

Sapphic Erotica in Pole Dance: Manipulating the Phallus

Rowena Gander

Abstract: *From the perspective of a lesbian creator and performer, who has worked professionally in pole dance for ten years, I reflect on my acclaimed solo show, Barely Visible (2021), to highlight how my process of metamorphosing the symbolic and metaphorical phallus has allowed me to stand firm in my lesbian sexuality on stage. The text emphasises the empowering and erotic potential of a woman in charge and how expression of sexuality emerged, not because of stylised feminine aesthetic, but by the creative actions I took as a gay woman.*

The first thing you should know about me is that before I became a performance artist / academic / lecturer in dance, I was an erotic dancer (between the ages of 18-21, 2008-2011). I worked at several strip clubs across the UK, and some abroad. Now, a history of stripping would not ordinarily be the first thing I would tell a stranger about myself, but the weight of my autobiography has significant meaning towards my thinking as an artist and choreographer, and how, over the past ten years (2014-2024) I have approached working with the pole in innovative, creative and bold ways.

It was my first performance with the pole, *Does This Pole Make Me Look Straight* (2014), which I performed for my undergraduate degree in dance practices, that encouraged me to see the experimental potential of the pole, particularly regarding how it allowed me to express myself as a woman. Through analysis of my work, I have found much evidence of how I have been pushing back at my historically partial subordination, and how the actions I am now taking with the pole differ from the actions I took then at the strip club. Over time I have formed a personal resistance against a stylized feminine aesthetic, giving particular attention to the realisation that, instead of just being looked at as an object by men, and restricting my movement only to a sexual aesthetic, I can now speak to audiences with and through my body, and, in doing so, I can raise my voice as a woman. However, as evidenced in the humorous and sarcastic title of my first work above, the subjects I continue to speak about are relative to my sexuality and agency, which can be complicated because my work has always, in some way, linked back to a theme of sex. This leads me to the second thing you should know about me - I am a lesbian. From here forward, when I refer to lesbian, I explicitly mean "a woman who desires and/or wants to be desired by another woman" (Wang, 2014, p.61) whether that is in an erotic, emotional or physical manner.

By remembering comments from my more naïve engagement with the pole at strip clubs, such as 'you can dance on my pole' and 'there is no way you are a lesbian if you can do that',

I acknowledge that, on the surface, a lesbian dancing with a pole, can be a recipe for male attention because of the pole's obvious phallic structure. So, each work I have made, I carefully and deliberately tried to find new ways to address and manipulate the pole, and to explore how I could bring a new meaning and intention to it -- meaning and intention that goes beyond the pole's stigmatic connotations. I mostly achieved this through countless hours of physical improvisation, manoeuvring the pole, and my body around and with it, exhausting as many options as possible. The results of my countless experiments led me to a series of full length works where I split the pole in half, I used it as a ballet bar to hang my body off, I signalled it as a weight on my shoulders, I hung it from a ceiling, I played catch with it, and I used it as a washing line.

In many ways, my work, made initially through the lens of an experimental choreographer, was rejecting the position of the pole in strip clubs, and saying, there is so much more possibility when dancing with this object. However, when I made *Barely Visible* (2021), a work based on common issues that lesbians face, where I felt confident enough to layer my artistic lens with my lesbianism, I saw clearly the anthropomorphic value of the pole as a man, and was audacious enough to use this to my advantage in my process, which, as I will uncover, blends themes of fetishism, castration, and object manipulation.

What my reflective analysis of *Barely Visible* will uncover is that, whilst there are few traditionally erotic connotations made with the pole via a sexual and stylised aesthetic, there are many erotic implications related to my choreographic actions as a gay woman and how I give meaning to the pole through the lens of my sapphic sexuality.



Figure 1

Barely Visible is an empowering physical solo performance that brings focus to common issues that lesbian women face, including sexualisation, objectification and (fe)male gaze. It incorporates the use of a 100 kilo pole and is semi-autobiographical in its content, meaning it combines and weaves my own experiences with those of other lesbian women.

Funded by Arts Council England, the work has toured nationally for four years (2021, - 2024), and has received much critical acclaim. It has engaged a vast number of lesbian audiences in pre/post-show conversations and workshops on topics of power and sexuality. It has also been at the centre of my discourse at numerous academic conferences.

Before breaking down my lesbian coded way of working with the pole, of which I briefly outlined in the introduction, I offer a journal entry, that I have repetitively used to prepare for performance since I made the work in 2021. This short text, which has been edited to better align to the focus this paper, succinctly narrates *Barley Visible* from start to finish and is shared to give you a sense of my interaction with the pole.

The x pole lite stage is tipped sideways. I hide behind it, in the shadows, like a lot of gay women do in their day to day lives.

After playing with my visibility, offering brief visuals of the extremities of my body, I emerge from behind it, only to be electrocuted to the voice of Margaret Thatcher in her section 28 speech “children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay”.

My body convulses as though it is stuck to an electrocution device.

I detach and I use my strength to dynamically move the weight of the pole and its base around the stage, I see it as the weight of sexuality that I must carry and hold, as my body weaves through, over, with and around it.

My actions turn the pole into a machine gun, a telescope, a seat, and a massive strap on, of which I have a moment of enjoyment playing with the audience (as if I am “free” to do so).

The base of the pole is now a backdrop to my performance in a TV show “Bury Your Gays”, which highlights the top ten lesbian deaths on TV in the past 50 years. I physically act out each death, the half pole becomes a knife, a guillotine, a piece of wood, a prison, and a windmill.

The derogatory and persistent voices that are featured in the work “dyke”, “dirty lesbian”, “make a dirty work”, hit me hard and my body reacts as though they are physically moving me.

The comments push me to cover my face in fake dirt, construct the pole to its 3-meter length, and to climb to the top of it, shouting “is this fucking dirty enough?” – I then proceed to effortlessly manipulate my body around the pole as I tell the audience

about awkward situations that I have repeatedly faced as a gay woman and how some situations make lesbians feel “dirty”.

I move closer to the audience as I converse with them, and in doing so, I take time away from the pole, though it is still visible in the background. I play with the difficulties of femininity and the resistance some gay women feel with it, particularly when femininity signals a “readiness” for male attention or to “fit” into heteronormative standards of living - lipstick lesbian being a key example. I get drunk in a bar to handle the situational femininity and readiness for attention.

Back to the pole. It stands still as I try to dance to a purposely distorted version of Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” (2008) until, again, I become frustrated by the queer baiting aspect of the song, and the female voices “I’m not into women, but, I’d let you fuck me” and “my boyfriend doesn’t care if I have sex with a women.. I just want to try you on”. Like earlier, I see the pole as the baggage I carry with me as a gay woman, and I drag the 100-kilo pole across the stage.

I find peace in dancing with a red dress, as though it is a woman (recognising the gendered signals of a dress, like the gendered signal of the pole), and in doing so, the pole slowly begins to take on a new meaning. It becomes a source of male surveillance on my romantic enjoyment with women – my slow and soft movement with the dress is juxtaposed with steps that move sharply away from the poles dominant and erect position in space.

The male and female societal voices begin again, asking me personal questions about sex. “How do you know you are a lesbian, if you haven’t had sex with a man?” is the last question I hear before the pole changes fully establishes its meaning as a metaphorical man. It stands true to its phallic symbolism, allowing me to tell the story of a time I reluctantly had sex with a man “just to make sure” – as many gay women have done.

I slowly climb the pole with visible hesitation, and I make gestures with my hands to show my internal dialogue of “what the fuck am I doing?” I hold numerous uncompromising and challenging positions on the pole, like I am frozen, and not enjoying what is happening, whilst the persistent dialogue continues “it makes me so hard to think of you having sex with a woman” and “don’t you just miss having a big strong man?” Considering I know how strong I am now, in comparison to the memory of the event this segment of the work refers to, that comment is the tipping point and is the one that reminds me that, no, I do not need a strong man for anything, especially not sex. As I recover my strength as a woman, I silence the voices by sourcing the right tools (Allen keys that I used earlier to construct the pole) detaching the length of the pole (or castrating the man) from its base.

I take the castrated pole to the audience, and I proceed to give them a mansplained tutorial about the pole and how they too, can deconstruct it -- “Ok, so, for those

of you who don't quite understand what's going on right now, I think I am going to break it down for you. This is a pole, it is about 3 meters in length, 20 kilos in weight, and it is covered with a black silicone coat. Now, who wants to touch it? [...] I then split the pole into two much smaller pieces. And now that I have got these much smaller tools to play with, I think I am going to have some fun"

Once I have fully signalled to the audience how the pole was used as a symbolic phallus, I proceed to parade and dance around the stage to the song "Short Dick Man" (1994) and in this dance, my choreographic actions metamorphosise the pole from crutch, microphone, barbell, hoover, majorette stick, aeroplane, ladder, and I lay it out on the floor and use it to frame a jumping game.

When I leave the pole and enter its base, where the pole used to reside, I pull the Allen key out of my pocket, and I swing it around in circles near my vulva -- the last time I make phallic suggestion. I then remove the dirt and lipstick covered jeans and put the red dress on and in doing so, the castrated object is no longer dominant in the space. My body replaces it.

I wear the dress, not as a token of femininity, but as though the red dress is a woman, and my wearing it means she is wrapped around my body. I stand in my sexuality with confidence, self-assurance, and strength, and I shut down the voices one last time.

As shown in the pre-performance text above that I use as a tool to evoke the essence of the original work for consistency in my performance, the pole takes on many meanings throughout the work and how I physically operate the pole has given me a framework to re-position, re-frame and to take charge of the pole, and give it new meaning, in a way that aligns with my sexuality. The meanings produced in the work, which I will now reflect on and analyse, are contextually situated, and concern a myriad of themes including the anthropomorphic object in relation to fetishism / castration, lesbian interaction with dildos (due to the obvious phallic connection), and object manipulation. Based on the number of times I have performed the work, I also offer brief insight into the reception of *Barely Visible* and how audiences have received my actions, and how I feel being watched by them.



Figure 2 *Anthropomorphic Object / Fetishising the Pole*

Given the subtitle of this text and how I “manipulate the phallus”, it is important to unveil the theoretical motivation behind my attention to this manipulation and how theory, however dated, has influenced my artistic choices. I have already noted the anthropomorphic value of the pole -- how I framed it with human characteristics and how, at times, I saw the pole as a metaphorical man. However, the framing of the pole as a man caused a ripple effect in my research which delved into fetishism and castration, which then led me to think about lesbian interaction with dildos. I knew that if I was parading around the stage with a pole that was split into “two much smaller pieces”, I had to have clear motivation to do so. As a gay woman, I also had to have a strong argument prepared as to why I continue to dance with a phallic object, an object that is directly linked to the male gaze and has the potential to fetishise my female body, even though I do not desire men or their gaze.

Sigmund Freud’s essay on *Fetishism* (1928) provided some answers to my questions, as well as giving me ample motivation to split the pole in to two. Fetishism, here, relates to an object that can elicit power over a person, either sexually or spiritually. Freud believed that a fetish was “a substitute for the woman’s (mothers’) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego” (p.161). He poses the little boy as having the expectation that everyone has a penis, but when the boy finds out that women do not have a penis, he sees the woman as living with a body that is missing something. He then fears that his penis might be at risk of castration, so, to protect it and to settle some of the anxiety, the man adds something (a fetishized object that is not exclusive to phallic representation) to the female body. The fetish acts as an aversion to the vagina, which allows repressed castration anxiety to stay hidden for the male. What I found interesting was that rarely did a fetishist approach Freud to gain treatment about fetishist

interests, instead they would usually revel in delight that they had found such compensation to make up for lack in the female form. According to Dant (1996) any object can generate fetishism, but an object such as a high-heeled shoe becomes fetishized through its appearance because of its shape and extension it gives to the body. For instance, the shoe might represent a phallus, and if the shoe is worn by a woman, it fills the void of her “castration”.

Given the historical use of the pole in strip clubs, like high heels, I saw the pole as an object that could also generate fetishism and fully understood why women dancing around it causes such arousal in men. However, rather than seeing myself as lacking something and attempting to ease a male onlooker’s anxiety about my “lack”, as I had done in those naïve dancing days, I looked at the pole and decided to “castrate” it. I pondered how if the “penis” (pole) was gone, which I completed through a simple deconstruction of the pole, using Allen keys and strength, then I would no longer have to deal with male surveillance on my lesbian sexuality, nor would I see myself as inferior to men. In *Barely Visible* there was a significant build to this moment that forcefully highlighted male commentary on lesbian sexuality -- ‘don’t you just miss dick though?’, ‘can I watch / join in?’ and ‘can you even call it sex if there isn’t a dick involved?’ The comments persisted until the moment I detached the length of the pole from the base. It became silent and obvious that I did not require ‘a big strong man’ for anything, especially not sex.

Whilst I was confident in my actions of deconstruction and attaching subjective meaning to the pole, as I did in many of my previous works, I was still questioning why a lesbian would be dancing around the stage with a phallic object and thought that I might as well be dancing around the stage with a massive dildo or strap-on. I knew my own relationship with sex toys, and that of my lesbian friends, because we talk about it, but what was the academic dialogue on lesbians and dildos? According to Madraga et al., (2018) the dildo for lesbians can be a useful but optional object. It can be a norm for a lesbian woman, or it can be supplementary in the act of sex between women. The dildo’s aesthetic, size, colour, and other visual characteristics depend on taste. The use varies and is also subject to preference. Furthermore, the meaning of the dildo is fluid, depending on how it is viewed, approached, and used. The appearance of some dildos can be ‘life like’ in that they were modelled to resemble a penis. However, most lesbians would reject this style and opt for a dildo that is less realistic (they come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colours, textures). What is evident in my academic reading, and in conversations with friends, is the ‘you do you’ mentality that is common amongst lesbians and how they do not have to feature in lesbian relationships. Given the evident construction, deconstruction and manipulation of the pole in my work, I see a similar ‘you do you’ mentality that adds to my choices and agency as a creator, and I also see the pole, like the dildo, as holding, “as much agency as the person who manipulates it” (Minge and Zimmerman 2009, p. 345) and I convey that the pole’s meaning is contextually determined by my lesbian coded thinking.



Figure 3 *Object Manipulation*

In the introduction and in the offering of my pre-performance text, I have given many examples on how I manipulate the pole to give it new meaning, and in doing so, I repetitively change the meaning of the pole for myself. When I see the pole as “just a metal pole” as Samantha Holland so aptly expressed in her book, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment* (2010, p. 178), then I can approach the pole in an almost childlike state, exploring it creatively, from a position of curiosity that is far removed from sex. I can simply ask what is possible – how long can I hold a certain position, what would this look like higher / lower on the pole, what happens if I fall against it, or fall without it / with it, how can I lift it, go under it, above it, around it, how long could I hold on with one hand, if it is possible to pull it, can I push it, roll it, move it, drop it?

As I write this, I see how important it was that I gave myself permission to play with the pole as ‘just an object’ without being attached to the cultural or aesthetic baggage it carries. My unapologetic and uncensored play with the pole, seeing it as, for example, a microphone, a prison, a set of skis, a washing line, or a climbing frame, allowed me to make an acclaimed work about sexuality, and not sex. The difference between the two, is that sexuality refers to the total expression of who I am, which is much more nuanced and complex than sex and the pleasure I gain from intercourse with women. To reiterate an earlier example, to dance with the pole in a ‘sexy’ way, to arouse and please the viewer, and thus relate it to eroticism and sex, can be restricted to a sexual aesthetic and is limiting for me as a creator and as a woman. However, when I consider the depths of my lesbian sexuality and how multilayered it is in relation to society’s doubts and judgements, and how exploited I have felt because I am a gay woman, I see that I have been able to take on board sexualities’ complexity with the pole because I had an arsenal of additional meanings and uses for it in my back pocket. I see my motivation to manipulate the pole in the way I have, as well as simultaneously rejecting and embracing the phallic nature of it, as a subverted and empowering way of fetishising the pole. I thus fully agree with researchers (Apter, 1991; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011) that fetishism is a form of magical thinking and how when an object comes into the hands of a consumer, it no longer has a universal status (or meaning) because its position changes depending on the subjective position of the buyer. When

the pole came into my hands as a lesbian woman, who has been on a mission to explore my sexuality and subjectivity through my work, I continually use the pole to elicit empowerment and agency and to defiantly reject my own objectification and raise the volume on my voice as a woman. Fetishism, then, or object manipulation, exemplified by the way I use objects in my work, presents as “an ever-shifting form of specular mimesis, an ambiguous state that demystifies and falsifies at the same time, or that reveals its own techniques of masquerade while putting into doubt any fixed referent” (Apter, 1991, p.14). I manipulate the object to increase my mental and physical power over it, and when my actions are read and received by audiences in a way that I intended, it causes them to feel stronger, and seen and heard too.



Figure 4 *Audience and Performer Connection*

The themes in this text referred to so far have all come from the making and performing of *Barely Visible*, a solo show, which was received by 19 different audiences across the UK. 80% of those performances were followed by a post-show Q&A or an online survey where the spectator could share their experiences with me in more detail.

I drew many themes from audience commentary on the work, such as the impact of lesbian representation on stage, what it felt like for them to be seen and validated in such a visceral and visual way, as well as vast amounts of gratuitous comments stating a sense of kinaesthetic empowerment from watching my vulnerability turn into strength, but the data I share here shines a light on the empowering and erotic potential of a woman in charge and how it was not an overtly sexualised aesthetic that caused expression of sexuality in *Barely Visible*, but it was the creative actions I chose to take as a gay woman. Specifically, I share brief comments that exemplify how my choices regarding the anthropomorphic and fetishised value of the object, as well as my audacity to manipulate it, were received by viewers.

“Rowena is power in her sexuality! This performance was limitless.”

“I have never seen a woman take control in the way that she did. I don’t know, the way she played with the pole and took charge. Truly empowering. And sexy.”

“Even though she was vulnerable, she was always in control of the thing that seemingly caused her vulnerability. I admire the contrast and I wish I could be that strong”.

“The performer held the space in a strong and sexy way. The sexiness was not attached to the pole or pole dance culture in any way. She owned herself through her creativity!!!”

During the last performance of *Barely Visible* at The Lowry in Manchester, I was asked by an audience member, who had seen the work four times, how the work had developed since the first show. I told her that the content and choreography, as well as the text and sound, was all the same, but that the way I delivered the work was bolder, more intentional, and became more meaningful with each performance. It became more profound because my connections with gay women in the audience were more validating every time I performed the work. Additionally, each time I danced under the gaze of a lesbian audience, I felt more secure in my lesbianism and there was, for me, an eroticism to being looked at as I literally took charge of my sexuality on stage. I liked being the centre of visual attention of an appreciative dyke audience, having them experience my power, strength, vulnerability and control. I found moments of pleasure when women told me they were turned on by my ability to command the space and how I could use my body to express something they haven’t yet been able to fully express for themselves.

I acknowledge that my audience was not always female and lesbian, but that did not matter to me, because I knew the work was educational and that it had the power to make me feel seen, without being consumed. I also knew from experience that as a gay woman I am always ready to deal with the male gaze because I do not desire it.

Throughout this text, I have offered an in-depth reflection on *Barely Visible*, a one-woman production that fetishises and manipulates a 100-kilo pole to express key elements of lesbian sexuality, including sexualisation, objectification and identity. By looking at my lesbian coded creative process, framing it with magical (Apters, 1991) and sexual (Freud, 1928) aspects of fetishism, I have detailed how and why I reject and metamorphosise the symbolic and metaphorical phallus, as well as conveying what such a process feels like for me as the creator. Whilst I present an eroticism in my thinking, I acknowledge the eroticism of my actions with the pole do not subscribe to a traditional and stylised sexual aesthetic that would be arousing for an audience. Instead, the eroticism, for me, and for the audience, derives from object manipulation, where I not only present the pole as a metaphorical man, but also as an objectified penis, a strap on, a dildo, and as something I can take or leave, make smaller / larger, or to simply just use as a toy that I can play with for my own enjoyment. To my knowledge there are no papers discoursing or describing lesbian sexuality in relation to pole dance and choreographic process. Thus, this text builds on existing knowledge of improvisation, pole dance, and lesbian sexuality in dance. I would like to see more work in pole dance that embraces the sexuality of the performer, without it having to align to a specific technical aesthetic.



Figure 5 Conclusion

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