

# exeunt



FEATURES

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## Where are the voices exploring working class experiences?

*"There's a huge culture of people from working class backgrounds feeling inadequate within the arts." Catherine Hoffman explains how shame keeps people powerless, and how her performance as 'Stench Wench' comes clean about class.*

CATHERINE HOFFMANN



Lifting the lid on a rat cooking in hot chocolate, breastfeeding it, sticking it in my grey austerity pants, cooking and burning food, talking and eating with my mouth full, scratching furiously and scrabbling about – these are all

visceral, abject attempts to humiliate myself. I make myself blush, straining to make my face go red whilst trying to spit out words but can't. In my performance, I show myself naked, expose family material, betray my mother – washing my dirty laundry in public. All the things I should feel ashamed of, but instead I illuminate these actions to relinquish them.

I have spent my life trying to fit in, covering up, aspiring to be middle class – ashamed of growing up poor, or of economically struggling as an artist. Even my father and grandmother tried to distance themselves from their working class roots so they could become 'socially mobile' but struggled. My gran's dream for me was always to get a proper job and marry someone from the BBC.

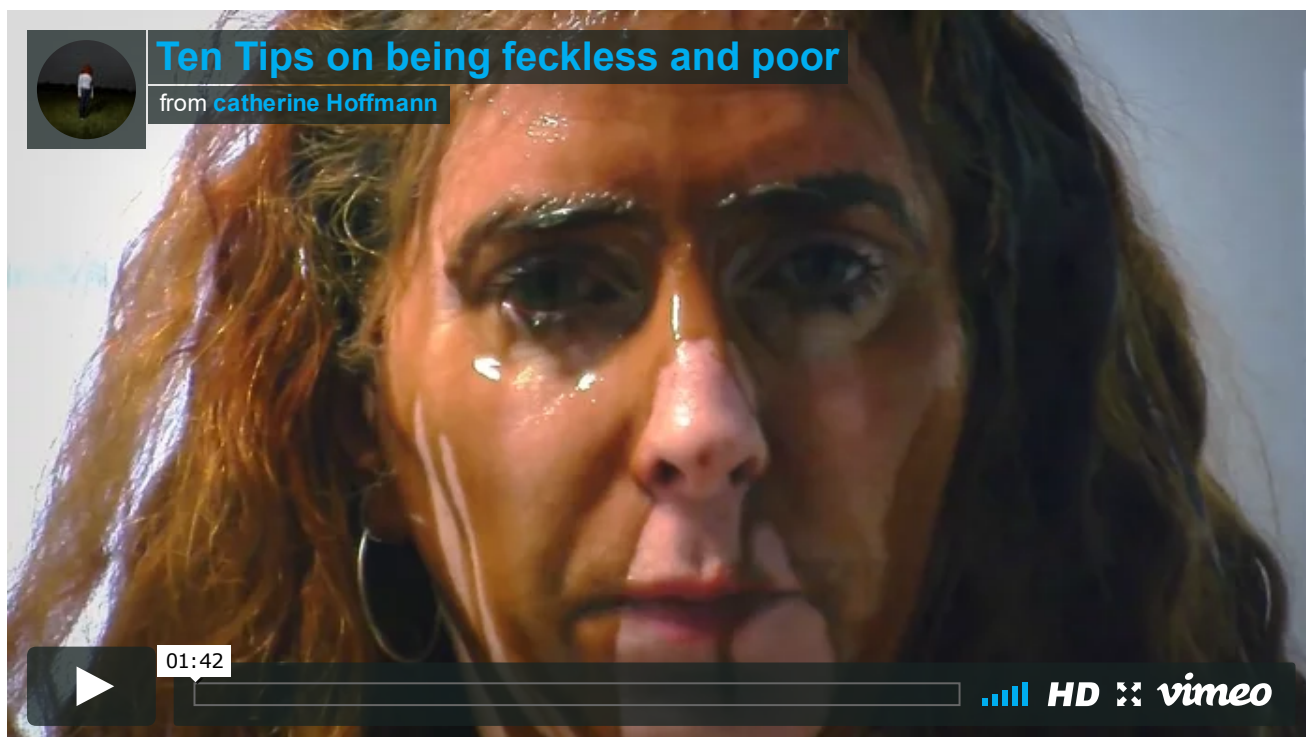
## ADVERTISEMENT



But what about just celebrating who we are right now? What is this stupid class thing anyway? Where are the voices which explore these experiences? There is still a huge culture of those from working class backgrounds of feeling inadequate within the arts. It took me a long time to understand this, to unpick it, to

recognise that I was in the minority. Other people's natural ease and confidence wasn't because they were any better than me, but because they were following their own codes and language. They had the resources to survive. In my early years I was constantly trying to be like them, but failing.

I wrote 'Ten tips on being feckless and poor whilst pretending not to be' as an act of dissent, a way of showing again this process of conforming to this idealised image of how to be. Although not used directly for the show they were a helpful structure and drive for the work.



I started to making the show in 2015 after rats, fleas and pigeons descended upon me in my flat at different times throughout the year, bringing with them not only intense emotional reactions but also a gift of new material I couldn't ignore. When Laura from Munich packed her bags in the middle of the night ravaged by fleas, I knew that the shame this brought up couldn't be ignored. These were familiar feelings from the past – of not measuring up, being discovered and feeling dirty. I knew I had to go into this difficult terrain and bring these pests kicking and screaming into the light.

I wanted to make a piece where I would expose myself pushing towards the grotesque even, so that I could defiantly say – Here I am, after years of hiding. Time to come clean – I am the Stenchwench. It is OK to be without anything, to be poor, to say no I am not going to shrink anymore and neither should anyone else. Time to uncover. There are loads of us out there and by presenting the work I am hoping more voices can come out, there can be a rallying and a sharing of experiences. The device of shame in relation to class and economics in the UK is the most pervasive device to keep millions of people feeling small and powerless and its getting worse.

For the preview of the show at Toynbee studios in June 2016 I was interviewed by various people for radio and press and each time a conversation opened up about what they also hid from people – a single



mother on benefits, a working class family with a heroin addicted brother who didn't get invited to their wedding, or just weird clothes they were made to wear to school. Every occasion brought out a personal experience of shame.

When a Guardian interview came out last year a couple of members of my family reacted badly to it and weren't too pleased that my family history was being publicised in such a way. This meant that the whole point of making the show – of not feeling shame – was being challenged, as they were affronted but at the same time were not going to talk to me directly about it. Their discomfort came out around about at the same time of the BREXIT vote, and even in my own family there was a splitting. They refuse to see the show mainly because they don't want to see me half naked, which I can kind of understand. But there is an element of sadness and also irony as I play down my achievements to them. I am acutely aware that they don't want to be reminded that I'm doing the show, and yet the whole point of it is for me to highlight these difficult areas in order to liberate from the strong grip of shame. It's a process.

I started to feel guilt for using their words in interviews despite their consent and for how they would be perceived by the public. I was fine when making the work and made sure I consulted them but now I had performed it I had to wrangle with the ethics of using such personal material that included my family. Interestingly it was the family members who were trying and succeeding to have a 'middle class' existence who reacted the most. I started to feel like maybe I shouldn't have made the show and doubted myself again. However I know that ultimately this is work that needs to be out there, no matter how uncomfortable it is to watch. In times of harsh cuts and a divided society this is not just my story or my family's but the experience of millions in Britain. So bring on the rats and the flea circus!

*Catherine Hoffmann's performance Free Lunch with the Stench Wench is on tour from March 2017. For more details, visit her [website](#).*

