

**‘Marching boldly into self-abasement’:
Shame, Femininity and Sexual Self-Narration**

Building on Sandra Bartky’s suggestion, in *Femininity and Domination* (1990) that ‘it is in the act of being shamed and in the feeling ashamed that there is disclosed to women who they are and how they are faring within the domains they inhabit’,¹ this paper develops an account of shame as a structural feature of woman’s being in the world and a central regulatory tool in the production and policing of femininity and female sexuality. The particular question that inaugurates the paper, however, is what is altered in the experience of shame – and disclosure of self – when the ‘act of being shamed’ is instead an act of self-shaming or an embrace of a shamed position, and thus perhaps a route to pleasurable self-disclosure, even self-transformation. I therefore discuss the fraught erotics of shame and vulnerability in the autobiographical narration of a female desire that is too often viewed as ‘grotesque’ and ‘unspeakable’, but which also sometimes *elects* to occupy that position of (self-) humiliation, taking as my focus two contemporary American works of experimental life writing: Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (1997) and Dodie Bellamy’s *the buddhist* (2011).² In both texts the tension between self-abasement and self-advertisement announces the availability of shame as spectacle; yet both authors, I argue, productively connect whatever personal shame they may experience to the structural conditions that govern femininity, in part by situating their work within a longer history of feminist performance and body art. If, as Sally Munt remarks, ‘shame is a woman’,³ and if, as Elspeth Probyn suggests, ‘a form of shame always attends the writer’, what (more) is at stake in the autobiographical fashioning of female sexual subjectivity?⁴

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¹ Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (London: Routledge, 1990), p93

² Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* [1997] (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), p138

³ Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p2

⁴ Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p xvii