



Women in London, U.K., held a Muff March in December 2011 to protest the rise in “designer vagina” surgery such as labiaplasty. (Photo: Gail Oreinstein-Demotix)

Viva la Vulva

BY
ERICA
LENTI

The mirror has long been touted as a feminist symbol of liberation. For some women, it is a means of understanding identity, a path to empowerment, a vehicle for harnessing sexual awareness.

As early as the 16th century, women began using mirrors to examine their vulvas. German paintings from the likes of Hans Baldung Grien depict women, stark naked, with mirrors between their legs. In demonstrations of strength, feminists of the 1960s revived the practice to familiarize themselves with their bodies. To literally reflect on the genitals—a distinguishing physicality—was to reclaim the feminist’s objectified body.

For Jessica Green, the mirror was a source of shame. Reflected before her was an image she describes as an “ugly vagina,” a vulva with elongated inner lips stretching beyond the flush

of her outer skin. Brought forth were memories of former distress—an early boyfriend’s audible disgust before oral sex (“Eugh!”), sexual encounters masked with alcohol to cope with a lack of sexual confidence.

On June 13, 2012, the reflection changed. In just a matter of hours, Green (not her real name), a 25-year-old British nurse, underwent labiaplasty, a procedure that reduces the size of the labia minora, or inner lips of the vulva. For women like Green, labiaplasty is a solution to an image they want to correct. The vulva is no longer simply a private part; it is analyzed, scrutinized and judged in every crevice of the media. And, as the desire for a “designer vagina”—small, tight and pink—grows, labiaplasty is quickly becoming the new facelift.

Noted sexologist Betty Dodson says, “We have the power in

In Japan, annual vagina festivals celebrate a variety of types of vulvas, especially the coveted “butterfly” lips.

our genitals to do anything we want.” If she is right, Green’s vulva may be no more than that of a manufactured power, a reflection of her fabricated self.

Green didn’t tell anyone except her then boyfriend about the labiaplasty. She felt guilty for being unable to reconcile her feminist beliefs with the fact that she hated the way her genitals looked.

“I was not strong enough by myself to say, this is my vagina and I’m okay with it,” she explained.

Green is not alone. In a survey conducted by Medicaid Financial, more than 70 percent of Canadians said they would consider surgery to correct a part of their bodies they do not like, including their genitals. Indeed, more than 300,000 Canadians, mostly women, went under the knife to receive cosmetic enhancements in 2003 alone. In the U.K., the number of labiaplasties performed by the National Health Service (NHS) increased by 70 per cent in 2008. In Canada, the procedure is not typically covered by provincial health care. Ontario and British Columbia are exceptions and labiaplasty is covered in cases of medical necessity—if an elongated labia, for instance, causes discomfort or pain.

Procedures to perform cosmetic “corrective” surgery on malformed labia popped up as early as the 1980s. The first medical journal article on esthetic labiaplasty was written by American physician D.J. Hodgkinson in 1984, followed by documentation of major innovations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In recent years, the phenomenon has spread throughout the West; a quick Google search of “labia” yields thousands of results on how to “fix” or “rejuvenate” the vulva.

“Women are getting more eager to talk about labiaplasty,” says Sean Rice, a Toronto plastic surgeon specializing in labiaplasty. “They’ll read an article about it or someone will talk to them about it and it will spark their interest.”

At Rice’s plastic surgery clinic, about 10 labiaplasties are performed per month.

The procedure is often done in conjunction with other cosmetic surgeries, like liposuction and tummy tucks. Labiaplasty costs about \$5,000 and requires four to six weeks of healing time.

For Green, Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) covered the cost of her procedure. When performed by a gynecologist, labiaplasty is covered if a woman’s labia are beyond five centimetres in length. Only after three appeals to the NHS was Green’s surgery covered.

Just what a designer vagina looks like?

The second floor of the Stag Shop on Toronto’s Yonge Street, like most sex shops in the area, is what some might call

a vagina paradise: Hanging from floor to ceiling are boxes of masturbation sleeves, moulded from CyberSkin to look and feel like the inner walls of a vagina. Many of these fake vaginas purport to be modelled after those of porn stars. The moulded vulvas are all tight, mostly pink. Their labia look infantile, if not completely invisible—as if they were snatched off the body of a Barbie doll. They parallel Green’s desired vulva.

In mainstream pornography, a similar trend follows: the women depicted are usually shaven smooth, with inner lips flush to their outer skin. In her 2002 article “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” in *Feminist Studies*, author Simone Weil Davis notes that there are no imperfections in porn labia, nor are there unsymmetrical, elongated or “discoloured” labia. “In the posh setting, it comes as no surprise that the star’s labia are small and her ‘pussy is perfectly composed, with every hair in place,” she wrote.

In 2010, Australian porn magazine editors admitted to Photoshopping women’s labia so as to make them appear seamless, less graphic. These editors are paid to perform digital labiaplasty to create what has become expected of a woman’s body.

In the reflection of sex toys and porn, the “Barbie” has become commonplace. But in reality, the commonality of the picturesque vulva is a farce. A study conducted by gynecologist Robert Latou Dickinson reported that, of the 2,200 of women he examined, two thirds had a “protrusion of the labia minor through the labia majora.”

In other words, women like Green are actually normal as part of the majority.

The obsession with “tidied” vaginas is largely a Western phenomenon, Davis says. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, women pull their inner labia beginning at puberty as an aid to pleasure both the woman and her husband. And in Japan, annual vagina festivals celebrate a variety of types of vulvas, especially the coveted “butterfly” lips.

While the continued projection of idealized vulvas pressures women to hate their genitals, the battle for a new reflection has begun. At the Triennale Design Museum in Milan, Italy, hangs another wall of vaginas. Spanning nine metres in length, the installation is far bigger than any wall of wank toys in a sex shop. Modelled after ordinary women—from mothers, to identical twins, to transgendered men—the 400 plaster pussies stand proudly against the white walls of the gallery.

No one vulva looks the same as its neighbour. Some are small, tucked away; others tout long lips, hair, piercings. Aptly named the *Great Wall of Vagina*, the installation is U.K.-based artist Jamie McCartney’s sex-positive claim to fame.

“I didn’t want to be part of a society that was encouraging



Jamie McCartney's *The Great Wall of Vagina* exhibit celebrates the physiological diversity of the vulva in all its varietal splendour. Shown above, the exhibit on display in Brighton, U.K., in 2011.

women to cut off parts of their body that give them pleasure," McCartney says. "And [I realized] I had the tools, the skill and the epiphany that casting could change lives."

Though McCartney does not identify as a feminist ("If even I, as a fairly aware renaissance man, is guilty of stupidity and prejudice from time to time, then how can I call myself a feminist?" he asks), he is part of a larger political movement by women to reclaim the word cunt, and to cheer on the type of reflection that caused Green to cringe.

Internationally, feminists are calling for a greater appreciation of their nether regions. In parts of London and Southampton,

more than 300 women, congregated under the guise of U.K. Feminista, organized Muff Marches against cosmetic surgeons' designer vaginas in 2011. In her New York apartment, Betty Dodson hosts "vagina workshops" where women play show and tell with their privates, compliment one another, and end on a high note with a group masturbation session. In Canada, Caitlin Roberts of *tobeaslut.com* has pioneered increasingly popular body pride parties, where attendees converse in the nude. And online, vulva-positive blogs have begun to crop up at every corner of Tumblr, displaying thousands of variations of vulvas.

Even some pornography, according to Kate Bornstein, a sex journalist for *Sex Toys Canada*, is moving towards a sex-positive direction.

"There is a greater awareness and push for feminist porn," she says. "People want to see a wider variety of body types in the indie [porn] industry."

For McCartney, the installation was a means of celebrating women's bodies and the parts that are too often scrutinized.

"It was not about being a man working with women," he says. "It was about being a human, with all the frailties and anxieties that are common to both sexes."

McCartney's *Great Wall* is a mere reflection of reality; it is a reminder of variation, of difference. It is a reflection that is perhaps far too often overlooked by women dissatisfied with their vulvas. ❀

Labiaplasty: One Woman's Story BY ERICA LENTI

It is a sunny spring day in Nottinghamshire, England, a county roughly 200 kilometres north of London, where Jessica Green will undergo her labiaplasty. The weather is almost optimistic, like Green herself: The rain has held off for the morning, and she is anxious to get the procedure over with.

She packed a bag: a toothbrush, a pair of slippers, a gossip magazine or two. It is midday, but the waiting bay is full of women seeking cosmetic surgery of one kind or another.

Within a few hours, Green is hooked up to an intravenous drip, given a local anesthetic and wheeled off to another bay. A nurse administers an oxygen mask and a relaxant into her IV, and within minutes, she is unconscious.

The procedure takes less than an hour. Using a scalpel, Green's surgeon trims along the edge of her inner labia, removing skin to create a lip that is almost flush with the vulva's outer skin. This surgical technique is called the trim method, and it is one of two methods of labiaplasty. The other, the wedge method, involves removing a triangular pie-shaped portion of the labia minora, to which a surgeon later sutures the remaining skin together to create a smaller inner lip.

Green is wheeled to the recovery bay, where she wakes within the hour. Her vulva is stitched up, slightly bleeding and swollen. It is gruelling and painful. The first day or two involve heavy icing to soothe the swelling and bruising.

A week after her surgery, Green's vulva had healed enough for her to resume her daily activities. Some stitches have dissolved, and, though still slightly peeking out from her labia majora, her inner lips are significantly smaller. She admits the cuts are a little jagged, untidy. Still, she says she is content.

"I can't even describe how happy I am," she says.

After a few months, Green resumed sexual activity. Physically, she says, sex is no different, although she enjoys it more because she feels more relaxed. She feels proud of the way her vulva looks and is more comfortable engaging in casual sex. While the judgmental voices in her mind have disappeared, she still has some lingering anxiety about the appearance of her labia.

For now, her physical healing process reassures her, but she knows the emotional healing will take much longer. ❀