[The Famous] Lauren Barri Holstein wrote a speech about disgust and other difficult feelings on stage as a strategy for political residence. An excerpt of the talk is published on the Kamgnegel-KOSMOS, with kind admission by [The Famous] Lauren Barri Holstein.
The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein

My work, both artistic and academic, employs strategies and subjectivities that resist pop/commodity culture’s distribution of affirmation, and the celebration of the coherent, successful, capable subject through the use of difficult feelings as political resistance.

Difficult feelings, for me, can be a strategic mode that resists the normativizing power of ‘happiness’. My work proposes a reading of the feminist subject that does not rely on affirmative or positive affects, such as self-esteem, pleasure, choice, or freedom – affects that have generally been celebrated and normalized by post-feminism. By disengaging with these affects or concepts understood by dominant culture as ‘feminist’, and re-focusing on negativity, mess, and failure, my work proposes alternative modes of embodiment, display, and agency for the contemporary feminist subject. My work aims to find a feminist agency that derives from the liminal body, the messy body, and its tendencies towards humiliation, awkwardness, difficulty, failure, and ambiguity – and, as I’ll touch on today, disgust or repulsion.

Notorious is my most recent piece of work. –just finished the tour a couple of weeks ago, so I haven’t yet fully processed the work and the work that it does. But it very deliberately deals with repulsion, and so I will try to explore some of that in words, in a kind of new, exploratory way.

Notorious is about witches, bitches, whores and sluts, and the mechanisms that seem to require their punishment/redemption. Notorious interrogates female monstrosity, the figure of the witch, its relation to the contemporary figure of the whore, and the cultural tendency to punish, vilify or redeem that figure. There is often a cultural attempt to seek the whore’s phantasmatic innocence, unmasking her as a helpless victim, in order to redeem her, but also to mitigate the threat she might pose. Equally, there is a tendency to vilify that figure, exposing her of her unsavoury ways, and, historically, condemning her to death. Whether through redemption or punishment, her agency is stripped, reducing her to the powerless figure misogynist culture requires her to be. This is particularly relevant in a contemporary cultural setting, in which popular culture, social media, and neoliberal consumerism have significantly
redefined the ways in which we relate to the female body, the concept of ‘the real me’, and public shaming.

One of the starting points for this show was the way in which female artists are often pathologized. It is much easier to see a woman as a victim, as crazy, as tragic, than it is to accept her in all her complexity. My research into artists like Lynn Hershman Leeson and others demonstrated the ways in which we culturally seek a singularized, easily essentialized, female subject – and once a woman betrays that singularity, she needs to be redeemed. Notorious explores the complexity of expectations, and the value itself, of a ‘difficult’ woman, on stage, for an audience.

Notorious and disgust:

Witch dance:

I am both the thing you desire and the thing that you fear. I am exactly what you expect of me and exactly its opposite. I am the repulsive witch, whore, just fucking going for it, and I am also trying to give you what I think you want. Twerking witch-style to Miley Cyrus’ ‘We Can’t Stop’. This bitch has no shame. She is an exhibitionist, she is filthy, she is horny, and a fucking beast. Humping spitting sucking drooling masticating masturbating tangled hair in teeth, between butt cheeks, hairy candy, sticky hairy humping breathing. Doing what Miley wants me to do. Just not the way she imagines it. Masturbating horrendously and reveling in the pleasure of just being a disgusting bitch. A gummy snake head hangs from my vagina and I hump pump twerk it out, only to re-ingest it. The snakes come out of my vagina, out of my hair, and go back in my mouth, to be chewed, ripped apart, enjoyed, and spat out. Spat back out at you. You who are here to witness this crazy bitch. Drool, spit, hump.

The eyeball:

I am Medusa-Mata Hari. Octopus splayed on my head like a pile of dead snakes. I stand, bejeweled, on a platform with a camera under me. The video closes in on my vagina. A green eye appears from between my labia-lids. This eye pulls you in and turns you away, simultaneously. It sees you seeing it, and it cannot blink. It stares back relentlessly,
awkwardly. It is uncanny – unreal and yet all too real as my flesh around it, wet and sticky and dark, reminds you. I then take that vagina monster and put it in my mouth – another dark wet hole, into which it disappears momentarily. It reappears, again, uninvited, in mushy bits, spilling out of my mouth in yellowish chunks of monstrousness.

The Octopus and Medusa:

The octopus tentacles slither around my face, my mouth, my tongue. It slides down my face, my shoulder, my breast, my belly. I dance with it – it is a part of me and also my lover and also therefore alien and other. It is a dead being. It is horrific and lovely. You enjoy its repulsiveness and also want to protect it, as I begin to abuse it. You love it and you hate it and you hate me. I destroy this once living creature, this symbol of my whoredom, and I also revel in its stickiness. It stays on me. Its smell fills the room. The death of the sea fills your nostrils. Its destruction is at once seductive and cathartic and revolting. You watch its tentacles rip from its body as it is flung around by me. The monster destroying the monster, loving the monster, dancing with the monster. Its whole body is then torn in half and handed over to my sisters- I am strung up, swung, and whipped, by my own flesh, by these tentacles that once belonged to me. And it feels fucking great.

Purge:

I hang upside down, legs spread. I have been reborn. As a sexy baby. I’ve been changing. For you. I know you came to see some slutty bitch. Some high class art. Some redemptive harpy. Some virgin birth. Some miraculous recovery of a whore. Some hanging of a witch. I’m trying to give you what you wanted. Or expected. Of me. So here I am. Exorcising myself. For you. I insert a large-ish tube slowly into my vagina, flip, and eject my green slime, my superbly artificial witchy innards. I repeat and repeat, flip back and forward, ejecting, erupting. And then it begins to change. And I am pouring out change. Money. From my hooahaa. What is the value of this anyway? You are appalled by my flesh, my repetitive insertions, until I play Miley Cyrus’ ‘Wrecking Ball’, and now you can enjoy yourself, revel in your repulsion, be pleased with my pleasing you.

I have to pee now:
You know what’s coming. I strap myself up again in to the aerial rig. My ritual pile of red popping candy is poured into place, its sugary dust like fumes of smoke, filling the air with its sickly sweet smell. I place my feet on my sisters’ shoulders. My urine is both familiar and alienating, in this context of pretence. It is a fountain, veering to the left. The popping candy begins to sing like fire. I come down, lie in my bodily mess, and ‘die’. Sometimes I lick it, turning my tongue into sticky wet flames. We are dead now. Dead sexy virgins. Just like you asked for.

I repeatedly ingest and regurgitate my monstrousness. I invite it and repel it, just as I invite and repel you, the audience. You are brought in, you empathize, only to be repulsed, pushed back, and alienated once more. Your place here, like my own monstrousness, is complex. You desire and resist my monstrousness, and it – I – need and yet despise you. You are complicit in this witch hanging, in this rejection of the repulsive one, the other one, the unhappy one. Or you are repulsed by my implication of your collusion. You want out.

But my desire to push you away, to repel you, is a political act – I do hope I have destroyed your happiness, the pleasure of this theatrical space, the pleasure of watching a woman in this space. I hope I have disgusted you – not just because I am disgusting, unappealing, angry, and difficult to fetishize – but because I have disrupted your relationship to this body on stage, this witch, whore, baby, virgin. I hope I’ve made you so nauseous with this movement back and forth – this push and pull, this invitation and rejection, between your empathy and your exasperation, between your pleasure and your rage, your misery and your desire, your laughter and your boredom – that you vomit out your feelings all over the fucking floor, only to eat them all up again and relish in your own mess.