

## **She Is So Lucky: Allyson Mitchell on Cindy Baker**

Cindy Baker's performance work is a dream come true to fat activists and feminist cultural theorists (two things that I, myself, am). In public settings, she makes people look at, interact with and consider the fat feminized body in ways that are surprising and often confrontational. Her work in this field has ranged from strolls down busy city streets in gigantic clear cubes (*Plexiglass Box*, 2001-2005), to pattern making and costume design in unexpected social contexts (*Fashion Plate*, 2005) to her most recent intervention, *Personal Appearance* (2008) for which Baker dons a professional mascot costume of herself.

Similar to other amusement park and sports team characters, Cindy's mascot for *Personal Appearance* is cuddly, goofy and supposedly approachable. In fact, it looks unnervingly like Baker, right down to her signature multiple mini pig tails and sexy, vintage librarian glasses.

Baker is super sized and so is her mascot. The mascot is to me the penultimate gesture in performativity (the term coined by Judith Butler to describe the ways in which gender and other identities are enacted through the repetition of social scripts). It is understood that women, fat women, should and do perform their bodies in particular ways. There are expectations and obligations in terms of dress, decorum and movement. Think about the amount of space that a fat body takes up on a bus seat for example as opposed to the amount of space that a thin body does. Women are expected to shrink, take up as little space as possible, and look pretty.

*Personal Appearance* turns the theory of performativity inside out by making it hyper visible. It is a "dragging" of the "self". Functionally, *Personal Appearance* allows Baker to fulfill the demands of being present, showing up, accounted for, while simultaneously letting the artist off the hook - happily absent, protected, cocooned. It works like an external articulation of "going to my safe place". Rather than escaping through a secret hatch in her mind, Baker insists on bringing the body with her - keeping it visible and present. With *Personal Appearance*, Baker is creating her biggest spectacle yet. Like a master of disguise, she encourages gawking while protecting herself from that gaze.

**Allyson Mitchell** is a maximalist artist who mixes pop culture lesbian aesthetics to materialize feminist theory - resulting in room size vagina dentata's and giant lady sasquatches. She is based in Toronto Canada.