, middle-class notions of respectability (Lind 2020).

Archival objects carry these feelings through to the present moment. For example, Mitchell discloses feeling swells of shame and vulnerability in digitizing the archive, at once excited to preserve PPPOd materials so that future scholars and activists can engage with the work and fearful of the judgments that can come from opening access to the material—especially a collection of objects that no one foresaw would be frozen in a capsule to be accessed, slowed down, analyzed, and disseminated. Mitchell imagines that when activist-artists are debriefing a performance-intervention, they don't imagine (or at least she didn't) that one day, 20 years later, documentation of their performances and their preparation for and debriefs of these stagings would be digitized, shared in an open access library, and made available to the public, allowing for the kind of scrutiny which the original creators had never intended. The limitations and opacities of any movement's politics often only become clear in hindsight, leading Mitchell to experience "that feeling of shame attached to the thought that this is self-indulgent, this is a bunch of white middle-class women working through very 'first world' issues". Vulnerability and self-doubt re-insert themselves through her posing reflexive questions, such as: Does this work count? Did it make a difference? What kind of difference did it make? Did we waste our energy? As the co-authors listened, we began to pose other, more theoretical and methodological questions of activist-oriented art and the archive: How do you translate complex moments, thick with affect and ideas, into an inventory list in an archive? How do you measure/record/interpret/understand the affects and effects of an activist artistic intervention? For creators? For audiences? How do you quantify the impacts of PPPOd's and others' fat activist art? These questions reflect the deep anxieties and insecurities about the relevance, purpose, and effectiveness of fat art and activism, as well as an awareness of the forces of intersecting oppressions shaping fat embodiment and expression, including fat hate, classism, ableism, and racism.

Mitchell also worked through feelings of resistance to revisiting the PPPOd materials as they became digitized, knowing that revisiting objects might elicit strong and unpredictable emotions. She worried about feeling mournful, nostalgic, sad, and humiliated. One object might make her recall a beautiful moment of friendship, and another rip the rug out from under her. Mitchell watched the NOLOSE footage, for instance, with a heavy heart, feeling grief and remembering people, like beloved fat-community member Luscious, who traveled to NOLOSE with PPPOd members and later passed away. Like PPPOd's fat performance art, the PPPOd archive conjures complex, conflicting, and not always "positive" or "easy" feelings, gesturing towards the importance of taking seriously so-called "negative" affects such as fear, anxiety, fatigue, and grief in theorizing the meaning, potential, and impact of fat performance art and archives.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

In this analysis, we have highlighted the liberatory, life-affirming and life-giving potential of Pretty Porkey and Pissed Off's activism, and the affects its live performances set in motion, that, we have argued, remain attached to its archival artifacts. We hold strongly that interventions such as those staged and archived by PPPOd remain urgent and necessary in a world saturated with anti-fat affects and discourses (e.g., anti-fat science). However, we do not mean to suggest that PPPOd's activism constitutes the right, best, or only way to challenge the pervasive, insidious, and entrenched fat hate operating as a forceful agent

of corporal supremacy. In many ways, the PPPOd troupe members resemble “The Rad Fatty”, a figure described by Chalklin (2016b) as someone who “uncompromisingly rejects fat stigma from a position of critical knowingness usually gained through involvement in fat activism or an academic understanding of sizeism” (122). Chalklin stresses that to become “Rad Fatties”, performers and audiences need to gain access to and accept certain counter-cultural knowledge and practices and acquire the kind of (counter) cultural capital and the “psychological resilience” needed to embolden those involved “to face [the] destruction of norms without being ‘undone’” (Chalklin 2016b, p. 122). Indeed, reflecting on PPPOd’s activism, Mitchell feels that, in many ways, it was quite tame in its methods of direct action and had its limits, such that PPPOd could be considered fierce but certainly was not radical according to many definitions of the term. In fact, Mitchell suggests that the truly radical aspects of PPPOd’s activism may lie in its queer performance roots. Chalklin’s (2016b) analysis raises important questions about the audience, limits, and accessibility of PPPOd’s activism.

One critique of PPPOd’s performances and the affects circulating around them that we consider here is PPPOd’s limited engagement with the structures of racism and white supremacy as these intersected, and continue to intersect, with fat oppression. PPPOd organized their first street performances in the mid-to-late 1990s, a time when paradigm-shifting scholarship on the intersectional nature of oppression was first being published by Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Theoretical insights into the ways that fat oppression fuels anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism were largely missing from the scholarly literature in (white) feminist studies, critical race studies, (white) queer studies, and the related critical fields that were then emerging; and many white feminist scholars and white cis activists were only beginning to grapple with feminism’s power problem, its centering of privileged white women’s issues, and its failure to center the intersecting-equity concerns of multiple marginalized wholly-or-partially-identifying-as-woman subjects. In this climate, fat studies and fat activism materialized as predominantly white spaces centrally concerned with interrogating fat oppression, with social actors extending this analytic frame mainly when considering gender and sexuality and sometimes, ability and class (Friedman et al. 2019). Across the conventional disciplines and within the fields of health and education, fat-destroying discourses had gained a stranglehold over almost all the funded research on fatness throughout the period of PPPOd’s activism, intensifying and proliferating biomedical perspectives and thinning out and weakening social, political, and material inquiries into fat as a phenomenon (e.g., following the rise of the obesity epidemic discourse, see (Gard and Wright 2005)). This meant that knowledge-makers and -users fed into a hegemonic knowledge system that reproduced the epistemic ignorance about fatness by disfavoring knowledge claims about the oppression of fat people as an aggrieved group deserving of justice, and favoring the expertise that emphasized fat’s pathology and pressed for its elimination. In this climate, few white fat studies scholars or activists could think through how fat oppression might function to uphold white supremacy, or how the empirical research informed by white supremacist knowledge systems might code fatness as a carnal sign of (familial, psychological) dysfunction that required correction to meet the standards and values of white abled middle-class life. For all of these reasons, PPPOd members mostly did not stage embodied experiences of fatness as those experientially entangled with race and coloniality.

Additionally, we recognize that our analysis highlights the celebratory and joyful affects engendered by PPPOd’s activism; in fact, it was difficult for us to find negative or even lukewarm responses to PPPOd shows in the archived recordings of performances. The e-mails we discussed earlier evidence the existence of hurtful affects amongst audiences; and whilst our analysis could be critiqued for emphasizing the positive or for setting up an apparent binary between so-called “positive” and “negative” emotions that PPPOd performer–audience intra-actions set off, we also orient these as constellations of emotions or as affective atmospheres created by and through the specific dynamics of each audience–performer dance. We further suggest that the cognitive-affective ambiguity generated in

the liminal space between creators and perceivers is part of the experience of any cultural production, and this is especially true of live performance. However, we believe that PPPOd accomplished the cognitive-affective work of creating space for fat joy and desire (and counter discourses oriented to the vitality of fatness) precisely through staging fat hate in ways that poked holes in it, that viscerally challenged its very premises, and that through exposing and upending its illogic, created potent spaces for unleashing queer, feminist, and fat desires. In the recordings, applause, laughter, and hoots from enthusiastic audience members drown out any ambivalent responses. We three authors, those at NOLOSE featured in the recorded interviews, the audience responses captured in other video recordings, and the published scholarly analyses of PPPOd performances, all align insofar as each source experiences PPPOd's activism as intense, affect-infused, and highly energetic exchanges. Other than the examples given, discomfort in the audience responses to the messages that PPPOd created and disseminated through their street activism, media interviews, and performances, be these in the form of a grumbling theatre patron or an offended community member, is not glaringly obvious to us.

6. Conclusions

Touching and feeling Pretty Porky and Pissed Off's artful politics, embodied in past live performances and remembered through objects in an archive, reveals the power of affect in fat performance art and activism to move subjectivities and world senses. In our lingering over the objects and recordings examined in our collaborative performance auto/ethnography and thematic analysis, we have aimed to illuminate the significant role that affect plays in how PPPOd's fat performance art and activism created the conditions of possibility for the radical transformation of fat, both in meaning and materiality. Overall, we argue that PPPOd's performances, as live events and archival objects, elicit the constellation of affects constituting fat hatred and, simultaneously, disrupt and flip (or cast off) those affects by generating alternate feelings of hope, playfulness, pride, desire, love, and euphoria that contribute to ephemeral micro-worldings.

We hope that by centering others' and our own sensory and affect-laden experiences of fat bodies and counter-cultural activism we offer pathways for fat people to collectively hang onto, extend, and rework our histories spatially and temporally, making them legible and relevant both here and elsewhere, and now and into the future. For this article, we offer a snapshot of the responses from three different academics⁷, who have made different contributions to fat activism, working intensively at different times over the last four decades of the fat liberation movement in Canada, and engaging with fat studies from discrete methodological angles and theoretical vantage points. We orient to the field itself as a form of activism that seeks to transform a fat-debasing world. The effectiveness of our activism is difficult to assess. The metrics are unclear and depend on the hope and desire of those who continue the work with faith that their contribution will engage, inspire, shelter, and embolden successive generations.

As they engage with the PPPOd archive, we urge readers to consider the pleasures and trepidations of picking up an object, pressing play on a digital video file, or clicking on a photo; to become mindful of what that object is, what it might have meant to its creators, subjects, and stewards, and what it brings to and might mean for the current moment. We recognize that this beginning analysis can only "scratch the surface" of the experience of creating an archive for the *archived*—for groups or individuals whose work finds its way to an archive while they are still living and participating in the activities archived. So often an artist's or activist's work is archived after their death. The archives of living people allow for deeply subjective and feeling-infused narrations of the objects and recordings. This adds weight to social movement histories. Ultimately, the PPPOd archive provides an alternate history and legacy for fat people by capturing ephemeral moments of radical possibility and, consequently, it offers unique and important opportunities for *feeling* our way to other, more livable fat lives in the present and future.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.T., A.M. and C.R.; methodology, A.T., A.M. and C.R.; formal analysis, A.T. and C.R.; investigation, A.T., A.M. and C.R.; resources, A.M. and C.R.; data curation, A.T.; writing—original draft preparation, A.T., A.M. and C.R.; writing—review and editing, C.R., A.T. and A.M.; visualization, A.T., A.M. and C.R.; supervision, A.M. and C.R.; project administration, A.M. and C.R.; funding acquisition, C.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by SSHRC Partnership Grant *Bodies in Translation, Activist Art Technology and Access to Life* (BIT), a project of Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available at <https://revisioncentre.ca/performing-fat-liberation> using the password: performing (29 March 2023).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ These archival materials are available for viewing here: <https://revisioncentre.ca/performing-fat-liberation>. Password: performing (29 March 2023).
- ² This video documentation was created by the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Eating Disorders Coalition and a copy was shared with PPPOd. It was preserved in the personal archive of PPPOd co-founder Allyson Mitchell. This artifact is a VHS tape titled “Blubber Show—Raw Footage” (length: 1:54:55).
- ³ This documentation is provided on a mini DV tape titled “PPPO-BJ-Casaloma Campus—25 March 2004” (length 1:04:26) and includes footage of set-up, rehearsal, and banter before the show at George Brown College’s School of Labour and a question-and-answer period after the show. It was preserved in the personal archive of PPPOd co-founder Allyson Mitchell.
- ⁴ This artifact originated as a VHS tape titled “PPPO’d at Buddies—November 2002” (length 32:14). It was preserved in the personal archive of PPPOd co-founder Allyson Mitchell.
- ⁵ This artifact includes two separate mini DV tapes. The first tape is titled “No Lose 2004: Performance and Roadtrip” (length 1:03:32). The second tape is titled “No Lose 2004: Interviews and Picnic” (length 44:04). It was preserved in the personal archive of PPPOd co-founder Allyson Mitchell.
- ⁶ This artifact includes one audio cassette with recordings on both sides titled “PPPO’d Women’s Studies Sudbury Workshop/1 December 2003” (length: 47:55 side A and 46:28 side B). The audio cassette was preserved in the personal archive of PPPOd co-founder Allyson Mitchell and the emails were saved by PPPOd member Tracy Tidgwell.
- ⁷ Who, because of our research interests and political orientations and embodied experiences, are indeed the enabling audience for this activism and archive.

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