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IMMANENT

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Maria Mathioudakis

Committee in charge:

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Co-Chair  
Professor Alexandro Segade, Co-Chair  
Professor Janelle Iglesias  
Professor Paul Sepuya  
Professor Wayne Yang

2023

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University of California San Diego

2023

## DEDICATION

For my Aunt Sofia

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Immanent

by

Maria Mathioudakis

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Co-Chair

Professor Alexandro Segade, Co-Chair

IMMANENT emerges from the iconography of the Federation for Feminist Women's Health Care Center's publications and the works of feminist artists of the 1970s. IMMANENT represents repressed emotions by placing art objects made today by the DIA PHANO collective in conversation with images made by Maria Mathioudakis referencing feminist aesthetics of past generations.

## Introduction

A light, a mirror and a plastic vaginal speculum are the basic tools of *self-examination*. A speculum is a device used to look into body cavities and canals. In ancient times, it also meant mirror or body of knowledge.

- A New View of A Woman's Body, A Fully Illustrated Guide by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers

Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view. It is a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? It answers: we do not know; let us try and see.

-Amia Srinivasan, The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

Feminist *self-examination* is a ritual practiced by inserting a speculum past the lips of the vulva into their vaginal canal with the handle facing upwards. The speculum is then opened in order to prop open the vaginal canal. One then uses a mirror and a flashlight so see inside their vaginal canal. This ritual is practiced alone or with a trusted group of people. It is distinct from other medical forms of vaginal examination done by medical professionals. There is no single purpose for *self-examination*. The ritual is intended to be performed over time in order to see one's vaginal canal change. It can be practiced to observe the cervix at various times of the menstrual cycle, check for signs of infection or STI, checking for signs of IUD string, observe healing post surgery, post biopsy or post partum. etc.

In the following introduction I offer a detailed history of *self-examination* in relation to feminist self-help centers. Following the introduction are three chapters detailing my thesis project *IMMANENT*. In Chapter 01 I recount my personal experience with *self-examination* and relate my experience to the psychoanalytic theory of Luce Irigaray. In Chapter 02 I present my

research on feminist aesthetics, discussing the ways that feminist art since the 1970s influenced this project. In Chapter 03 I discuss the IMMANENT thesis exhibition and each art work's production.

My interest in *self-examination* began after meeting Isa Coffey in the winter of 2020. Isa worked as a lay-worker at the *Feminist Women's Health Center* in San Diego in the 1970s. My conversations with Isa sparked my curiosity. Thanks to her I became interested in researching the history of illegal extra-medical feminist health care practices known as *feminist self-help*. In the fall quarter of 2021 I wrote the first version of this paper for Babette Mangolte's seminar on Second and Third Wave Feminism. During the winter quarter of 2022 I continued my research in a feminist historical methodologies course for the History Department with Ulrike Strausser and wrote the second version of this paper. The research presented in the introduction draws from a few primary sources. In 2021 I conducted an interview with Isa Coffey in which she shared her experience as a lay worker at *WomanCare* in San Diego. I also consulted official publications produced by the *Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers*. I acquired those publications through the archive at UCLA. Few academic histories have been written about feminist self-help practices, however I found Estelle Friedman's *No Turning Back* and Hannah Dudley-Shotwell's *Revolutionizing Women's Healthcare: The Feminist Self Help Movement in America* very helpful.

## **The Birth of *Self-Examination***

The practice of *self-examination* emerges in the early 1970s in Los Angeles when abortion was illegal in the US. Over the past 150 years laws and policies have been instrumentalized to limit the reproductive rights of women in the US. This is most notable in the political and socio/cultural battles over abortion rights. Although this project is not focussed on abortion practices, illegal abortion clinics created the stage on which feminist self-helpers developed *self-examination*. The self-help movement created devices, practices and protocols to supported reproductive health that include but were not limited to abortion practices. Their ultimate goal was liberation from any reliance on gynecological medical doctors and institutions.

The history of the criminalization of contraception and abortion date back to the beginning of capitalism in Western Europe. In her book *Caliban and the Witch* Sylvia Federici details that “starting in the mid-16th century, while Portuguese ships were returning from Africa with their first human cargoes, all the European governments began to impose the severest penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide” (Federici 2014, 89). Federici argues that midwives also come under state suspicion at this time. “Both in France and England, starting from the end of the 16th century, few women are allowed to practice obstetrics, an activity that, until that time, had been their inviolable mystery. Then, by the beginning of the 17th century, the first male midwives begin to appear, and withing a century, obstetrics has come almost entirely under state control”(Federici 2014, 184-185). Federici argues that in order for colonialism and slavery to proliferate around the globe Western governments required that reproduction be under state control. These new controls by the state allows for reproductive labor to be exploited in the service of the state.

By the 1880s the American Medical Association makes an organized effort in many states across the US to pass laws criminalizing abortion. Although the degree of punishment differed depending on the state, the laws often allowed narrow parameters under which legal abortion could be offered. These laws cemented licensed doctors as the only practitioners sanctioned by the state to offer abortions and only under circumstances of medical emergency. They limited reproductive rights by placing abortion services under the control of modern medical institutions, where they still exist to this day.

Criminalizing abortion did not eradicate abortion. Criminalizing the practice only exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the individual seeking abortion. Abortions were often offered in a myriad of illegal ways that came at high financial cost and high risk to the patient's personal safety. For example, In the city of Chicago in the 1960s illegal abortion services could be obtained at an astronomical cost from mafia crime rings (*The Janes, 2022*). In the mid 20th century these high risk and high cost abortion services were called *back alley abortions*. One such *back alley* abortion clinic is the birth place of *self-examination*.

Feminists in the 1950s and 1960s attended consciousness raising groups. In consciousness raising groups women sat in a circle and shared their stories each with equal time to share. These spaces often encouraged criticism and self-criticism as mechanisms towards consciousness-raising. As many women in these groups connected over their abortion stories, feminist self-help abortion practices emerged. Feminist self-helpers began to actively participate in organizing safer illegal abortion services in their communities. In California the group known as the *Army of Three* (Patricia Maginnis, Lana Clarke Phelan and Rowena Gurner) held workshops and distributed pamphlets referring women to illegal abortion providers. *The Army of Three* published books detailing DIY abortion techniques. They sold abortion kits. In Chicago

*The Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation* known as *Jane* provided 11,000 safe abortions. *Jane's* operation was run entirely by a small circle of laywomen trained by a former mafia affiliated abortion practitioner.

Feminist abortion services like the *Army of Three* and *Jane* brought a different ethos to illegal abortion services. They were not motivated by financial interests. They sought to reconcile women to their reproductive rights without mediation of a doctor. They looked for ways of disseminating DIY approaches to contraception and abortifacients. If an abortion procedure by a practitioner was needed the scope that their centers considered differed greatly from any care available on the illegal market or through the medical system. Patient's emotional needs and anxieties were addressed through counseling services available to them through *Jane*. Many clinics offered sliding scale pricing which allowed women with limited options to procure a safe procedure regardless of their financial limitations. Feminist abortion facilities gave patients information about the procedure up front. During the procedure the patient would be told exactly what was happening to their body. Groups like *Jane* even sent patients home with consciousness raising literature like *Our bodies, Ourselves*. The goal was to empower women.

In 1969 in Los Angeles California a burgeoning self-helper named Carol Downer began to work with *The Army of Three's* Lena Phelan. Downer participated in illegal abortion services by referred patients to a clinic run by Harvey Karman and John Gwynn. Both Karman nor Gwynn provided a variety of health-care procedures to women although neither were doctors. They both allowed Downer to observe their procedures . Her proximity to Karman and Gwynn's work demystified gynecological procedures. Upon observing an IUD insertion performed in the clinic Downer recalled her shock at seeing a cervix for the first time. " I was absolutely amazed... it was so close! ... My knees buckled. I was that awestruck"(Dudley-Shotwell 2020,

16). Downer was curious and felt empowered to attempt to examine herself. She took a metal speculum home from the clinic and tried it on herself. By using a flashlight and a mirror she was able to see her own cervix. Downer realized that it was in fact very simple to access one's uterus (through the cervix); having read *The Abortion Handbook* published by *The Army of Three* she was convinced that feminist self-helpers could safely perform abortions and other procedures. Downer hoped this shift away from back-alley clinics run by opportunists would reconcile women with their reproductive rights. The rest of this story operates at the level of feminist legend.

On April 7th, 1971 a group of thirty feminists met in the back of *Everywoman's* Bookstore in Venice, California to discuss the opening of their own abortion clinic. Most of the attendees at the meeting came in response to an ad in a local feminist newspaper. Downer showed the group the tools that Harvey Karman used to perform abortions. The group looked at her and the device grimly. Downer decided to emphasize to the entire group the plausibility of their endeavor. She knew it was possible to safely provide abortions. Downer decided to vividly illustrate how easily she could access her own cervix. She pulled up her skirt, climbed onto a table and inserted a speculum as the group watched. She used a mirror to gaze at her own cervix and invited other women to join her gaze. The legend goes that the group was immediately transfixed (Dudley-Shotwell 2020, 16). The group stayed late as more and more women chose to *self-examine*. In the weeks following this event the group founded the *Feminist Woman's Health Center* in Los Angeles which later grew into *the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers*.

*Self-examination* became the cornerstone of the FFWHC's techniques. They taught *self-examination* to thousands of groups of women hoping to discourage women's reliance on

any medical institutions or health-care providers. *The Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers (FFWHC)* would built a massive network of health-care centers run by non-doctors and extra-medical healthcare practitioners they referred to as laywomen. This was an intentional diversion from medical institutions hierarchical approach to care work. The *FFWHC* sought to liberate access to all medical procedures related to reproductive health. If laywomen were all equal, than power moved horizontally in the context of their examination rooms. The federation's logo was a hand holding a speculum. Patients came to a *FFWHC* to learn reproductive health practices among their peers. The centers published texts like *How to Stay Out of The Gynecologist's Office* or *A New View of a Woman's Body* which detailed their practices in order to document and share their knowledge widely.

I provide this detailed history of *self-examination* to illustrate the practical and political intentions behind *self-examination*. The practice allowed self-helpers to access their cervix and vaginal canals in order to monitor their own health. *Self-examination* was practiced for any number of reasons: monitoring yeast and bacterial growth, monitoring for STI symptoms, monitoring for the presence of an IUD string through the os (cervical opening), monitoring for period blood, monitoring for cervical cancer, etc. The *FFWHC*'s book *A New View of a WOMAN'S BODY* states "women are given a very clear message: be sexually available, but do not look at, touch or understand your bodies" (Gage 1980, 17). The practice of *self-examination* was intended as a ritual of reclaiming one's body. *Self-examination* was not about population management and the exploitation of reproductive labor. Self-helpers instead choose to *self-examine* with their overall health and wellbeing in mind, which in turn resulted in formal shifts in the design of standard duck-billed metal speculum. The *FFWHC* developed the clear plastic duck-billed speculum in order to see the details of the vaginal walls more clearly.

Self-helpers signaled their control over the examination practice by inserting their own speculum with the handle upwards (Dudley-Shotwell 2020, 19). This allowed for easy closure of the speculum in case of discomfort or pain. For self-helpers these shifts in the form of the speculum and its use were outcomes of their own liberatory goals. The practices they created were imagined to hold infinite liberatory potentials for each practitioner.

As late as the 1980s self-helpers were speaking of a future in which patients everywhere would be accessing their own vaginal canals with the plastic speculum they purchased at a corner drug store. The future they imagined has not yet arrived. Instead, in 2022 the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that federally mandated equal access to legal abortion services across the US. I see this attempt at stripping away inalienable reproductive rights as an extension of centuries of state control over reproductive labor. The work of the *FFWHC* started, 52 years ago, with no efforts to change laws or to make its practices legal. They operated under the belief that reproductive rights were real whether or not the state recognized them as lawful. For this reason, among many, their ideas, practices and images are an important site of study and inspiration for this project. If the state does not protect reproductive rights we can look to the work of the *FFWHC* to learn how to care for our bodies.

## **Chapter 1**

### **My entry into Self-Examination**

2020 was a blur. The months of quarantine, the protests, the political uncertainty brought on by the election. Endless mourning. My relationship to my body and to the bodies of others shifted. Like many people, I was afraid. So many vulnerable people were more vulnerable than ever. Like everyone, I was suffered from lack of touch. Feeling the deficit grow as months passed. No hugging friends or kissing their faces. I felt myself desperate for more ways to connect. If alienation and precarity were issues before the pandemic, where would we be when the pandemic was through?

Before 2020 my primary art practice was a social practice. In quarantine, I began making fabric art works in my house using bleach and cyanotype. I took my art on a walks and photographed it hanging off a chain link fence in a parking lot. I dipped my pieces in the water of a closed public pool. I became friends with a cactus growing through a fence near a road. I harvested cochineal from the cactus to dye fabric. I turned the red fabric into cum rags. I gave the cum rags to my lover. In response to social distancing, my art became my excuse to maintain contact with the life around me.

Work and school and social gatherings were all held on Zoom in 2020. The screen-mirrored-Zoom-space became a magical portal through which I could safely access people. Through Zoom I attended all kinds of classes including dance classes. The dance community shifted quickly onto Zoom, Twitch and Instagram Live. By the early summer of 2020 I was dancing daily in a virtual spaces with friends joining from all around the world. Dancers were offering new informal and formal workshops everyday online. Through my weekly Zoom pilates class at Pieter Performance Space, with Devika Wickeremesinghe, I heard about a

feminist sex-ed school called *Wise Bodies* based in up-state New York. I signed up to participate in a *Wise Bodies* feminist circle held on Zoom.

In December of 2020 I began attending the *Wise Bodies* circle. All the attendees Zoomed in from different corners of the US. We were all strangers. We each signed on for a four month commitment to the circle. The group was modeled after consciousness raising circles but also differed in important ways. Our circle was not exclusive to cisgender women. The group included non-binary and transgender participants. Our ages ranged from early 20s to early 40s .

Our circle's facilitator was Isa Coffey the founder of the *Wise Bodies* school. Isa began her training as a lay-worker at *WomenCare* in San Diego starting in 1979. *WomenCare* was a member of the *Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers*. In the 1980s and 1990s Isa conducted sexual-health workshops in NYC including the infamous orgasm workshops facilitated with Annie Sprinkle. Isa eventually went back to school to become a registered nurse and now runs *Wise Bodies*.

From December 2020 to March 2021 our circle met for long Zoom sessions over the course of one weekend every month. The sessions began Friday evening and continued all day Saturday and Sunday. In the first months our activities were anchored in consciousness raising practices. Each participant would talk for 10-15 minutes reciting to the group their inner monologue. We listened intently. After the finished sharing, we would each respond with connections to what was shared. The check-ins took hours and resulted in a profound sense of connection. Listening , we learned, was the core-principle of the feminist circle.

A few months into our meetings Isa introduced the practice of feminist *self-examination*. She mailed us each a plastic duck-billed speculum. Before using the duck-billed speculum we

were taught about its invention by Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology. Sims practiced gynecology in the US in the 1800s and designed the metal duck-billed speculum after experimenting on three enslaved black women named Anarcha, Lucy and Betsey (Dudley-Shotwell 2020, 19). Self-helpers since the 1970s understood the racist origins of the speculum as “emblematic of the myriad of ways medical institutions had experimented on women without their consent” (Dudley-Shotwell 2020, 19). They sought to intervene on its history by creating the plastic disposable clear version of the tool. They sought to find ways to shift the practice away from its oppressive foundations.

Isa planned a session for us devoted solely to practicing *self-examination*. We did not *self-examine* on camera. We either turned off our computer cameras or positioned ourselves out of the frame of the camera. We remained unmuted. Each with our microphones on through the practice and shared our experience through our voices. As we each looked inside our vaginal canals different emotional experiences unfolded. Some members of our circle were unimpressed, others fascinated and energized. I couldn't bring myself to even try. I found myself unable to even insert the speculum into my vagina. I sat with my speculum, mirror, pillow, flashlight and listened to my friend's voices.

After we finished with the *self-examination* our circle put our tools aside and returned to our cameras to discuss the experience. Everyone shared. Some people loved the experience. Others were underwhelmed. I told the group that I couldn't bring myself to use the speculum. People nodded in understanding. Isa affirmed that many people felt similarly and preferred to take their time with *self-examination*. I fought the urge to feel ashamed of my response.

## Visceral Critique

I continued to attempt *self-examination* on my own. I would make the intension. I would set up all the tools and not to practice for very long. It felt like my vulva and my vaginal canal were in unanimous refusal to participate. My eyes wouldn't look. My cervix tightened. I could not recognize myself in my visceral refusal. My understanding of myself was as someone comfortable in my body and my sexuality. Isa encouraged me to listen to myself and not force myself. If I was unconsciously so horrified, it was important that I not disregard my feelings with my conscious mind. I began to research *self-examination* and learned about Carol Downer and the *Federation for Feminist Women's Health Centers*. I read books. I researched the organizations publications. I did interviews of lay workers at FFWHC centers. I interviewed the participants from my feminist circle. I discussed my experiences with just about anyone who would listen.

Eventually I spoke to Grace Wardlaw about *self-examination*. Grace is an artist and a glass blower. Grace and I collaborated on projects in the past . Grace made the lenses for my camera obscura installations in 2021. She told me she had found a metal speculum in an antique store and purchased it. We joked about the word *speculum* meaning lens. I mailed her a disposable clear plastic duck-billed speculum and she decided to use it. The following journal entry is Grace's reflection on her first attempt at using a clear plastic duck-billed speculum for *self-examination*:

I decided to finally try using the speculum before I dilated so I would only need to clean up once. I lubed up the duck bills and popped her in ... I think it was upside down. I started to open it up, I struggled to get the speculum open enough to lock and hold itself open. I held it open while I held the hand mirror in my other hand. Looking into my vagina I saw a lot of darkness and some angry flesh. It was scary. I pulled the speculum out because it was uncomfortable. There was blood on it ... I must have scratched my vagina wall or something. I'm good now ... honestly the lack of light is what is sticking with me right now, and the thought that I'm never doing that again. Morphing flesh tunnel. Terrifying. Yet literally apart of me.

Grace's visceral critique reminds me of my own. In Grace's writing she describes looking inside her vagina as terrifying. Much like identifying with the story of someone else in a consciousness-raising circle, reading Grace's journal validated my own experiences. Looking at my vagina through a mirror, I felt distant from my self and objectified. The mirror reflects the handle of a speculum in a hand and fleshy vaginal walls. The mirror reflected a cultural thing disguised as a natural thing. Here I was in my private space. I was looking inside my body for the first time only to discover that public discourse had proceeded me. That inside me before I found my body, I found meanings produced for me by social institutions. The mirror reflected social codes that alienated me from myself. My visceral response was to these social codes not of my anatomy. The social distancing of the pandemic had further re-contextualized my first attempts at self-examination. I had *self-examined* alone in my room over Zoom. Grace had similarly engaged in self-examination alone. We had done this not realizing the importance of collectivity to the practice. Perhaps if we had engaged in *self-examination* in a consciousness raising circle we could have not been able to engage in inter-subjective building of the self.

In the following section I discuss the work of feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray specifically dealing with the emotions that social vaginal denigration produces in the female psyche. Irigaray's work provides a lens through which we can understand my project but also feminist aesthetics more broadly.

### **Denigrated Sexual Void**

In her book *Speculum of the Other Woman* Luce Irigaray critiques Freud's concept of *penis-envy*, which is the psychological process through which a girl-child comes to understand her role within the phallic order. Penis-envy requires that the girl-child compare her genitalia to

that of a boy-child and find her body lacking a penis. She must understand that her lack of penis, which represents power within the phallic order, means she is marked as lacking power. Through this process she comes to understand her place within the phallic order, a being who lacks a phallus and therefore lacks power.

Irigaray's critique of Freud questions why truth is defined in terms of what is visible. For Freud, only the penis and the clitoris are visible and therefore comparable to one another, while the vaginal cavity and the uterus are invisible. "Nothing to be seen is equivalent [for Freud] to having *no thing*. No being and no truth"(Irigaray 1974, 48). This Freudian assumption that the vaginal cavity is *nothing* is grounded in his assumptions that the vagina is not sensed by the girl-child through her other senses. He assumes the girl-child is ignorant of her vagina because the girl-child is unable to see her vagina. Freud structures his theory of penis-envy through the logic that the girl child's embodied experience is similar and inverse to the boy-child. "The little boy is narcissized, ego-ized by his penis- since the penis valued on the sexual market and is overrated culturally because it can be seen, specularized, and fetishized- but this is not true for the little girl's sex organ(s)"(Irigaray 1974, 68).

In *This Sex Which is Not One* Irigaray discusses the psychoanalyst Karen Horney's elaborations on *penis-envy*. According to Horney "it would not be appropriate to speak of the relation of the girl-child to her vagina in terms of *ignorance*, but rather in terms of *denigration*" (Irigaray 1974, 50). The girl-child comes into awareness of her vagina through her senses but is taught by society to dread and fear knowledge of her "sexual void". For her to assimilate into her role within society she is required to understand her vagina as *nothing*. Penis-envy requires that the girl-child enters the phallic order by denigrating herself. She must disregard what she knows and feels to be real, she must deny her embodied truth in order to internalize the patriarchal

construct. This process of *denigration* is required of her in order to take on “ the role that Western civilization assigns her” (Irigaray 1974, 52) within the phallic order. Irigaray’s critique calls into question the universal natural order that Freud’s theory claims and re-casts the theory as a reflection of a Western construct of apparent truth .

Irigaray conceptualized a vaginal way of being as an *innerness* which is felt rather than seen. For Irigaray vaginal being is invisible in the phallic order but still real. The truth of *innerness* emerges from “ touch without tool or object, except for the test, the experience, of *innerness*”(Irigaray 1982, 70). Through her theory of *innerness* Irigaray is trying to articulate what femininity could be outside of the gender binary and its reliance on the visual markers of difference. By untethering the feminine from the visual phallic order Irigaray pursues a sensual order. Like many feminists of her generation, Irigaray sought to use gender essentialism as a political strategy towards discovering other ways of being. Like the women of *FFWHC*, Irigaray was critical of medical and scientific ways of defying life:

“The same things happen to us: sociology, psychology, ethnology attempt to unveil the mystery of the *to be* which we are. But these sciences parcel us out to different kinds of knowledge, transforming our *to be* into different types of *apparent beings*. In so doing, they distance us from our *to be*, turning us inside out, exhausting the reserves of our *to be*, emptying us of our capacity to be, dragging us to our own oblivion.” (Irigaray 1994, 75)

Irigaray’s articulation of *innerness* emboldens us to move away from apparent ways of articulating being. Her ideas emboldened me to intervene on the tools required for *self-examination*. I reached out to Grace Wardlaw and Claire Anderson. Together we creating forms other than the duck billed-speculum (lens). Our forms are sensual. They are pleasurable and bodily in their aesthetics. We created our forms through collaborative practices and developed our concepts through consciousness raising dialogues together.

## Chapter 2

### Feminist Aesthetics

Feminist art is not simply art made by women. Many women artists participated in the avant-garde movements that preceded the feminist art movements of the 1970s. From surrealism to abstract expressionism female artists like Meret Oppenheim, Maya Deren, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, etc. are cited in the canon. In Lucy Lippard's essay *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* she argues that feminist art contributed to the avant garde by "changing the character of art" through its lack of contribution to modernism. Feminist art isn't an art movement in the art historical sense. Feminist aesthetics emerged across mediums and styles. Feminist aesthetics are a result of consciousness-raising practices that called into question the naturalized subjugations experienced by women living in a patriarchal culture. They are not interested in "the male modernist closed off self-critical monologue that simply reinforces our cultural ideas that art is an isolated activity". Feminist aesthetics bring art and the social together using the techniques of consciousness raising circles such as dialogue, collaboration, constant questioning of aesthetics and social assumptions and a new respect for audience". Since the 1970s feminist aesthetics have shifted the art world in important ways, yet the work of feminist artists is still marginalized.

In Los Angeles in the early 1970s, as the *Federation for Feminist Women's Health Centers* emerged, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's founded the *Feminist Art Program* at California Institute for the Arts. Through studying the images in the *FFWHC's* publications, I became curious about the feminist art movements taking shape concurrently in Los Angeles. In the following section I discuss Judy Chicago's work. I choose not to focus on the *Womanhouse*

project but rather to discuss her practice. In subsequent sections I will further discuss feminist performance artists from the 1970s to today whose feminist aesthetics influence my work.

### **Center Core Images**

“To be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is devalued. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that overt mark of otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.”

- Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, 1972

“I’ve been struggling lately to resolve a gap that exists in my work, and that grows out of the difference between my rhetoric and my work. I talk about exposure and encourage my students to work out of their real feelings. Yet I’ve been hiding some of my subject matter in the rigid structures of my images. I started thinking about when I had first begun to use that structure and realized that it had happened in graduate school after my first husband, Jerry, was killed. My work then was spontaneous, naïve and processed a certain dumpy quality. I showed in a young artist show which a number of establish male artist attended. My friend Lloyd, now my husband, was also in the exhibit. The male artist responded more to Lloyd’s work, which was very structured, than to mine. So, I squished all my dumpy, bumpy forms into a symmetrical structure which I’ve used ever since. Even then my male instructors responded negatively to the exposed subject matter still evident in my images. In order to get my degree I felt I had to hide my content even more behind the structure. Now I’m trying to let the structure be the underpinning of the image rather than a device to obscure the subject matter. I want to find out more about the information that has been compressed inside the structure to expose the content more clearly. This drawing is a small step in that direction. When I finished it I felt embarrassed. Also, this whole issue has something to do with my father’s rejection of that part of me from which I make art. I used to feel that whenever I opened that part of me and expose myself, I got hurt in my most vulnerable center.”

- Judy Chicago inscription from *Childhood Rejection Drawing from Rejection Quintet*, 1974

The inscription above is written by hand in cursive under a drawing of Judy Chicago's made using Prismacolor colored pencils and graphite on a large piece of paper. This work uses a child's tools of representation to unlearn Chicago's complex visual "structures". In the caption she alludes to this unlearning by tracing through her personal history. She considers her work in relationship to her students, the men in her life and past versions of herself. There is an autobiographical and self-critical quality to the writing which presents a stark contrast to the transcendent and colorful drawing it captions. Although there is no direct reference to consciousness-raising, I would argue that Chicago's uses language and references complex webs of relationships resemble the methods of consciousness raising. This work was made concurrently to her work building feminist curriculum at Cal Arts.

Chicago is often remembered for her vaginal imagery which she called "center core" iconography. Chicago's central core images materialized as airbrushed paintings on plexiglass, ornate painted porcelain plates, photographs of her body during the removal of a tampon, etc. Chicago was critiqued in the 1970s for a biologically essentialist imagery that confined women to patriarchal social positions and definitions by reducing the experience to the biological (the vagina). For Chicago "central core" imagery was as a visual language through which vaginal signs would take on positive signifiers that contrasted the objectification as sexual or maternal that the vagina often symbolizes in art. Chicago's work was an attempt to "help balance out gender values in society, by asserting the inherent validity of all things in women's sphere as fit subject matter for art" (Broude and Garrard, 25). It emerged from a visual language attempting multiple dialogues at once. Her work is both engaged in a critical dialogue with modernist aesthetics and a critical dialogue with society at large.

Chicago's central core imagery informs the IMMANENT project in the same ways that the images produced by feminist self-help central core imagery informs the project. These early feminist aesthetics responded directly to the historic denigration of women and their bodies. Through very deliberate choices image producers responding to sexism by celebrating the vagina outside of purely sexual or maternal representations. Chicago's transcendent images reflected her own emotional journey to overcome the female social position she felt overshadowed her art. These aesthetics of transcendence push back at the gender binary and its chokehold on representation. The work of the *FFWHC* also intentionally created racially integrated images as a way of responding to the cultural systems that segregated women of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Their politically essentialist iconography "deliberately celebrated culturally essentialist forms". These early feminist visual languages challenged the status quo which subordinated women and further subordinated women of different races. It is easy to take these early feminist aesthetics for granted. Even feminists today will dismiss them as essentialist and crude. However, these images have remained on the margins and have yet to be integrated into the art historical cannon. Their continued marginalization would suggest that they do not uphold the status quo.

As I scanned pages and pages of images from the *FFWHC*'s publications using the flash on my phone and/ or the illuminated scanner at the library I thought about the luminance in Chicago's central core structures. In my work I often use focused light to represent patriarchal cultural systems that repress and confine complexity. I began to imagine ways to bring Chicago's luminant visual structures together with the images produced by the feminist self- help movement. This was the conceptual birth of the *Self Examination Series* in my thesis show. A

simple bringing together of Chicago's conceptual framework with feminist self-help iconography.

## **Feminist Aesthetics Embodied: The Waves of Feminist Performance Art**

### **First Wave Feminist Aesthetics**

Following the conceptual movement of the 1960s, the 1970s saw an explosion of self-identified feminist social energies re-characterize what subject matter could be art. Many of the most influential feminist artists from the time were performance artists. Canonical works like Carolle Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* in 1975, demanded that art consider vaginal dialectics. Hannah Wilke's *Scarification Object Series* in 1974, invited the audience to chew bubble gum and shape it into vaginal sculptures which she then adorned on her body as scars. Drawing attention to the vaginas denigration and the way that denigration was sexualized. In 1972 at the University of Iowa a young Ana Mendieta performed a private ritual in which she was photographed violently pressing her body and face against a pane of plexiglass for *Untitled* (Glass on Body Imprints). Reminiscent of a specimen under the glass of a microscope Mendieta's gestures force the audience to recognize the ways that representation distorts subject matter. Together with her naked body we must see the pain and labor required for objectification. From 1973 into the 1980s Mendieta's performance practice produced her iconic *Siluetas* through which she left behind patriarchal constructs of the self and existed in continuum with nature.

In the 1980s into the 1990s Annie Sprinkle performed and re-performed her "party trick" *A Public Cervix Announcement*. Costumed in black lingerie amidst a campy boudoir mise en scene, Sprinkle would lean back in her chair as an assistant inserted a metal specula into her

vagina with the handle facing downwards. The audience would then be invited to make a line and one by one would be invited to examine her cervix using a flashlight. Sprinkle's work demands that not only the vagina dialectics but cervical dialectics enter the discourse of art and that we attend to parts of the body which have never been studied by art .

I group these artists and artworks together because I think of them as the first wave of self-identified feminist performance artists. Their work explores aspects of biological essentialism and calls attention the cultural constructs that naturalize biological essentialism while seeking to find a meaning in the feminine outside the gender binary. The second wave of self-identified feminist performance artists is informed by third wave feminism, postmodernism and Judith Butler's theories of gender as performance. Their work examines social institutions that produce gender. Feminist performance artists like Janine Antoni , Nao Bustamante and Patty Chang do this by taking on institutions like the the family, the nation, the state, psychology and the medical sciences. Through their work they point to the ways that social institutions limit and police gender.

## **Second Wave Feminist Aesthetics: Works by Artists that influenced IMMANENT**

### **Janine Antoni**

Janine Antoni, perhaps the artist most influential to IMMANENT, works in performance and also exhibits artifacts which allude to performances or a rituals not presented to the audience. Janine Antoni's *Wean*, made in 1990, is a wall work in which hollow impressions fit seamless into the wall depict the artist's breast, nipple, three latex nipples used for baby bottles and the latex nipple's store-bought packaging. The work, read from left to right, represents a baby's

separation from the mother as culture remakes her body. In Antoni's 2000 piece *Umbilical* the artist molds her mouth onto the bowl end of a silver spoon and the inside of her mother's hand onto the handle end of the same spoon. These works traces the cultural impositions separating mother and child.

Most influential to IMMANENT is Antoni's 2009 piece *Conduit* a small hollow copper griffin-gargoyle fashioned to conform to the shape of the vulva. *Conduit* was created to be used as a device that allowed Antoni to urinate standing up. *Conduit* is displayed next to an image in which Antoni is documented using the object to pee off the side of the Chrysler Building. Antoni's urine created a patina on the surface of the copper piece, leaving a trace of her gesture on the object. *Conduit* deals rebelliously with the topic of penis-envy and it's relationship to modernism. Antoni fashioned a medieval phallic device to pee off the side of a giant modernist phallic structure representing automotive and industrial design. In the image that accompanies the work only Antoni and the building are in focus with the landscape far in the distance blurred. Her body is hidden under a voluminous gray linen dress and her hair blows in the wind wildly. She faces forward, away from the camera , with a blank look and a slight smile. She is not wearing makeup. She presents herself to us plainly. A trickle of urine is captured as it flows out of the *Conduit*. The modernist steel building is presented in the background behind her, and between us and the landscape. Also visible is on of the building's art deco American Eagle motifs representing the hood ornament of a Chrysler automobile. The American eagle and her mythical griffin are juxtaposed . This small and poetic performance has impacted the production of IMMANENT greatly. The melancholic emotional registers in Antoni's work produce aesthetics that ask us to consider the alienation produced by modernist cultural institutions.

## **Patty Chang**

The artist Patty Chang makes videos and performances and images and objects and installations that investigate the social, cultural and political systems that produce gender. Chang's work also interrogates the narratives of transnationalism and colonial legacies and capitalism. Much of her work is based on her research and emerges from webs of collaborations with artists and fabricators and family members. Most influential to IMMANENT are Chang's *Glass Urinary Devices*. Chang originally created these devices out of found plastic objects like plastic bottles and various forms of tape while following China's *South To North Water Transfer Project*, the longest aqueduct in the world. Chang used the phallic devices to pee on the aqueduct every time she came upon it. She later had a fabricator in New York hand blow her designs in borosilicate glass. The original 26 bizarre and elaborate *Glass Urinary Devices* range in size, shape, color and material. Chang's Glass Urinary Devices refer to a past rebellious performances not shared with the viewer. Like Antoni's *Conduit*, Chang's original plastic "Feminine Urinary Devices" elaborately perform gender norms (the performance of penis-envy) as a rebellious acts of frustration directed at phallic modernist structures.

Although Chang's *Glass Urinary Devices* and Antoni's *Conduit* are not objects made to be inserted into the vagina they are objects created to complement the vulva and intended for gender transgressive acts. Both projects serve not only as conceptual inspirations for IMMANENT but also as inspirations for the forms that the Caesuras take. Unlike *Conduit and Glass Urinary Devices* objects DIA PHANO made are not phallic objects. Unlike Antoni we were not directly inspired by architectural design in our object making. Unlike Chang we did not want to re-imagine and re-work found objects. We instead we choose to reference feminine

modernist shapes like those found in the paintings of Lee Krasner or forms like Louise Bourgeois *Femme Couteau*. Our Caesuras would be blown glass, not cast or molded. They would be made through the encounter between the maker's breath and the hot glass material. The objects themselves would reference feminine modernist aesthetics and postmodern feminist aesthetics in order to reveal the ways that the social defines the vaginal space and naturalizes those meanings.

### **Noa Bustamante's Bloom**

Nao Bustamante's videos and performances deal with the vulnerability of the female body and ways those vulnerable bodies can be protected. Although I have seen many of Bustamante's works in person, the *Soldadera* work were exhibited at ICA San Diego, I have not seen Bustamante's BLOOM exhibition, which deals with the speculum. I do feel it is important to discuss BLOOM in order to expand on the ways it differs from my project and to think about the ways it can inspire me to grow my project. For this portion of my thesis I pull from the article *Bloom Welcomes Viewers Into The Vaginal Imaginary* by Laura G. Gutierrez of The Latinx Project.

BLOOM was installed at Artpace San Antonio Texas from July 15th- September 5th 2021 following Bustamante's residency. The exhibition deals with the vulnerabilities that emerge for women during gynecological vaginal examinations. A visitor enters the BLOOM exhibition through thick red and gold velvet theatrical curtains. The exhibition space inside has been painted a light pink. Five drawings from Bustamante's *BLOOM* series are framed and installed on the wall. The drawings have also have interventions from Piper Bangs who painted botanical flowers on the glass surface using oil paint. At the center of the exhibition lies a table with unpainted clay forms titled *Vaginal Imaginary*. The most complex form on the table is a clay

prototype of Bustamante's *BLOOM* speculum, made by the San Antonio ceramist Michael Foerster. The rest of the forms are made by different members of the local community as a part of the "Speculum Salon" programing proceeding the exhibition. The forms were made according to Bustamante's prompt to "meditate on the vaginal imaginary and create their own versions of the next speculum." Parallel to the *Vaginal Imaginary* table is an encased table that displays various labeled metal specula like those encountered by women at the gynecologist. One metal speculum is comically propped up on a champagne glassed dressed in red woven fabric, the metal speculum is wearing large googly eyes . Above this display plays the videos *Gruesome History (speculum puppet)*. A single channel video in which Bustamante and the puppet narrate the racist and sexist history of the specula. Next is an 8 minute single channel video piece playing on loop titled *Vagnasium* installed at an angle from above couch. Text on the wall instructs viewers to lay down and participate in the breathing and pelvic floor exercises being narrated by Bustamante in the video. *Fountain*, a tower of wide champagne glasses marked with red lipstick stains sits next to a single channel video titled *Portal*, featuring footage of dripping water from a famous water hole in San Antonio. Above this whole show looms an antique table hanging from the ceiling with chains. The piece is names *Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy* after the three enslaved women who were tested on by James Marion Simms. This last piece was activated by Bustamante, her collaborators and the public on the evening of the opening through a performance I will subsequently detail.

Bustamante lies face up on the chained table groaning as a local musician Pamela Martínez clangs a tuning fork and a metal speculum together. Martinez sits down to play the harp as Bustamante begins to rattle the chains and groan more loudly. Marcus Kuiland-Nazario then enters the space and helps Bustamante lover the table using pulleys. This marks the end of

the ritualistic exorcism. The artists then walked among the public and passed out red lipsticks to the audience. Coaching people on how to use them to smack their lips together making various sounds in harmony together. Bustamante then used a machete to open a bottle of champagne which was given to the audience to drink from cups . The audience was invited to stain the cups with their lips. These cups were then stacked together to make the *Fountain* piece.

I have taken care to understand *Bloom* without ever having experienced it because I am interested in Bustamante's strategies for telling the story of the speculum as a tool that harms the vagina. The project is inspiring because of the way Bustamante collaborates with other artists and the ways she incorporated workshops with the community in the exhibition. These are both strategies I used in my first year show at UCSD and strategies I would like to return to in future iterations of IMMANENT. Bustamante's project differs from my work in its emotional registers. BLOOM is focussed on the gynecological history of the speculum while my work focuses on the feminist appropriation of the speculum. Regardless of these differences BLOOM is relevant to my project because of its feminist aesthetics. Through various aesthetics strategies Bustamante's *BLOOM* critiques systems of power while centering care for women. Through collaborations *BLOOM* open itself up to its audience.

### **My Own Feminist Aesthetics**

My training in the arts came from a number of wonderful and challenging patriarchs. I was a dancer in a dance company as a child/teen and as an adult I have worked as a fabricator for a number of notable male artists. Grad school allowed me the time and space to study the matriarchal apocrypha of art history and to work towards finding my place within the lineage of Feminist Aesthetics. This has looked like building a relationship to the art history cannon which

differes from a masculinist oedipal relationship the avant garde. How do I reject the father without falling into the trap of losing my femininity? I am still seeking out the answer to this question. I am interested and inspired by the matriarchy that came before me. I have learned so much from their works and writing and contribution. I was raised in an art world shaped by their contributions. Many of us have arrived at the same questions years apart. Feminism is now a social institution whose impact can be felt in all areas of Western society. Feminism has led to many unintended outcomes and has yet to realize its intended goals. Moving forward, like the feminist artists before me, I plan to make work in dialogue with other artists and with my audience. I plan to honor the feminist artists that came before me through my engagement, critique and interventions on their aesthetics.

## Chapter 3

### IMMANENT

The title of my thesis show IMMANENT calls for hermeneutics. Through it I point to my own devotional practice to feminist writing, history, art and practice. I ask the audience to join me in engaging and interpreting my work. The sterility of the exhibition design was intentional. Fertility, which has been a theme in other recent work, was not a theme in this work. I wanted my audience to feel the intentional sterilization of the space as a means of conjuring medical institutional aesthetics. The glass pedestals, aluminum shelves and aluminum frames displaying the works are austere and sterile conjuring the aesthetics of a medical institution while also having the potential to reflect light. The art-objects themselves are magical and mysterious in relationship to their supports which try to blend in with the institutional aesthetics as best they can.

I chose the SME gallery because of its windows and natural light. Knowing that the heartbeat of the show would be glass works, I knew I needed shifting natural light to animate the objects.. I designed the show simply in order to be able to install it myself in a short amount of time. The work also needed to be easy to store since I have limited space to store my work. These limitation resulted in works that are smaller than the scale of the body. The scale is successful in inviting the audience to come closer to see the details of the work.

What follows is the checklist for IMMANENT. The works, like the questions that inspired them, are far from resolved. Much like with my first year show and my second year installation, I anticipate many of the works and concepts in this show will fuel future work. The propositions at the heart of IMMANENT are ready to shared with an audience. I am excited to

learn from the process of showing the work and to allow it to fuel future exhibitions and performance with the works.

### **IMMANENT List of Works**

1. Self-Examination Series : 3 Triptychs

- A. Falling Specula, three frames each with three laser prints of digital drawings on velum tracing paper (2 layers of red under one layer of black), 2023
- B. Irreducible, three frames each with three laser prints of digital drawings on velum tracing paper (2 layers of red under one layer of black), 2023
- C. Looking in a mirror, three frames each with three laser prints of digital drawings on velum tracing paper (2 layers of red under one layer of black), 2023

2. Cesura Series

9 clear body safe blown glass sculptures, 2023

3. Untitled

Artifact of ongoing performance of melting clear plastic duck-billed speculum using acetone into a glass vessel, 2023

**IMMANENT Installation Photos**

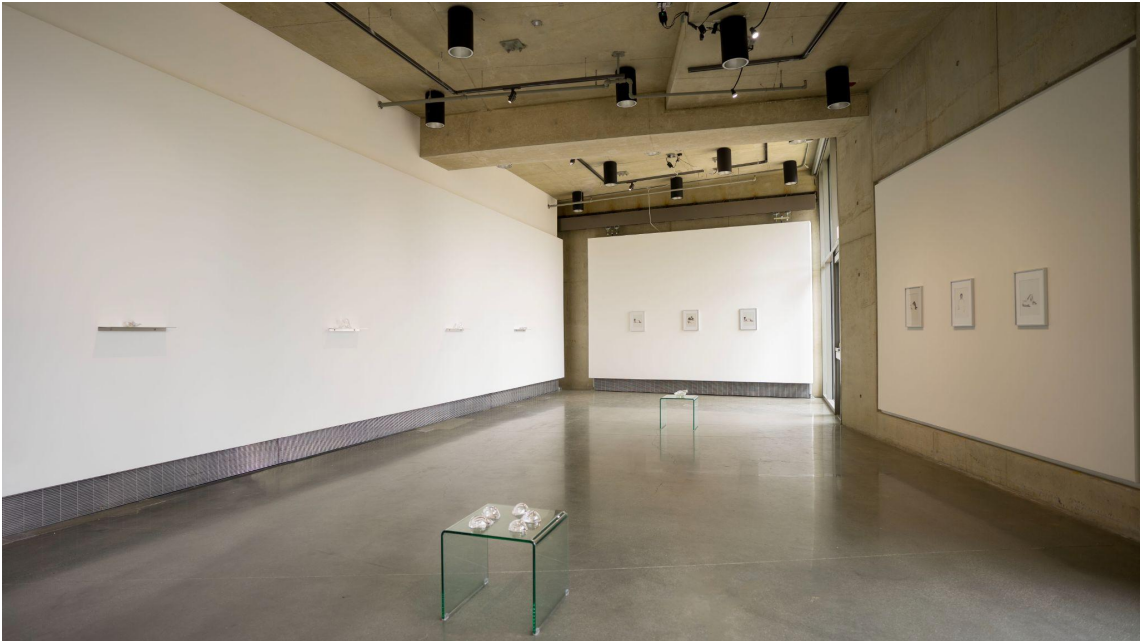


Figure 3.1 Wide view of Installation



Figure 3.2 Wide View of Installation

## Self- Examination Series

In researching the history of self-examination and the FFWHC I intentionally sought out pamphlets and books used by the organization to share their ideas and practices. I was most drawn to publications that represented their work through images. The images I draw from for IMMANENT come from the book *A New View of A Woman's Body*, first published in 1981. I have spent two years now scanning and digitally archiving materials from the FFWHC. The text heavily features Illustrations by Suzann Gage. Gage is a national certified OB/GYN nurse practitioner, a nationally certified licensed acupuncturist, a nutritionist, herbalist and a naturopath. She is the founder and Clinical Director of Progressive Health Services in San Diego. Gage's drawings are described as "designed to lift the veil of medical mystery from women's bodies and reveal truths that, though simple, have been hidden up to now" (Gage 1980, 17). Her illustrations reflect her own training in medicine seeking to represent women's bodies in images "superior to any to be found in medical texts" (Gage 1980, 17).

Many of Gage's drawings represent *self-examination*. The triptychs in Immanent draws from nine of her illustrations. For my works I scanned selection of Gage's drawings into my Ipad's Procreate application. My fingers, stilus and apple pencil allowed me to use various tools to trace and manipulate the image within the program. Over the course of a few months of this drawing practice I developed an intervention using the eraser tool on one layer and a brush tool on another layer that imitated the effects of light rays illuminating the text in ways that obscured the vulvas and vaginas of various images. My interventions reference the luminance at the center of Judy Chicago's "structures". In bringing Chicago and Gage together I am tracing threads that connect the celebratory aesthetics of both of their works. My interventions add layers of alienated and melancholic aesthetics to the works. In these drawings I am attempting to balance a

respectful engagement with the images and the ideas of a previous generation of feminists whose work is important. At the same time I do not shy away from my own emotional distance from their narratives.

The printing of the images was done by exporting the image as a PDF file and printing using a xerox laser printer at FedEx. Each work in the series is printed on transparent tracing paper in order to signify that the image's traced quality. They are all 8.5 x 11 inches, the size of standard office copy paper. The final works are a small stack of laser prints on tracing paper, each with two red copies layered under on black copy. The layering of the red pages below the black create a red glow around the lines that I like to think of as the blood of the drawing. The stacking of the layers on one another illudes to the process through which the work was created. The vellum (tracing paper) conjures the body in its form. The drawings appear almost like tattoos on the surface of skin.

Each triptych is made by combining three of the the stacked prints and displaying them matted in aluminum frames together on one wall. This awkward staging intentionally mimics the kinds fo artistic presentations found in medical institutions. By combining the works as triptychs I am opening up the relationship the images could have to one another . The goal of this practice is to broaden the readings of the original images while also not completely erasing the traces of their original meanings and the feminist politics from which they emerged. I hope to place these works in exam rooms in health care facilities where they can be seen in the context of the practices they represent.



Figure 3.3 Installation Shots of *Looking into a mirror triptych*

### **Cesura Series**

The cesura series of nine body safe blown glass sculptures was made by DIA PHANO collective. DIA PHANO collective is Claire Anderson, Maria Mathioudakis and Grace Wardlaw. Our cesura series emerged organically from conversations about *self-examination*, our bodies and society. In the Fall of 2022 we began to discuss the potential for making a series of forms that could replace the speculum (and potentially the mirror and the light) in the practice of *self examination*. Grace and Claire are both glass blowers and run a queer glass sex toy company called *PeaceLily*. With financial support from the William Male Foundation I traveled to Toronto in February of 2023 to work with Grace and Claire in their glass blowing facilities at Sheridan College. In an intensive five days we worked from months of sketches and 3d renderings to make over forty Caesuras. The works were conceived through improvisation. Each work is produced and finished by hand and in this way is entirely unique. The inspiration for their shapes was taken from nature and the art works by Lee Krasner and Louise Bourgeois. Each cesura is

body safe and can be safely inserted into the body. All cesuras can be cleaned and sanitized. They are all made using clear glass because this material was at our disposal for no cost. They are called cesuras which refers to the rhetorical break in the flow of sound in the middle of a line of a verse of poetry. The name is intended to conjure the liberatory potential of pauses in discursive constructions of reality.

In IMMANENT five of the tear drop cesuras will be arranged to imply the shape of a flower on the top of short glass pedestal. One of the five caesuras will be displayed with bodily residue indicating that it has been inside of a body cavity. The remaining four cesuras will be displayed on aluminum shelves hung at eye level. Two of these are twin bunny-eared forms one slightly smaller than the other. One of the two will be displayed with bodily residue indicating that it has been inside of a body cavity. The remaining two forms are the wild card forms that emerged from playful experimentation. All Cesuras will sit on top of a thin self-adhesive layer of mirrored PET material cut to the dimensions of each piece. They will all be fixed in their place using museum wax.



Figure 3.4 Details of 5 *Caesuras* on glass pedestal



Figure 3.5 *Caesura* on aluminum shelf



Figure 3.6 *Caesura* on aluminum shelf



Figure 3.7 *Caesura* on aluminum shelf



Figure 3.8 *Caesura* on aluminum shelf

### Untitled (Melting Specula with Acetone in Glass)

The final work in the series is an artifact from an ongoing performance. In the performance I am using acetone to melt a clear plastic speculum into a glass vessel. The glass vessel is a clear found object made through casting glass in earth using resist. The pooling plastic becomes white as it is melted by the acetone. This performance is highly toxic because of the acetone. I will not be performing this live during my thesis in order to not expose the audience to the toxic smell and fumes of the acetone. This work will be displayed on a small glass pedestal across the space from the pedestal with the caesuras.



Figure 3.9 Detail of *Untitled* on glass pedestal

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