

The (dis)appearance of *Up Your Ass*: Valerie Solanas as abject revolutionary

Desiree' D. Rowe

University of South Carolina Upstate, Spartanburg, SC, USA

Through performative writing and using Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*, this piece explores how the archival and treatment of Valerie Solanas' 'lost' manuscript *Up Your Ass* marks her as an abject body. Further, this piece critiques the treatment of Solanas' works as typical of radical feminist activists.

Keywords: performative writing; Solanas; abject; Cixous; *écriture féminine*

Introduction

After I presented an early version of this paper at a national academic conference, a woman approached me. She¹ said that she had seen the very last performance of a work by Valerie Solanas – a performance I had just mentioned – at that moment I disliked her. My dislike was rooted in envy, to be sure. Envy of her experience of seeing *Up Your Ass* staged in a tiny theater space in New York City. Of being able to feel the pressure of Solanas' script. A script that was never again performed, but shoved in a dusty archive. This space, P.S. 122, is one I have been to a few times – but I never saw Valerie there.

My new friend saw the performance in 2001. Someone from the *Village Voice* must have been there too: 'What astonishes more is the ahead-of-its-time critique of gender roles and sexual mores embedded in the jollity,' she wrote, 'queer theory has nothing on the boundary-smashing glee of Solanas's dystopia, where the two-sex system is packed off to the junkyard' (Soloman 2001). My jealousy builds.

Valerie Solanas herself²

After that 2001 New York City performance, Valerie Solanas' writings were put away for good. Her performances and scripts disappeared. Why? The answer, unfortunately, lies not in Solanas' text, but in both the absence and inaccessibility of it. You see I would love to take you on a grand tour, in the fashion of a rhetorical analysis of Solanas' *Up Your Ass*. But, as you will soon discover – that text is lost.³

From the Cradle to the Boat, or The Big Suck, or Up From the Slime

Solanas' most popular work, *SCUM Manifesto* (2004), is not her only one. Solanas has two (lesser known – of course they are) other works. The next known surviving work of Solanas' is an article titled 'A Young Girl's Primer, or How to Attain the Leisure Class,' published in 1966 in the soft-core pornography magazine *Cavalier*. She couldn't get her work into mainstream publications so she went to porn magazines. Don't we read it for the articles?

The final piece, and the one I am most interested in, is her 1967 play *Up Your Ass: From the Cradle to the Boat, or The Big Suck, or Up From the Slime*. After Solanas had completed the performance piece, she directly approached Warhol about producing *Up Your Ass*. Warhol didn't care. He took it. Lost it. Didn't give a shit (Harding 2001). By the way, this was her only copy. She clickety-clack-clacked her way through this play and Warhol tossed it aside. Here's the thing: the play didn't suck. After it was rediscovered in 2001 (and performed. Remember? My new 'friend' had seen it) the response was strong.

But who cares?

The play was/is/can be good. But it is still lost.

Currently, the manuscript is in the archives of The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, PA. As part of Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, the Warhol Museum charges \$20 general admission. I paid the student price, \$10. *Up Your Ass* however, is in the archives. You need an appointment to get in there – it's no place for the common folk. The only published excerpt of *Up Your Ass* appears in James Harding's 2001 article, in which he reprints two of the 40 pages of text.

When I attempted to access the script I was informed that I needed to show documented proof of my affiliation with an institution of higher education. Further, the copy would cost me, according to an employee of the Archives Study Center at the Warhol Museum, at least \$80 for every hour it took archivists to retrieve and that didn't even include photocopying and postage. Further, I was instructed to wait 4–8 weeks to receive a response from the museum to confirm these details. After payment, they would send me a copy of Solanas' manuscript.

That struck me as complete bullshit.

That began the process of historical gatekeeping that I had to negotiate for the next two years.

I found it absurd that I had to provide such information, considering Solanas' own position on higher education and relationship to Warhol. She was the woman who attempted to take his life, something the archivists never tired of reminding me in my contact with the Museum. Solanas also wrote in her manifesto of her disdain for higher education because of her own experiences at the University of Minnesota, believing it was men that had control over knowledge and doled it out to women only when they had earned favor with the men in charge. Knowing this and requesting those letters left me feeling a bit sad. Had so much changed since 1968?

On 7 June 2006, I received my copy of *Up Your Ass*. The museum had photocopied (presumably) the original manuscript, which included Solanas' own scribbles and editorial marks. It is an amazing document. What I would ordinarily do is detail the finer points of the piece, quoting Solanas' acerbic writing style and marking the destruction of gender binaries and the hilarity of satirical performativity. I can't. There are only two copies of *Up Your Ass*. Mary Harron found one via Billy Name, one of Warhol's closest associates. Name gave the script to Harron who then (allegedly) passed it on to Solanas' sister. The second copy is the one I found, and cannot be reproduced or quoted from without seeking 'permission to quote . . . from the author, if known' (Warhol Museum Invoice). The Museum was not going to give permission to me, and I sure could not call Valerie up and ask, so I was stuck.⁴ So I took a trip to Pittsburg.

A pilgrimage to Pittsburg

It is sad to me, really, that when I visited the Warhol Museum Archives, a manila folder filled with photocopies of photocopies and originals were plopped in front me.

(I didn't even need to wear white gloves when touching the documents. No one told me to. That says something doesn't it?)

This manila folder, heavy only with the symbolic representation of a little-known life represented as copies of newspaper articles and scraps of paper, was the most information I had ever seen about Solanas in one place. Before I opened that folder I was breathless.

I could romanticize it for you, as if her fragments were swept up by the wind like dandelion seeds, but we both know that is not what happens to radical activist women. Solanas was ripped into little pieces and hidden away, and it remains difficult to pluck even the smallest bit of information about her from the confines of archives.

That is why, when I told the archivist at the museum that I was thinking about coming back for a second day he laughed:

Why would I?

There was nothing else to see.

There was just that one folder.

There is no collection devoted to this radical feminist; and this is no accident. There are only fragments because no one cares enough to preserve them – to make space in a public conversation about women like Solanas. Radical women. Solanas' work is not accepted in traditional feminist histories, offering it no stable home and perpetuating fragmentation. The Duke University's online collection of archives from the Women's Liberation movement, considered to be the foremost archives of the time, dismisses her in a footnote: 'While Solanas is not generally considered to be part of the Women's Liberation Movement, her SCUM (Society to Cut Up Men) Manifesto, written in 1967, is an example of

extreme radical feminist theory' (Special Collections Library, Duke University, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/>). Duke's unwillingness to house Solanas' materials perpetuates the fragmentation of her story.

Alright here it is: how does the inaccessibility and absence of Solanas' manuscript and papers demonstrate an effective silencing of radical female voices?

We must ask H el ene Cixous.

 criture f eminine

H el ene Cixous would rather not be known as a cultural theorist. Cixous' method of writing is one of interconnectedness, reaching through and between not only her own writings, but the work of her contemporaries as well. She is described as a 'Talmudist of reality' in the way 'that the Talmudist would read the same little scene, or dialogue with a capacity for interpretation which is many, many fold' (in Blyth and Sellers 2004, 106). Cixous' method of fluid interpretation and her emphasis on the interconnectedness of texts and contexts is perfect for my purposes.

Cixous gets it – the invisibility, the inaccessibility.

 criture feminine, or feminine (women's), writes Cixous, is 'the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.' Writing can be subversive to the degree that it allows women to free themselves from the 'self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism' that is characteristic of the 'history of reason' (Cixous 1976, 879). Writing, for Cixous, offers a place of solace from the continued violence that occurs against the bodies of women.

Read this:

Sometimes I think I began writing in order to make room for the wandering question that haunts my soul and hacks and saws at my body; to give it a place and time; to turn its sharp edge away from my flesh; to give, seek, touch, call, bring into the world a new being who won't restrain me, who won't drive me away, won't perish from very narrowness. (Coming to Writing 7)

Now read it again:

Sometimes I think I began writing in order to make room for the wandering question that haunts my soul and hacks and saws at my body; to give it a place and time; to turn its sharp edge away from my flesh; to give, seek, touch, call, bring into the world a new being who won't restrain me, who won't drive me away, won't perish from very narrowness. (Coming to Writing 7)

Women are forced from their bodies.

For Cixous, the recovery of the female body is vital for * criture feminine*. Women must write to recover from the damage done to their bodies to 'wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics . . . they must submerge, cut through' (Cixous 1976, 886). Cixous values interconnectedness between texts.

For Cixous (and many other French feminists, including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig) to overcome the oppression of masculinist

hegemony, women must seek *jouissance*, or ‘the direct reexperience of the physical pleasure of infancy and later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father’ (Jones 1981, 248).

Change the way we write.

Write outside the box.

(Quick aside – are you getting tired of all these citations? I am.
But I’m also afraid to not include them.

I am experiencing a both/and disconnect. I am attempting to embody Cixous’ style of women’s writing AND show my legitimacy as a scholar. I’m nervous you won’t accept me if I don’t put these other people in here. Now we know.)

The second way in which women’s writing rejects masculinist logocentrism is through a changing of the structure of language itself. Creative non-fiction? Performative writing?

For Cixous, *écriture féminine* acts as a destabilizing force in texts, where the ‘introduction of instability is radical and creative.’ This force acts like a ‘computer virus that infects and rewrites . . . the governing code/ discourse of patriarchy’ (Blythe and Sellers 2004, 34). The language in which women write holds the potentiality not only to free their individual bodies from the confines of masculinist discourse, but to create a ripple-effect on the system of discourse itself.

‘I am afraid I may die of silence. Is there a risk? Yes. Without the person who is not afraid to publish me, would I be published?’ (Cixous 1993, 214)

During my phone conversation with an employee of the Study Archives Center at The Warhol Museum, I began to feel a sense of dread. As he began to describe, through a thin veil of sarcasm, each progressive hoop that I would have to jump through to even read Solanas’ manuscript, my mind wandered.

I needed to visualize the woman whose script was being kept under lock and key in (from what I can imagine) a dusty room. Valerie was an extraordinarily intelligent woman, who ‘runs with the best of them’ – Derrida, Freud, Butler, Deleuze (all dudes) – ‘picking off crucial themes associated with phallogocentrism’ (Ronnell 2004, 8). She had quit her work as a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota to pursue other, more revolutionary endeavors (Ronnell 2004, 11). Though often portrayed as a madwoman, she fought without being subsumed by the consumer capitalist culture surrounding you. I guess Valerie paid for her lack of reverence, because she died ‘homeless and destitute’ in San Francisco in 1988 (Ronnell 2004, 31). With that gloomy thought I quickly turned back to my conversation with the man in Pittsburgh. When I learn that I need to provide proof of my affiliation with a university in order to gain access to the manuscript, I laugh, knowing Valerie would be pissed.

She would be pissed because it is impossible for Solanas' writing of *Up Your Ass* to be seen as a form of solace, that Solanas' text *Up Your Ass* has been treated as abject, just as feminine writing has always been, and that Solanas' attempt at linguistic rupture, through the lens of Cixous, has failed. How?

Through a closer look at the implications of the context surrounding the chronology of the disappearance of *Up Your Ass*, I (we) can come to a better understanding of not only why I felt such dread that moment on the phone, but why the inaccessibility of *Up Your Ass* has far reaching ramifications.

Implications

Cixous believes that writing is what can save women from a body-as-text death within a culture that does not see them. Cixous writes to 'touch with letters, with lips, with breath, to caress with the tongue, to lick with the soul, to taste the blood of the beloved body, of life in its remoteness; to saturate the distance with desire; in order to keep it from reading you' (1991, 4). Solanas wrote *Up Your Ass* as more of a revolution than a contribution to a Norton Anthology.

Solanas wanted her writing to be read and embodied, not disappear in a Warholian lighting trunk. In her exploration of Solanas as a radical feminist Dana Heller likens the disappearance of *Up Your Ass* as akin to the erasure of the 'memory' of Solanas herself: 'Seemingly unreproducible, Solanas' memory, writings, and image had all simply vanished, as ephemeral as print itself' (Heller 2001, 171). In the losing of Solanas' performance text, Warhol perpetuated the same scene that Cixous describes, where every woman who attempts to write for a larger public fears:

'I am afraid. As a free writer? Worse still: a woman. Yes, I am afraid: afraid of solitude, of hatred and rejection, afraid of being 'horribly burnt'' (Cixous 1993, 214).

Solanas, through the rejection of her script (and the subsequent loss) was 'horribly burnt.' The rejection and fragmentation of Solanas' text is a rejection of Solanas. A rejection of her body. And, to take it all one more step – a rejection of her body-as-text.

Valerie Solanas entered the University of Maryland in 1954, where she was an open lesbian who 'put herself through school by working as a prostitute' (Heller 2001). Pursuing a degree in psychology, Solanas was using her body as a tool to engage in endeavors of the mind. This theme reappears in nearly all her (known) texts, when she focuses on the abject processes of the body. The scatological reference in the title *Up Your Ass* and the excremental reference SCUM (which she does not separate with the required periods) push us to think of the body as a real place. A place for

Shit.

Blood.

All of her works come from this abject place. This base site.

She is reaffirming the value of the abject, or the connection between body and mind.

She is in the muck – creating a shitstorm.

A consideration of scum, or the waste product of a waste product, as a powerful mobilizing force of women is not overlooked by Solanas. She attempts to turn what is abject into that which is valued.

Her work, however, has become abject itself. And here is where Cixous steps in.

Cixous formulates women's writing as abject because it must happen in secret. When writing is not secret 'it wasn't good, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or,' and watch out here, because Cixous brings it back to the body for us, 'because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret' (1976, 877). Women write in secret. And those secrets are shameful.

Solanas' work is secret. Hidden. Disgraceful. She must be punished. She didn't care about the singular moment of pleasure. She wanted more.

Her work was focused on a greater structural rupture of the linguistic system that had so entrapped her. As an individual Solanas worked diligently so that her voice would be heard – Solanas was fighting/writing for a revolution.

For Solanas, the power was in writing the revolution. When Solanas approached Warhol to produce *Up Your Ass*, Warhol responded, 'Did you type this yourself? I'm so impressed.' Warhol deadpans. 'You should come type for us, Valerie'' (Heller 2001, 174). She was met with laughter and sarcasm. Cixous envisions this moment of rejection: 'A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language that which speaks in the masculine' (1976, 880–1). As a rejected abject body, Valerie never experiences the ideal experience of *écriture féminine*, for her gift was never received but, rather, it was (figuratively and literally) lost.

The Warhol Museum still has the script. And isn't showing it to anyone.

As it establishes requirements for viewing (membership with an accredited institution of higher education) and imposes costly research fees (at least \$80 an hour for 'research costs') the Warhol Museum reifies the denial of Solanas' writing. In effect, the body of the text (body-text) is cloistered in the house of the one whom rejected it.

The manuscript remains, undistributed, unread, and unrecognized in Pittsburgh.

Up Your Ass might not be a 40-page revolution, but it still should be accessible to the general public. By keeping the work hidden, by locking it up, the Andy Warhol Museum continues to categorize Solanas' work as the text of a madwoman. Solanas' will never be able to experience Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Yet it might still be possible to bring make this open to the public. My analysis of Solanas' script has shown that the rhetoric of the text itself is not all there is. Context matters too and is just as important. Through the lens of Cixous,

women's writing becomes more valuable. Held up to Cixous's ideals, Solanas becomes a valuable contributor to women's work. Hopefully, one day, others will also acknowledge that value. We must. For me, for Cixous, for us. For writing.

Notes

1. I don't remember her name anymore. I feel awful about this. You will know why by the end of the paper. You see the tendencies are in all of us – the pushing out and away.
2. This would be the place where a responsible editor/reviewer/reader/critic would tell me to insert some biographical information about Valerie Solanas. But I'm going to be honest with you. I'm really tired of it. I'm tired of reiterating (Rowe 2011; Rowe and Chavez 2011) a life story of someone you should already know. Do you need someone to tell you who Warhol is? Nope. Everyone knows him. Do some work yourself – maybe you will remember longer.
3. Not lost as in no one knows where it is but lost as in we can not reach it. I see it – yet it is out of my grasp. I move forward and so does the text. We are never meant to be seen in public ... together.
4. I never received an answer as to why Harding's (2001) piece was allowed to reproduce two pages of *Up Your Ass*. I did, however, find it ironic.

Notes on contributor

Desiree Rowe (Ph.D. Arizona State University, 2009) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of South Carolina Upstate in the Department of Fine Arts and Communication Studies. Her research interests include feminist performances of activism and performative writing and her work has appeared in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*.

References

- Blyth, I., and S. Sellers. 2004. *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Cixous, H. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1 (4): 875–893.
- Cixous, H. 1991. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, edited by Deborah Johnson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cixous, H. 1993. "We Who Are Free, Are We Free?" Translated by Chris Miller. *Critical Inquiry* 19: 201–219.
- Harding, J. M. 2001. "The Simplest Surrealist Act: Valerie Solanas and the (Re)Assertion of Avant-Garde Priorities." *The Drama Review* 45: 142–162.
- Heller, D. 2001. "Shooting Solanas: Radical Feminist History and the Technology of Failure." *Feminist Studies* 27 (1): 167–191.
- Jones, A. R. 1981. "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*." *Feminist Studies* 7: 247–263.
- Ronnell, A. 2004. "The Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas. Introduction." In *SCUM Manifesto*, edited by Valerie Solanas, 1–31. New York: Verso.
- Rowe, D. D. 2011. "I Should Have Done Target Practice." Valerie Solanas and Performative Writing." *Qualitative Inquiry* 17 (2): 1–4.
- Rowe, D. D., and K. R. Chavéz. 2011. "Valerie Solanas and the Queer Performativity of Madness." *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 11 (3): 274–284.
- Solanas, V. 2004. *SCUM Manifesto*. New York: Verso.