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"How Skin Can See:" A Phenomenological and Cultural Account of Touch as Witness in the Latter Half of the Twentieth-Century

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Abstract

Prema Purigali Prabhakar

"How Skin Can See:" A Phenomenological and Cultural Account of Touch as Witness in the Latter Half of the Twentieth-Century

My dissertation project on embodiment and touch uses literature, performance art, photography and theatre to explore how non-normative bodies—mentally ill, physically disabled, queer or violated bodies—reconfigure concepts of touch in the 20th century. This project will assert that contemporary experience, characterized by ever-changing technologies and traumatic historical events, has not only created new ways in which to define the body, but has also created new ideas about how art and the individual's body can and do touch. By exploring touch through witnessing, objects, and personal and historical trauma, my project ultimately seeks to answer the question posed by feminist historian of science, Donna Haraway in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" My project argues that the inherent nature of touch means that our bodies do not and can never end at our individual skins.

In order to situate this interdisciplinary project in a theoretical and historical framework, my project uses phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the

body; along with Jean Luc-Nancy's writing on touch; Elaine Scarry's work on the body under the nation-state; Amelia Jones and Petra Kuppers work on performance; Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway and Sara Ahmed's feminist phenomenology. Additionally, I will use the innovative methodology of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Each of these theorists both provides a genealogy for the artistic disciplines I am examining and also helps to create a situational and culturally specific interpretation of what the body is, means, and can do.

The innovative aspect of this project lies with its comparative consideration of multiple genres and theoretical frameworks and with its argument for a theory of the body that looks closely at phenomenological and lived experience. Given that my project examines phenomenological experience by focusing on non-normative, disenfranchised bodies, this is necessarily a project of ethics. Non-normative bodies allow us to ask questions about what our responsibilities are when touch is negotiated between individuals whose hands, skin or sexual organs have been destroyed; and how social conceptions of purity, danger and contamination are negotiated between individuals and their society. If our bodies do not end at our skins, as Haraway claims and if our body lines are fluid, as Deleuze and Guattari assert, then how do we a create a responsible way of touching one another? . The many ways in which we can touch each other in contemporary culture: through computers, phones, public spaces, weapons, skin on skin, also makes it harder to negotiate how to touch each

other ethically with a touch that is empathetic—what I name “witnessing touch--rather than a touch which is fragmenting and destructive

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Preface:

"How Skin Can See:" A Phenomenological and Cultural Account of Touch as Witness in the Latter Half of the Twentieth-Century

Mappings: Preliminary thoughts on mapping the body

This is a map of my dissertation. I have never liked maps and have always found them difficult to read; their widely placed arrows and their various (incongruous) colors that highlight different types of terrain. However, because this is a dissertation on the body, a 'map of the body' would look less like a road map , pleated and tucked into the plastic pocket of a car, and more like an X-ray. Of course, X-rays are less egalitarian than maps; you need some expertise to read them, some education to interpret their symbols. When the untrained eye looks at an x-ray, it sees a flat white shell of bone on a murky grey plain. Maybe, the eye observes a darkened area of calcification or the dangling digit of a break. If we can see the muscles, they appear crude like shapes fashioned out of play dough and stuck rather haphazardly onto the delicacy of our bones. The spine is a series of hooks that hangs our skin.

But as with the geographical map, the map of the body—the X-ray—is flat, two dimensional; its representations of the body are unsatisfactory; the roundness and closeness of shape and texture are entirely missing. Coming back from the dentist, a friend asked that rather than keep the X-rays of her jaw and teeth as a memento of the procedure she had undergone, she be given the teeth that were extracted during the

procedure. The ghostly X-ray of the jaw was a poor memento of the dental procedure compared to the glossy slickness of the tooth and the thin blood root hanging off of the tooth's craggy underside.

So this is a dissertation not about how the body looks, but about how it is touched and about how we experience this touch. When my friend touches her tooth, does the pain of dental surgery come back to her? Does she feel a throbbing in her jaw where the tooth once lay? Or does she merely experience the tooth as a strange object, the size and feel of a small marble, lying in her hand? As the title of this dissertation suggests, how do we see through the skin? Our skin has so many more 'eyes' than our face. It has a multitude of pores breathing in and out like fish gills and a complex twining of nerves, many of which are barely covered by a thin layer of skin. Because of its perceptual sensitivity, the skin absorbs almost everything we experience. When we sleep, our eyes are closed, but our skin 'sees' a breeze coming in from the window, 'sees' the restless body next to us and 'sees' the heavy blanket upon us. Our reaction to each of these things: breeze and body and blanket are different. The breeze makes or skin shiver; the restless body next to us, may make or own legs and arms more wakeful, more restless; the blanket may feel protectively heavy or suffocatingly hot.

1. Contextualization, Questions and Theories of the Dissertation: Radioactively Lit

Primary Arguments and Questions

When you go for a body scan **(**CAT**)**,[1] they give you a strange blue liquid that lights up your insides. It acts as a highlighter, underlining the uneasy flicker of the heart or the sly occupation of a tumor in the folds between organ and muscle. This is what I have tried to do with this dissertation—illuminate certain instances of touch, describe them, probe them and discover the connections between them. Where the blue liquid does not seep, there are many shadowy areas. This is inevitable. Dye seeps out of the body, light flickers, our hands can not reach everything. By metaphorically 'unzipping the skin,' as Armando Favazza aptly puts it, this dissertation considers questions on tactility and the tactile body that have been raised in phenomenology, witnessing studies, modernism, feminism and performance.

I will be focusing on three particular lines of thought in regard to tactility and the body: the intersection of witnessing and tactility, the way in which the individual body and the social body touch each other and the ethical implications touch has for the toucher, the touched and the larger collective body. My primary material will include a close examination of the work of novelist, Janet Frame; photographer, Francesca Woodman; the performance of Marina Abramovic and Diamanda Galas; the plays of Sarah Kane and written and visual testimonials by individuals who self-

[1] CAT stands for Computerized Axiel Tomography

harm. Particularly important to my discussion of these questions will be Gilles Deleuze's concept of "becoming," Laura Marks' analysis of the haptic and Jacques Derrida's work *Specters of Marx*. Furthermore, because my dissertation takes such an intimate look at the body, I will be using the work of a variety of artists, musicians, journalists and therapists—individuals who are not necessarily critical scholars or theorists-- to support my thorough understanding of the primary subjects examined in this dissertation.

The bodies and bodies of work that I have chosen to highlight in my project, non-normative, disenfranchised bodies, are why thinkers that work on theories of differences such as performance and disability theorist Petra Kuppers, Derrida, Nancy and Scarry, provide a workable model for my project. They do this by integrating individual bodies, the nations they live under, the interactions between nation and body and the possible ethical implications of these interactions.

Style and Methodology

"that commentary itself belongs more to the performative than to the assertive mode: it proposes a viewing, or a reading , not as fact, but as act." [2]

My dissertation is not written in what would be considered 'traditional academic language.' It is more poetic, more intimate, more (as one of my professors noted) empathetic. However, in writing, I was also aware of the more traditional

[2] Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 151.

scholarly necessaries for the dissertation: definition of terms, literature review and the insertion of critical theory. The melding of the scholarly and the poetic makes each of these chapters a bit of an experiment. My own feeling was that hybrid styles work best in shorter pieces. I had also reviewed a couple of highly interdisciplinary dissertations that effectively used the idea of dividing up a long chapter into shorter 'sections'. Each of my chapters is different stylistically, but I did divide each chapter into smaller 'mini essays.' I also headed each chapter with a short "story-argument." The argument conveyed in the 'story' is elaborated on in the rest of the chapter.

The topic of touch, the language used by performance studies and most importantly, many of the bodies I am examining lend themselves towards this type of emotional involvement. Moreover, to advocate for bodies which are constantly involved in touching, merging and transforming one another (intentionally or not) and not acknowledge the way in which I 'touch' and am touched by my subjects seems inauthentic. A similarly non-traditional approach is utilized by theorists such as Julia Kristeva (Black Sun), Elaine Scarry (The Body in Pain), Judith Butler (Precarious Life) and most recently, by Sianne Ngai (Ugly Feelings) and Lauren Berlant (Compassion) in their own scholarly work. These theorists' projects are similar to my own in their interdisciplinarity, their focus on the body, emotions and affect.

While I have not closely examined the role of gender within my dissertation, the gender of the writers I have mentioned above and the gender of most of the

subjects I am considering in my dissertation, *are* female. To write empathetically about issues such as the body and the emotions has largely been a female enterprise, what Helene Cixous calls women's writing or *écriture féminine* in her "The Laugh of the Medusa."[3] This writing has been a way to subvert the dominant male paradigm of scholarship that tends to focus on argument, rigor and an often cryptic set of critical and literary terms. Experimentation with language, not only subverts the dominant paradigm of scholarly presentation, but it seeks to extend the possibilities of scholarship by reforming the way in which academic material is presented. This need not be only a female enterprise—indeed male critics such as Michael Taussig and performers such as Ron Athey and transgender scholars such as Jay Prosser have undoubtedly expanded the linguistic possibilities for academic language as well as their female identified counterparts.

Historical Context

Because touch is such an expansive topic, I have chosen to center my dissertation on artists working in the latter half of the twentieth century. The advent

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[3] "I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into story-by her own movement." Cixous, *Critical Theory since* 1965, 309.

of new technologies, the influence of modernist avant-garde movements such as surrealism and high modernism, the expansion of film and media studies and the political turmoil and civic unrest that took place between 1945-to the contemporary period complicated the way in which society regulated touch between individuals and touch between the individual and the state. The trajectory of touch in American history is transformed according to the political and social events of each decade. In the 1960's (during some of Frame's novel writing years and the beginning of Abramovic's performing years) in some ways, as with the state violence taking place in Vietnam, the touch between state and individual was violent and invasive, a constant assault on the individual body.

However, the American civil rights movements of the 1960's and 70's sought to expand the touch between individuals, advocating for integration of the races, free love and the right to control one's own body (this time period accords to when Woodman experimented with her own body and its positioning in space and in the artistic landscape of the 1970's); In the 1980's state and personal tactility were inextricably linked with the recognition of the AIDS crisis; performer and singer Diamanda Galas began to construct her inspired masses as a way of protesting the national policy towards individuals with AIDS. In the 1990's technology, the personal computer, emails and websites have much more poignant things to say about the complex ways we touch each other; the first Iraq War and the conflicts within the Balkans also caused this to be a decade of national upheaval; in this context, Sarah

Kane wrote plays that connected the bodily harm inflicted by the nation-state to the bodily harm individuals inflicted on one another. In the 2000's technology became increasingly relevant, as people used the internet and cell phones as their primary way to communicate professionally, personally and, even, physically (sexual chat rooms, virtual realities and avatars). It is in this climate that Stieg Laarson writes his Girl with a Dragon Tattoo trilogy which features the socially inept, but technologically brilliant Lisbeth Salander.[4] As the 20th century progresses and merges with the 21st century, touch becomes ever more complex and ever more involved.

There are more ways to touch intimately, as in the aforementioned example of the sexual chat room, but there are also more ways to touch people in ways that violate and destroy their skins. While the way in which we can touch each other has diversified, this very diversification also means that our bodies can be more easily regulated and controlled. For example, you may be able to engage in intimate virtual touch with another individual on line; you may engage in this act in the privacy of your own home, but because of the tracking devices on websites and computers, the government can easily identify your 'virtual touch' activities and by identifying, seek to control them. The many ways in which we can touch each other: through computers, phones, public spaces, weapons, skin on skin, also makes it harder to

[4] I examine Laarson's trilogy in the second half of my fourth chapter; it works as a type of conclusion to the dissertation.

negotiate how to touch other individuals ethically with a touch that is respectful and empathetic, rather than fragmenting and destructive.

While I have chosen to limit my study of tactility to the latter half of the twentieth century, the subjects I am examining come from multiple artistic genres. Each genre illuminates different aspects of the way in which we 'see through touch.' Think of each chapter as one set of pores opening on the skin. My first chapter, which considers the form of the novel highlights the difficulty of understanding the body through written language; my second chapter examines the way in which photography emphasizes the tactility of objects. The performance art that I look at in my third chapter extends my analysis of touch from individual to collective touch and my final chapter, looking at films, plays and verbal narratives, examines how we touch ourselves. By considering a variety of genres in my dissertation, the understanding of the complexity of tactile relationships is unveiled.

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter of my dissertation, entitled, "Frame: Space, Tactility, and the Institution," examines the novels of New Zealand writer Janet Frame. Specifically, I will be looking at Frame's novel *Faces in the Water* which focuses on the way in which touch is experienced within the confines of a mental institution by asking: how do we understand touch in its absence? In order to support my understanding of

touch and the institution, I will consider the works of Michel Foucault, Didi-Huberman and Louise Phelps. Frame, perhaps the most famous of New Zealand's contemporary writers, describes the institution as a complex land of touch wherein sometimes not touching is as important as touching. Like the protagonist in *Faces*, Frame was confined to mental institutions for a number of years. The uncanny overlap between Istina's fictional story and the author's own life create a mystery for the reader which draws her into the particular space of the mental institution. Frame's writing, which relies on the style of literary modernism including the use of first person narrative, stream of consciousness and florid language, 'touches' the reader's senses , allowing the readers to form an intimate understanding of the way in which the body is experienced within the very particular space of an enclosed institution. In this chapter, I also introduce basic concepts that are reworked throughout the dissertation: the importance of touch to individuals' memory and sense of self and the way in which witnessing and touch are interrelated.

My second chapter, "The Body as Object: Understanding Mortality through Touch" on invisible or as performance critic Peggy Phelan has said "unmarked bodies," will engage the work of American photographer Francesca Woodman. I consider how Woodman makes tactile contact with objects, rather than with human flesh and I will examine how she was able to merge with the objects that she touched by using Gilles Deleuze's theory of "becoming" and Jacques Derrida's theory of spectrality. In this chapter, I ask whether it is possible for there to be a

sympathy and merging between the skin of objects and human skin. Additionally, the fragility of Woodman's black-and-white photographs and her tragic death by suicide ask what it means for a society to touch a body that has rendered itself invisible. The fragmented and fragmentary touch of Woodman will be examined through the lens of visibility, invisibly and at its threshold, spectrality

My third chapter entitled, "Social Skins: Performing History in the Work of Diamanda Galas and Marina Abramovic," asks: can the skin stretch so completely that it touches multiple skins simultaneous? In order to posit a hypothetically answer to this question, I explore the touch that the audience gets from a disquieting performance or performer. As performance artist Diamand Galas' and Marina Abramovic's work make clear, "exchanges" or "touches" between performer and audience can be dangerous and unnerving. I argue that this performative touch reveals the lack of boundaries between bodies and examines our fears about contamination and illness. Specifically, much of Galas' work grapples with the AIDS crisis, which she deals with extensively in her works, *Masque of the Red Death* and *Plague Mass,* while Abramovic invites audiences to experience the collective trauma brought about by war in performances such as "Balkan Baroque"

In my fourth and final chapter, "Witnessing the Self, Wounding the Skin: A Reading on Private Self-Harm Practices and the Plays of Sarah Kane" I ask: how can we refigure and reclaim violent touch towards ourselves and others? I will argue, as in Woodman's work, that it is only through a fragmented body that the

individual can mirror the trauma, desire and fear enacted on it through the larger society. In undertaking this examination, I will be using the work of Sarah Kane, a young British playwright, often classified as a "New Brutalist." In her plays, Kane reformulates touch as both violence and as healing and often these violent and healing touches are inseparable from one another. Another form of touch that Kane's plays interrogate is the way the audience is touched, traumatized and intruded upon by seeing her plays, I will more specifically examine the idea that touch -- personal, individual embodied touch-- has a direct and clear correlation with the way in which individual bodies touch and interact with their larger society. This chapter will also closely consider first personal accounts of self-harm by looking at memoirs about self-harm, the films "In my Skin" and "The Piano Teacher" and the critical work of Armando Favazza, Marilee Strong and Janet Kilby.

In each of my chapters I highlight the innovative way in which these artists have redefined and re-imagined the body and its capacity for touch. By showing that the skin of an individual body is able to extend to and 'touch' the skin of other bodies, the surfaces of objects and the collective skin of a society , my research answers questions about how we can touch each other –responsibly and without fear—in our social, personal and imaginative lives.

Conclusion:

I am standing on the train, my hand dangling from the metal bar. Besides me, there are two couples; one couple is sitting and the other is standing. They have been talking and one of the women utters this phrase: "I feel you." Slang, short hand for 'I relate to you," "I understand you," "I sympathize with you." But how intimate are these words flung out as a gesture of solidarity! To feel someone: the whorls of your finger against the grooves of their skin; the instant attachment of finger to skin through the stick of sweat and the surprise pleasure of contact. "I feel you" implies 'I have been inside your skin." I have understood its pulses and tensions and I have let my own skin become part of that pulse and tension. I do not know the origin of the phrase; I wonder if its popular use is to bridge that enforced silence, that stoic anonymity infusing our every day contact with other bodied beings.

And so brief the bridge. The train jolts. There is the inevitable whir of impatience and sliding of thin plastic. One of the couples gets off the train. The couples are severed just as casually have they have been bonded. "I feel you." The sweat no longer sticks, but slips. The surprise of my grip on your hand relaxes. The grip grows weaker. I let go. "Listen, Man/It may soon be time/for you to guard a dyeing man/until the angels come. Let's not chat about despair/If you are a man (and not a coward)/You will grasp the hand of him denied by mercy until his breath becomes your own."[5]

[5] Galas, *Shit of God*, 38.

Chapter 1

Frame: Tactility, Space and the Institution, a Dystopian Beginning

Argument (in short)

Crisis Lines: dissolutions of the body

Sometimes I answer the phone and it is M.[6] I always know it is her. The number is a payphone and the conversation is always short—one or two deep breaths between lunch and the occupational activity for the day: sewing, beading, patting the clay and dividing it in two.

M's voice is always blurred like a stage mirror streaked with makeup and Vaseline and stray hair. In those smears, I could take my finger and write all of M's medications: risperdal, haldol, lithium, diazepam, seroquel. Little mallets hoping to hit the right note on a tiny, rusty out of tune xylophone.

[6] Name protected for confidentiality purposes.

Today M says, ‘I have no body.’ I have had similar conversations with M before. If you can call these short, broken things of ours conversations. She has said she doesn’t know her age, or that she is young but looks old, or that her image is like a late Picasso, her head swollen in a crook underneath her arm, a splatter-painted swallow.

Hitchcock would like to picture a mental hospital made entirely of mirrors: fun house mirrors that lengthen and shorten the body; mirrors that refract; mirrors that seem to be made up of infinite doors. But at M’s hospital there are few mirrors. Her statement ‘that she has no body’ does not come by way of an external visual aid, but through her subjective observations. She feels no body. She is light or shadow or some commingling of the two, dust that falls from the energy-saving hospital lights.

I do not know what to say. I cannot contradict her. I cannot see her or touch her. And the voice is no guarantee of physical manifestation: wind and breath and ghost all sound and they are not hardened into distinct bodies.

I wonder if she has said anything to the nurses at the hospital. If she has, I wonder how they, with their longer experience, reassured her. Will they take up her hand and press it? Will they shake their heads and keep silent? Will they placate her, telling her that if she does not believe in her body, then she does not have one?

M has been in the hospital for years now and I have been told she has no visitors. Only nurses and fellow patients and doctors; the same round of bodies in cycle-- wash, spin, dry, hang, wash again. There is no one to carry her memories and she cannot piece them together. M's one contact with the outside world is this phone call, two minutes long. One bodiless voice talking to another bodiless voice. I imagine that the less contact she has, the less she remembers. And the less she remembers—the memories turning to sawdust in her hand like roses preserved in a book—the more her body fades. If memory is lodged in the senses of the body-- smell of pie and feel of silk and wrinkle and twinkle of the eye-- then what happens to the body when these memories are unlodged, or simply evaporate? The puppet is emptied of its stuffing.

My body is my sickness: Introducing Frame, Introducing Istina

Janet Frame's novel, *Faces in the Water*, is about a young woman named Istina and her experience in New Zealand's mental hospitals; though the details of the book have an uncanny resemblance to Frame's seven years in mental hospitals, it is fiction. Istina has been in and out of mental hospitals for years; it is unclear just how many years, since, as Istina relates "I lost count of months and years."[7] During these years, Istina documents her time at two major hospitals: Treecroft and Cliffhaven; she

[7] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 122.

records her experiences with other patients, with doctors and nurses and with the various therapeutic interventions she received (ECT, insulin shock, solitary confinement).[8] The reader knows very little about Istina's life before she entered mental hospitals and the novel ends when Istina leaves the hospital; her experience within the walls of the mental institution stands unattached to her past or future life. Istina's narrative is dream-like, claustrophobic, a kind of nightmare video game. The space of the institution seems like a creation of one of Borges' fantastical worlds: secret, inhabited by strange creatures, governed by its own unique set of rules.

When Istina is finally released from the hospital, she is told by the nurses that "when you leave hospital you must forget all you have ever seen, put it out of your mind completely as if it never happened and go live a normal life in the outside world."[9] In essence, they tell her to forget that there are drowning 'faces in the water' (her fellow patients) and that she has been one of those faces.[10] Istina has been in hospitals for years; if she forgot those years, she would lose them entirely; the place where the memories were would become a space of no self, a veritable black whole. To forget, as the nurses instruct, Istina would have to deny any of the physical and emotional experiences she had during her institutionalization; she would have to deny herself and the other patients she met within the asylum walls.

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[8] Just to be clear, Istina does not receive any of the "contemporary" forms of treatment for individuals with mental illness-- personal therapy or, it seems, is she given many psychiatric drugs.
[9] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, Frame, 254.
[10] Obviously, 'faces in the water' is a reference to Frame's title.

Istina's response to this suggestion is given in the form of a rhetorical question directed at the reader. This question is also the last line in the book: "And by what I have written in this documentary, you will see, won't you, that I have obeyed her?"[11] It is an answer full of impish sarcasm—because, clearly, Istina has not forgotten her experience in the hospital. In fact, by writing about her experience in the hospital, leaving out very little of the horrific detail, she has done the complete opposite: she has remembered and recorded as much as she could. Istina's narrative becomes a document of witness.

Istina's final line/question of the book is also an injunction, an injunction that the reader remember with Istina. Although I am trying to avoid biographical analysis in my reading of her novels, it is unavoidable to hypothesize that Frame, who spent close to a decade in New Zealand mental hospitals, has also disobeyed the advice of the nurses and obeyed Istina's injunction to remember and testify through writing. In almost all of her novels Frame gives voice to a mentally ill character who is either trapped, like Istina, in an institution or isolated in other ways by New Zealand's conventional social rules and strict delineations between 'normal' and 'sick.' Through her characters, Frame exposes these delineations. She writes "Witnessing is like treading water, it must keep on keeping on; if one stops one sinks out of sight into

[11] .Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 254.

oblivion."[12] Despite the possibility of drowning, by writing Frame kept treading water.

"I recoiled from the facts of illness and hospitals that make the comings and goings of an ordinary human being seem like prodigious events: I recoiled because I envied, knowing the few human conditions—love, starvation, imminent death—which construe as miracle the hieroglyphic commonplace. And yet I recoiled because I knew it was not love or imminent death which made the patients gaze at Dr. Steward and his child; it was a kind of starvation that is not relieved by rainbow cake or Sports Day fizz."[13] I want you to look at the length of this sentence; I want to you to look at the density of the sentence and how it packs in multiple images, hopping from one to the next. This density of imagery indicates that Istina is engaging in act of remembering. She is recounting the particularity of the Sports Day Scene. To lose these images would be to lose a part of herself and a part of the other people she is describing. Here the dense metaphors of Frame's language, Istina's act of remembrance—an act that is as much physical as it is strictly emotional; 'starvation' is itself a double needing—a need for sustenance: 'sports day fizz' and the need for love: the patients' hungry gaze as they consume the love between Dr. Steward and his family.

[12] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 44.
[13] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 251.

Frame's phrases "prodigious events," and "miracle" and "starvation." I think Frame is using these dramatic words too dramatic for a picnic is purposefully. The lives of the patients are so drab that the color, the food, and the relative freedom of Sports Day are prodigious. The fact that Dr. Steward, a doctor, is at this Sports Day and, more importantly, the fact that he has brought his family to Sports Day is 'miraculous'—he becomes like a saint walking amongst the lepers. I wonder if the patients, "starved" as they are of any kind of love or affection, believe that by witnessing the love between the Doctor and his family that they will 'catch' some of the love that leaks from the doctor, that this love will leach into their skin and heal them.[14]

At the end Istina gets out. Gets out of Sports Day. Gets out of consuming 'fizz' as a gassy substitute for something more substantial. At the end the hospital nurses tell her that she should forget the hospital and all that has happened to her in the hospital space. But in the end Istina writes this 'document.' *Faces in the Water* is her remembrance: a remembrance of not only her experiences, but also a remembrance of all those ghostly faces, so delicately outlined, worthy of being sketched more vividly into the world.

Dissolution of Touch

[14] See Chapter 3 for more examples of the way emotions can infuse or "leak into" the skin.

One day I walked into a professor's office to discuss this very chapter. The professor turned to me in frustration and asked, in an incisive critique: "Where is the touch in this chapter?" My dissertation is on tactility in its various forms and this question, inevitably, made me defensive. Who would not be defensive when told, and perhaps rightly, that their reading was careless?

I have read Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* at least four times in its entirety and more times than I can remember in its parts and pieces. However, I went back to read my Frame, trying to be more observant, trying not to let Frame, a writer of mythic status in New Zealand, 'down.' My professor had a point, but a point that needed to be reinterpreted. I concluded that yes, I had not made touch as central to my chapter as it needed to be. This was partly a lack of focus in the organization of my chapter, but much more importantly, I had focused on the wrong thing. I had tried to list and explain the implications of each instance of touch in Frame's book. In doing so, I had failed to notice how little touch there was in the book.

This is the sorrow of Frame's *Faces in the Water*. Touch, flesh to flesh, body to body touch—even in its violent or abusive form--is a rare privilege. In the two hospitals described in Frame's novel, Cliffhaven and Treecroft, there are strict boundaries maintained between patients and nurses, nurses and doctors, and the medical staff of the hospital and those individuals living outside the hospital's walls. Rather than simply recite the meager episodes of touch in Frame's book, I should have been exploring their glaring absence.

The thing is, the imagination strains when it tries to conceive of what a complete or almost complete lack of touch would be like. When I teach creative writing, I sometimes ask my students which of the five basic senses they would, if they had a choice, prefer to keep if their four other senses were destroyed. They so rarely choose touch; because it is so integral to the other senses, they cannot imagine its loss. I believe that without the tiny openings of skin, with the nerves burned like crumpled leaves, the other senses would have no outlet. "Touch is not simply a matter of touching. 'Not touching' is often a very real part of the experience and sometimes the most conspicuous part of it. This not only applies to cases of active touch, [...] but to passive touch too. The touch of one's clothes is not ordinarily at the forefront of awareness, but its absence can be. If one takes off one's clothes and walks around the room (even a warm room), the sense of not being touched can be quite pronounced, at least for a short term."[15] Yes, so there are the ignored touches: the touch of our clothes, the touch of our hair, the touch of our skin brushing against itself, the tongue meeting the delicate skin of the mouth. Without touch, I do not know what our bodies become. Perhaps, like M, we begin to see it as invisible, immaterial even to ourselves.

Questions/the Argument

[15] Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 82.

It may seem strange to introduce a dissertation on touch with a chapter about a space that contains so few instances of touch. My aim is simple: to iterate the importance of touch. By using Frame's narratives of mental illness, this chapter will explore how the mentally ill body interacts with other bodies within the very specific space of the hospital or institution. In the words of psychiatric nurse and Professor Louise Phillips, the individual and the individual's body lose much of their identity during institutionalization.[16] Frame's narratives, which describe depersonalization, the fragmentation of the body in space and the essential loneliness of the self within the confines of an often unsympathetic institution, confirm this.[17]

The institution is a singularly closed off space; patients are cut off from family, friends and partners; family and friends (and, yes, I am using that term in a general way) create parts of our history—and by way of our history, our identity. The people who habitually surround us can, in fact, serve to reinforce parts of our history: cementing memories through their own remembrances. In remembering with others, a memory becomes stronger, more vivid. By cutting patients off from the family and friends who (in part) provide them with their identity, patients experience a loss of this identity. The mental institution is a kind of artificial community. Patients are flung together simply on the basis of being "sick" and are packed into dormitories

[16] Phillips, *Mental Illness and the Body*, 167.
[17] I realize that I am using body and individual and body and memory almost interchangeably here. I am thinking, as in Merleau-Ponty's work, that all perceptions are foremostly processed through the body. Thus any fragmentation or unification of 'identity' or 'self' must happen, in some way, through the bodily senses.

like children sent to a strict, reform boarding school (Dickens and his charity schools). Nurses and matrons act as traditional substitute mothers by making sure that patients follow eat, sleep, follow rules and are not disruptive to other patients. Doctors act as distant defacto fathers; they visit wards infrequently. They make sure that the general rule of order in the hospital is followed; they officially diagnose and label patients. Cutting patients off from regular contact with family members and instituting a type of substitute family is generally meant to help the patient. The clear roles and strict rules of the institution allow the patients to be without responsibility and without ambiguity. However, these nurses and doctors do not hold a patient's history—a part of their memory. And nurses and doctors are rarely affectionate with patients, reinforcing my image of the mental institution as equivalent to a poorly funded, understaffed orphanage. The most consistent—or most memorable—touch that patients encounter at the institution seems to be for objects such as the ECT machine, needles, scalpels and everyday objects: cups, beds, clothes, the occasional package from home. These are objects that, while they may be used for the intention of healing the patient, initially cause a severe phenomenological disruption to the patient.

In the midst of this loss of identity and bodily fragmentation—a loss that is, if not caused by the space of the mental institution, at least exacerbated by it-- I am asking: what happens when the institutionalized body touches another body, be it the body of another patient, practitioner or family member? Istina seems to experience

any brief episode of direct, skin on skin touch as positive. In fact, even episodes of violent flesh on flesh touch, as in an incidence where she pushes a nurse, are preferable to a complete lack of touch. How does the touch of an object differ from the touch of flesh in forming the patient's bodily identity? The touch of a doctor forms a very different bodily connection to Istina than the ECT machine for example.[18] More literally, I will look at the way a constant lack of touch can stunt an individual's emotional and physical growth. Frame's *Faces* describes a young woman named Carole who has been brought up in the asylum. It is unclear what her diagnosis is or where her sickness lies; she has always been treated like a child and her favorite activity is to listen to the radio voice for she believes that it, deep and smoothly romantic, is the voice of the man she is going to marry. Carole is no longer a child, nor is she physically incapable of growth, a little person, but her body seems to have stopped its growth during preadolescence. Her limited knowledge of the world beyond the asylum gates, the condescension by which patients are treated and the lack of sexual intimacy—or physical intimacy of any kind—seem to have stunted her. Her body and its stores of memory are the size of a ten-year-old child. Sometimes she passes scrawled, simple love notes under the fence. I wonder what they say.

This chapter will also introduce themes that will be explicated in more extensive, more vivid detail throughout the dissertation. In Frame's *Faces,* to touch

[18] Please note the sections on "Doctors and Touch" and "Memory"

an object is, often, to experience a sense of dissolution; this dissolution is presented as negative, an unnecessary erasure of identity. However, the second chapter, on the photographer Francesca Woodman, will make a more complex argument about the way in which flesh touches object. I will propose that in Woodman's photographs, the dissolution of human skin into object skin is a way of confronting and coping with the mortality of the body. *Faces in the Water* considers the space of the asylum, a space certain bodies are able to touch (patients can sometimes touch patients) and others have a social line drawn firmly between them **(**patients rarely touch doctors). My third chapter on the performance art of Diamanda Galas and Marina Abramovic looks at what happens when the boundaries between bodies are purposefully dissolved. Finally, this chapter on Janet Frame will figure the idea of touch into a redefinition of witnessing. Frame's narrative explores the difficulty of receiving sympathetic, bodily touch within a larger, collective space such as the institution. Conversely, the fourth and final chapter of my dissertation will incorporate tactility into witnessing by exploring the very private practices of individuals who self-harm.

Frame: "mirror, mirror" reflections on an autobiography

The ghost of each of the artists I am presenting in this dissertation revisits their texts; Frame no less so. Experience, emotions, and history cannot be categorized into events or directly transcribed, but they are infused into the text. With unmitigated

dramatics: the blood of the author is always part creator of the text. It's inevitable. It is her hand that writes or sings or draws and it is her sweat that drips on paper or stage or audience. [19]

Scholars are so taken with Frame's biography and her mysterious psychiatric diagnosis that ninety-five percent (my estimate) of the critical work on her writing involves an examination of her autobiography, a fact-finding mission about who 'the real Janet Frame is'; there are also extensive comparisons of Frame's three-volume autobiography to her novels --again, with the dubious premise of 'fact-finding'. It is no way my intention to examine the autobiographies or make a claim about Frame's mental state or go about an investigation summarizing the similarities between Frame's life and the protagonist of her novel, Istina. However, because Frame's biography has become so central to Frame criticism, I believe it is necessary to summarize both the general 'facts' of Frame's life and the criticism written about that life.

Janet Frame was born in 1924 and raised in a small town in New Zealand named Oamura.[20] She grew up poor and, by her own description, was awkward and dirty. Frame's family did seem unusually beset by misfortune. Two of Frame's sisters died

[19] This author-text relationship is, of course, complex. In Chapter 2, Francesca Woodman's death 'haunts' her pictures; in chapter 3, Diamanda Galas' personal involvement with AIDS permeates the physical power of her performances.

[20] These facts come from Frame's three volume autobiography, primarily the first volume entitled, *Angel at My Table*. As a side note, Jane Campion made a movie based on Frame's life also called *Angel at my Table.* The movie served to mythologize her even further in her own country and to bring her greater recognition in Europe and America.

very young, purportedly of weak hearts, a medical condition that was never diagnosed or treated, and George, Frame's brother, suffered from epilepsy, a disease that cast an unredeemable stain on the Frame family in a country where conformity was prized above all else. Frame, as might be expected by her readers, was clever with words and received admission to train as a teacher in Dunedin. Frame boarded with her Aunt Issy in Dunedin and was so afraid of drawing attention to herself that she barely ate. When she menstruated, Frame dropped her tampons in a nearby cemetery rather than ask her aunt for the garbage. She graphically wrote: "My room stank with sanitary napkins. I did not know where to put them therefore I hid them in the drawer of the landlady's walnut dressing table, in the top drawer, the middle drawer and the bottom drawer; everywhere was the stench of dried blood…"[21] This quote is from Frame's *Faces in the Water*. However, an almost identical paragraph is related in her autobiography. This reflects, I think, not that *Faces* is a biographical retelling of her experience in mental hospitals, but that the physical discomfort Frame experienced and her awareness of her body is infused into Istina's narrative.

It was in Dunedin that Frame met psychology professor John Forrest. Forrest was charismatic and after teaching Frame in his class had regular therapy sessions with her. He compared Frame's writing talent to the talents of Victor Hugo and Vincent Van Gogh—artists he claimed were schizophrenic. Frame took on her schizophrenic label readily and studied the signs and symptoms of the disease, "performing"

[21] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 12.

schizophrenia for Forrest at their sessions.[22] It is quite possible that Frame was mildly in love with Forrest and wanted to make an impression on him. This episode demonstrates the fine line between (or lack thereof) between mental illness and its performance. Critics like Simone Oetelli-Van Delden claim that the line between Frame's performance of schizophrenia and her actual diagnosis was slim or negligible.[23] After all, don't 'genuine' schizophrenics or mentally ill patients perform their illness? What if Frame was, indeed, both a 'performing' and a 'real' schizophrenic? However, I think Frame's bodily performance of schizophrenia was also her way of expressing the sexual feelings she had for Forrest.[24] Again, this indicates the discomfort Frame had with her body, but, as will be seen in the forthcoming section, also how this discomfort could be abused by Forrest and others.[25]

Frame: Why these details of the biography? Why not see Frame as Jane Campion, director of *Angel at My Table*, did? Red-haired as Orphan Annie, but far less confident, with gawky limbs and a constant sticky as sweat slicking her skin. Or as living by the Spanish Sea, free from the hospital and writing, pretending to be young as she drinks with other expatriates? I put this detail in about her sisters' hearts and her epileptic brother because they speak to how Frame experienced the

[22] The definition of schizophrenia is still debated, but it was first described by Ernest Kraeplin and first named by Eugene Bleuler.
[23] Oetelli-Van Delden, *Janet Frame and the Rhetoric of Madness*
[24] This reminds me of the "performance" of women who were diagnosed as hysterics. See Didi-Huberman's book, *Invention of Hysteria*.
[25] See Appendix A, Figure 1

body and how this experience may have (inadvertently or not) seeped into the perception of her characters. The Sanitary napkins conjure a young girl's, and woman writer's fear of being known by her body, of taking up space. This sexuality could only be expressed by "performing" schizophrenia for an ambitious but not particularly sensitive young professor. Frame felt that she had a physical stigma that was given to her by her family: two sisters dead and an epileptic brother and soon, her own strange discomforts. Her family was one of poverty and decay. Each member of the family experienced a physical loneliness as sharp as the wire frames of old dormitory beds.

Frame: Power, Authority, the heavy hammer of morality

One night, in a rather ambiguous attempt at suicide, she swallowed a dozen or so Tylenol. The Tylenol left Frame relatively unscathed, but she did write the episode into an autobiography that she presented to Forrest. On reading of Frame's attempted suicide, the ambitious Forrest felt he needed to take action—he arrived at Frame's lodging with other men and took her to Dunedin hospital and from there she was taken to Seacliff mental hospital. Frame was in and out of mental hospitals for seven years and was given numerous ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy) treatments.[26]

[26] During ECT treatments patients have electrodes placed on their head; a current is then applied to the patient and the patient has a brief seizure. ECT has been used to treat major depression and treatment resistant mental illness. Doctors are still unsure as to why ECT works so well for patients who do not respond to other forms of therapy. Although I am generally critical of ECT in this chapter, ECT is, in

Throughout this time, she continued to be labeled 'schizophrenic.' She was saved from this constant circulation in mental hospitals and from a mutilating lobotomy by the very thing that had placed her in a mental hospital to begin with: her writing. Frame was "saved" from a lobotomy by her first book, the prizewinning *Lagoon and Other Stories*, a save that must have been as shocking as it was relieving (rather like Dostoyevsky's stay of execution). [27]

There is an imbalance of power here-- a rather obvious one. Forrest was ambitious and educated and relatively wealthy. Frame was incredibly poor, not terribly cultured and had difficulty in understanding the social mores of friendship or love. When she was at college, she was solitary save for her weekly "performances" with Forrest. To arrive with three other men at home and demand that she go with them to a mental hospital seems a flagrant abuse of power. I believe Forrest saw that Frame was in love with him; this insight gave him the power to treat her and her body as an intellectual research experiment; she would be a case study to write up in his newest book.

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fact, a highly effective form of treatment. Reading accounts of patients who undergo ECT in the 1950's and 1960's such as Frame and Sylvia Plath, when ECT became a common form of treatment in mental hospitals, it seems like administering ECT was more harmful than helpful. Because ECT was so new during this time, doctors and nurses were just learning to use ECT equipment and were unsure of the exact method of treatment (how many volts, how many times a week, etc). Especially in public, underfunded hospitals, patients were not always given any kind of relaxant or medicine to temper the shock of ECT. Further in the chapter, I also point out how ECT is used as a weapon against patients, rather than as a healing technique. In contemporary hospitals, ECT patients are generally give a muscle relaxant and are put to sleep with a general anesthetic. Handling the procedure like this significantly reduces the basic physical trauma of the procedure, although it does not necessarily decrease the memory loss associated with ECT.

[27] The book won the Hubert Church Memorial Award.

What of it? Frame may have been unworldly, but she was articulate and she was not shackled or handcuffed by either Forrest or the other two men. I tell you this story about the arrogant Forrest because I think it may partly explain the sharp whiff of morality in Frame's novels. A heavy-handed morality. And one that, as a critic, I am not unsympathetic with. In *Faces,* Frame describes a world where the power differentials between patients and doctors and nurses and patients are vast. This does not mean that Frame's morality is unmixed with sympathy, just as Diamanda Galas expresses a similar sense of morality or judgment against individuals who use power irresponsibly in her performance pieces. But would you not feel morally aghast, vengeful even, towards those individuals who have almost entire control over your body? Yes, perhaps the overworked nurses were trying to do their best. Beleaguered by the amount of patients they had to take care of and the infrequency of the doctors, they were scared of showing too much affection, too much softness. Frame writes that most of them entered the profession with a view to healing and those who stayed in it had long ago sloughed off that skin of idealism. Even if many of the nurses wanted to show affection, I imagine that the many patients they needed to attend to would weary them; it is difficult to be constantly attentive, constantly compassionate to the suffering around you. [28]

[28] "It may seem strange to learn that all the nurses were most of the time without compassion; until one remembers that those who longed to care for their patients either gave up their lonely struggle in its unfavorable conditions of staff shortages and twelve hour days, or were corrupted into harassed reluctant hypocrites and bullies" Frame, *Faces in the Water*,

Frame: Language: witnessing texts/performing language

One of Frame's most literal critics, Donald Hannah, claims that "Istina Mavet, the main person in *Faces in the Water*, is, of course, Janet Frame, herself, under another name."[29] In essence, Hannah claims that *Faces* is not even a thinly disguised account of Frame's time in mental hospitals but is in fact straight autobiography, containing few if any fictional elements.[30] A more theory-heavy and contemporary critique of Frame, written by Maria Wikse, is interesting but only marginally more productive. Wikse begins her book by comparing the serious Frame to pop star Madonna, claiming that the two belong to a similar cadre of feminist voices whose self-expression is largely autobiographical. She goes on to say that both Madonna and Frame are artists who, while autobiographical and expressive, soundly resist a unifying or singular voice, claiming for themselves multiple selves and multiple identities.

There is no doubt that Frame's experience in mental hospitals, whether she was schizophrenic or not, was pivotal to her writing.[31] In each of her books, there is a character that could be seen as mentally ill: Daphne in *Owls*; Vera in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*; Toby in *Edge of the Alphabet*, and of course Istina in *Faces in*

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[29] *Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Essays on Janet Frame*. Jeanne Delbaere (Editor). "Faces in the Water: Case History or Work of Fiction," Donald W. Hannah. Dangaroo Press: Denmark, 1978, 47-52.
[30] *Faces* comes under the most direct comparison with the autobiographies and Frame's life in general, since it is told in the first person and set in a variety of mental asylums in New Zealand.
[31] See Appendix A, Figure 2

the Water. I would argue that each of these characters is not defined by his or her mental illness, but, more importantly, by the isolation their sickness and 'difference' brings. "I inhabited a territory of loneliness which I think resembles that place where the dying spend their time before death and from those who return to the living to the world, bring inevitably a unique point of view that is a nightmare, a treasure, a lifelong possession"[32]. It is interesting that Frame juxtaposes 'nightmare' with 'treasure.' Clearly, her experience in mental hospitals was painful; it was a space in which she felt powerless and completely isolated from other individuals. But such an experience is one that she values, "treasures." Coming back from her "territory of loneliness" gave her the power to remember that territory and to write about it.

I am not using much direct Frame criticism. As I wrote earlier, much of the criticism concerns the facts of her biography or her three volume autobiography. And, frankly, much of it skims the surface (a cat's tongue sliding across cream) of her novel. Most important to contextualizing Frame's work in a type of archive are the literary accounts of madness and institutionalization that were written in the 20th century. Frame might stand alone as an experimental stylist in the New Zealand literary world, but her preoccupation with mental illness and the institution and her personal, descriptive writing style can easily be juxtaposed with those of many modernist writers. As Kyle Valentine succinctly puts it, "modernism represents the first literature in which the experience rather than the appearance of madness is

[32] *Angel at My Table*. Janet Frame. p 96

described. Modernism too sees the emergence of a rich body of work engaged with the politics and sexual politics of madness."[33] The phenomenon of writers inscribing madness into narrative is, no doubt, due to the emergence of Freud and his psychoanalytic school of thought. It was also due to the distinctive modernist style of writing—a style that was much more personal, imagery-based and fragmented than its Victorian counterpart. Valentine cites Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Emily Coleman and Antonia White as modernist writers who wrote madness into their characters or the narration of their books.

In particular, White's *Beyond the Glass*, a fictional account of a young women's sudden breakdown and subsequent experience in a psychiatric hospital, and Coleman's *Shutter of Snow*, a dream-like first-person narrative of a woman institutionalized after the birth of her first child, have resonances with Frame's work. *Beyond the Glass* ably described the blurring lines between inside and outside space and the importance of the various physical touches that the protagonist receives, and also mixes religious symbols with narration about mental illness, in a not-dissimilar way to Frame. Coleman's *Shutter of Snow* is stylistically more similar to Frame's *Faces* than *Beyond the Glass*: Coleman uses first-person metaphorical language that distorts the reader's sense of place and time, much as Frame uses multiple extended metaphors and bodily fragmentation to describe the experience of madness and

[33] *Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry and Modernist Literature*. Kyle Valentine. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2003. p 10

institutionalization. Placed alongside Coleman, White and writers who (I believe) extend from this modernist tradition, writers such as Marie Cardinal, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Frame's work can be seen as more than biographical, more than obscure. It becomes part of a fictional archive on madness, the body and institutionalization. It becomes no longer isolated as an anomaly in New Zealand but part of a larger literary trend in European literature.

This trend is talked about extensively in Louis Sass's *Madness and Modernism*. Like Valentine, Sass believes that the growing interest in psychology and psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20th century (specifically, the interwar period) coincides with the emergence of the Modernist style of writing. More specifically and, perhaps, more interestingly, Sass compares the language used to describe schizophrenia to the types of language used in Modernist writing. He does this by looking at historical cases studies of schizophrenia, the transcripts of diagnosed schizophrenics and the profile of Modernist writers and their methods of using language. For example, Sass argues that the characterization of patients with schizophrenia as alienated, introverted and distancing is evoked by Franz Kafka's narratives. Beckett's spare, awkward narratives and the bodily discomfort that his characters experience also reflect descriptions of schizophrenia; in fact, Sass's analysis could imply that many of Beckett's narrators, like Frame's are suffering from mental illness or schizophrenia. "It is in the Modernist art and thought of the Twentieth century that this self-generating, often compulsive process has reached its

highest pitch, transforming the forms, purposes and preoccupations of all the arts and inspiring works that to the uninitiated, can be seen as difficult to grasp, as off-putting and alien, as schizophrenia itself."[34] I believe that Frame contributes to Sass's work by placing her moral agenda into her writing. Additionally, her language reveals that the "off putting" language that Sass claims for both mental illness and modernist writing can, in fact, be very empathetic and beautiful, despite its unconventional styling.

These novels write their experiences from inside the body—something more than the literary subjectivity and something less than the "possession" of performers Diamanda Galas or Marina Abramovic. It is claustrophobic and oddly beautiful. This is why Emily Coleman called her book *Shutter of Snow*. The experience of illness within an institution is like falling asleep in the snow. At first, it is painful and cold; your joints become glass; you resist a warmth that you know is the first indicator of unconsciousness. A loss of memory, a loss of death; covered by snow, you are forgotten and forget yourself. You are undifferentiated from the landscape. In Frame's novel, the writing is a textual performance of mental illness.[35] The blurry

[34] Sass, *Madness and Modernism,9.*

[35] See Chapter 3. Also see the work of Chilean author Diamela Eltit. Eltit was a writer and a performer. Often her performances took place in spaces of marginality: a town square where the homeless came to sit or a brothel or the mental institution. In one performance, Eltit cut herself while reading her book; her text and her blood blending; the wounding of her body created a 'passage' created a passage whereby other bodies could enter. The performance was done in a brothel. By cutting herself in front of the brothel workers, Eltit dissolved the boundary between her 'educated', upper class body and the body of the poor, marginalized brothel workers. Eltit's language, like Frame's , also uses multiple metaphors and images in a dense prose; this density is a kind of obsessive

boundary between Frame's experience in mental institutions and Istina's experience in institutions is partly what gives her writing a performative quality. The questions surrounding the factualness of *Faces* gives an empathetic reality to the experiences. In other words, the possibility that Istina's experiences may, in fact, be Frame's experiences gives *Faces* weight and opens up a space of cultural empathy where none existed before.

Wading through Frame's books is like wading through half-dry concrete; it is thick and exhausting; there are no footholds and there are times when you feel like the language is pushing you farther and farther into a sludgy, opaque swamp. Why not simply drown? The utter boggy despair. I found myself longing for quicksand—or at least an air mask, something that would help me breathe.

Definitions of: Trauma/Witness

Can a text witness?/Can a body witness?

I want to talk about witness and then join this to my own idea of tactility; I see my aim as no grander and no less grand than claiming touch as an essential (and often

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memory of marginalized bodies through language. But Eltit's language is even more 'performative' than Frame's. It is broken up into many sections—fragmented—in the same way that her 'performing body' is fragmented when it cuts itself. As you might be able to see in Chapter 3, performance seems more effective—or at least more direct—than language when it comes to expressing a bodily experience.

undiscussed) component of witnessing. The body as testament, the touch between bodies, a witness. [36]

Testimony or witness studies has become an increasingly broad field of study.[37] As Thomas A. Vogler notes, witness studies is included in "fields as diverse as Holocaust studies, the Latin American testimonio and atomic bomb survivor studies with approaches ranging from the historical and anthropological to the literary and philosophical, and considering a range of genres and media."[38] Vogler goes on to discuss the specific event or circumstance that may call for a witness: "Only certain events have the power to interpolate witnesses; in ordinary life we look at things or watch the passing scene, but we witness an accident or crime."[39] The implication of this statement is that an event must be extraordinary, must indeed be traumatic or violent, as an accident or a crime imply for it be 'witness worthy.' Trauma, like the term witness, is a word that is claimed by many fields (feminist studies, history, literature and psychology, among others) and whose use differs depending on the orientation and argument of the scholar who uses it.

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[36] Vogler writes "there is a widespread view that witness/survivors are by definition traumatized by their experience, and that they exhibit the effects of trauma in the broken, incoherent nature of their acts of witness." Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 11.

[37] Testimony vs. Witness: "Witness" and "testimony" are, even in Vogler's discussion of them, used interchangeably. "Testimony" or "testimonio" is most closely associated with South and Central American and the famous testimonio *I, Rigoberto Menchu.* What is also interesting about these words is that they allude to different senses. Testimony is something auditory, language-based, whereas witnessing seems to refer to the visual, the bodily act of seeing.

[38] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 1

[39] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 22.

My own definition of trauma will perhaps be more metaphoric than explanatory: trauma is a seizure of the self, as subtle as the tremble of a hand or as sudden and widely encompassing as an unexpected earthquake. Trauma can be a series of small seizures that continually scar the surface of the self (wrinkles, fine cuts, minute strokes in the brain) or one wide one gaping on that surface. *I, Rigoberto Menchu* is probably the most well known example of testimonial which attests to a gulf, a gaping in the cultural landscape of Guatemala. Menchu's testimony witnesses not only to the pain within her, but to the pain of the dead and the injured living in her country.

Why is witnessing important? It names us. In Madeline L'Engle's children's story, *A Wind in the Door*, the protagonist, is a 'Namer.' She must name individuals, stars and creatures before they are destroyed or unnamed. The only way to name an individual is to try to understand them, to try to virtually get inside them. Throughout the book, she inhabits her brother's body so that she can 'name' his cells; her naming will ensure that the cells and her brother will continue to exist. Witnessing is a naming of the self; it is an attentiveness that connects the individual fragments of a person—as a name does. It holds our memory in the other person's skin.

"If we heeded the calls to witness that are being mounted on every side, the result would be to live in a permanent state of witness, something like that achieved during the cold war when millions of people learned to live as witnesses to the

bomb."[40] Yes, but to my mind it is necessary to try to attend to all of these calls, or at the very least, hear them like a thousand humming moths in the back of our minds.

Tactile Witnessing

Looking at a slightly different example of witnessing, one that is closer in subject matter and spirit to Frame's "Faces," I point to Louise Phillips, the psychiatrist-academic who wrote *Mental Illness and the Body* and who, for her book, interviewed four psychiatric patients. During her interviews, Phillips notes not only her observations about the patients' bodies but also writes about her awareness of her own body. She also lets the patients speak for themselves (i.e. testify to their own experience) by quoting them extensively.[41]

Phillips witnesses to the numerous scars on the psyche and skin of her patients. Menchu testifies to the traumatic 'earthquake' that a cultural and political system undergoes. The reporter or passerby, as in Vogler's example, may witness the unexpected violence of a car accident and its victims. As different as all of these events may be, their ability to be witnessed requires a common act: the act of attention. Menchu needed to attend to her country's policies and the way they were affecting the people around her, and Phillips needed to listen to and emotionally

[40] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 34.
[41] Phillips, *Mental Illness and the Body*, Chapter 8.

engage the psychiatric patients she was speaking with; the very act of attending (or giving attention) seems to witness for the event or person that is attended to. By making this statement, I am differing from some of the viewpoints about witness and testimony, most of which make the assumption that only trauma or whatever a certain theoretical lens chooses to define as trauma "has the power to interpolate witness."[42] To give recognition and attention to each individual's life events, joyous or damaging (the car's driving by *and* the sudden accident), is unrealistic, maybe impossible. It is not that the witnessing is not essentially multisensory—but I don't think that studies have focused on the importance of involving all the senses during the act of witnessing.[43]

Why tactile witnessing? "Later in life, the skin becomes not only the receptor of rich and constant sensory input, it also serves as a kind of organ of communication through which he both experiences and expresses tenderness and pleasure and, alternatively, hurtfulness and pain." [44] Why is tactile witnessing important? Because seeing or speaking is often not empathy enough. "Language, in short, is the result of or is made possible by the dehiscence or folding back of the flesh of the world... In this sense, language too is "another flesh..."[45] And, perhaps, flesh is

[42] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 22.
[43] See my discussion of the haptic in Chapter 3
[44] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 17.
[45] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 91.

another language. It is a language that is more complex and more stifling than language; it is without the markers, the rules that govern language.

Frame's Istina can be witnessed by not only by herself and her physical scars, but also by the nurses who discipline her or the family who visits her or the doctor who advises her treatment. Istina also mentions that she wonders if she has any distinguishing marks of madness: disheveled hair? A strange look in the eye? A mark where the sting of the ECT strap lay? She seems to both fear and long for such a mark and the recognition such a mark would bring. Istina wants her experience in the asylum to bee seen and witnessed and her distinguishing mark would be proof of that experience. Yet such a mark is to be feared as well; in recognizing the mark, people may not witness to her experience but do quite the opposite: express disgust, anxiety and, possibly, commit violence. As Vogler notes with some surprise, "from the first the average person treated the injured…almost as if they had always been dirty beggars."[46] Istina's phrasing-- 'I wondered if people understood or *wanted* to understand what lay beyond" (italics mine)-- expresses her need to have people acknowledge the existence of the asylum and the patients within it. It also expresses her more personal desire to have people understand what lies 'beyond' her exterior. But again, her desire is always tainted by fear: do they *want* to understand? And there is a greater fear than mere ignorance: the doctors and the nurses who do know

[46] Vogler,*Witness and Memory*, 31. Kristeva's theory of abjection may be helpful in understanding this 'disgust'.

what lies beyond the stone walls of the asylum, who are seemingly interested in what lies beneath and beyond Istina's exterior, are not so interested in understanding the 'beneath' and 'beyond' but in doing away with it, changing it with lobotomies and ECT machines.

An individual *outside* of Istina must be attentive to her in order for her complete experience to be testified for. I think Istina's body is made strange by years of confinement and multiple ECT treatments and is also made strange by the isolation in solitary confinement and the obdurate lack of recognition that her caregivers seem to give to her body .At various points in the novel, nurses and doctors deny Istina the bathroom, tampons and clothes. As Harriet Davidson explains in her essay "Poetry, Witnessing and Feminism," "The testimony is not a recital of history, but is the creation of a history through an intersubjective process in which both the speaker and hearer gain their witnessing subjectivity through the new knowledge of a shared situation."[47] Perhaps part of tactile witnessing is its reciprocity. Touch is necessarily physically mutual. Even if both individuals do not agree to or initiate such touch; when a nurse reaches out to touch the hand of a patient—the patient is touching the nurses' hand as well. None of the other senses are mutual in quite the same way. Touch allows for moments of mutual sympathy. Placing a hand on the shoulder of an individual in mourning is a gesture that signifies understanding infinitely more than a look or a vocal gesture. The hand of the sympathizer meets the body of the mourner

[47] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*,

and is temporarily their skin is joined; in this joining, the sympathizer feels (or directly indicates that she) what the mourner feels.

In his small, complex book *Noli me Tangere: on the Raising of the Body*, Jean Luc Nancy calls what I have called 'witnessing touch' inner touch. He elucidates his philosophy of inner touch by describing the first and perhaps most magnificent resurrection (certainly, the most mythologized): Christ's resurrection on the third day of his death. In the garden near his tomb, Mary Magdalene sits; she is waiting for Jesus to appear—in any case, she has *faith* that he will appear. It is probable that she is shrouded in mourning robes that she is weeping or staring vacantly, wringing her hands in some daydream. When Jesus does appear on the prescribed third day, Mary does not recognize him.[48] She thinks that he is the gardener come to water the plants and clean. When she hears the gardener's voice, a voice she half recognizes, she tries to touch him to affirm her recognition. But Jesus—shrouded and unrecognizable—stops her; Mary must believe that he has returned without a confirming touch. She must touch him, recognize him, without *physically* touching him.

This moment of simultaneous desire and withdrawal, hesitation and recognition, is captured in the numerous pictures that Nancy places alongside his text. There is Rembrandt's depiction, tinged with light but lacking intimacy. There is Titian's soft pastoral painting and Alonso Cano's strangely emotional one. Each of

[48] Godfrey, in Janet Frame's novel, *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*, is also 'resurrected' on the third day of his death/coma.

these paintings Nancy examines and in each of them Mary's hand reaches out instinctively to touch and, hearing Jesus' command, '*Noli me Tangere*,' stops –- vibrating, electric—just short of that touch.

The command is not as harsh as it sounds, but it asks for an incredible amount of restraint and an incredible amount of faith from Mary. The witness is asked for these things too; this is why the act of witnessing is so difficult and requires moments of such intense attention. When Istina beseeches Dr. Portman about her lobotomy, she does not want him to *not* touch her, but she does want him to not touch her harshly, without recognition of her. Before the intimacy of physical touch, there must be a recognition, an "inner touch" given to the person who is to receive your touch. "Touch me with a real touch, one that is restrained, no appropriating and non identifying. Caress me, don't touch me."[49] So Mary Magdalene must not use her physical touch to identify Jesus, but, in recognition of him, she can caress him. Touch without such recognition, without first having inner touch, is a violation. I think of this example: at one point in the novel, Istina overhears the nurses at Cliffhaven plotting to give her ECT the next day—tittering like the three weird sisters, they whisper 'we will give her a shock she will never forget.' They do not mean the touch of the ECT to be therapeutic or 'for her own good.' In fact, quite the opposite. If one of the nurses had refrained from advocating for and giving Istina the shock treatment, her lack of touch would, in fact have been a witnessing touch. It

[49] Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*,50.

would be a deliberate withdrawal of touch because of the knowledge that touch (the ECT in this case) would bring harm.

The touch that is de-witnessing, like the ECT machine or the lobotomy, displays a lack of recognition. It probes without knowing what or who it probes. By touching the unrecognized skin of another, you are trying to contain them, capture them through your touch. So Istina is captured and contained, but not recognized by the violent hands that hold her down during ECT. To impart witnessing touch would be to recognize the inability to contain the other through your touch. Why is witnessing important? It holds memory: "You hold nothing: you are unable to hold or retain anything , and that is precisely what you must love and know. That is where there is knowledge and love."[50]

By reviewing the concept of witnessing, I wanted to make clear what framework I am using to examine instances of touch in Frame's work. Through the various descriptions of bodily encounters in *Faces in the Water*, Frame witnesses to the loneliness of being the mental patient, Istina. Interestingly, Istina then witnesses for both herself and other characters in the novel, creating a reciprocal circle of witnessing. Frame witnesses for Istina, Istina for other fictional mental patients and, through Istina's fictional witnessing, Frame witnesses for a larger community of mental patients in New Zealand. How can a text witness? Frame's novels are

[50] Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*,37.

witnessing texts. They are culturally imbedded in the landscape of New Zealand literature.[51]

Space and Touch

In a recent issue of the photography magazine "Eyemazing," there is a series of images entitled "Metanoia".[52] "Metanoia" chronicles some of the oldest mental hospitals in Egypt. Nermine Hamman describes it as a "space of forever." The hallways are long, imbedded with many closed doors, like monk's cells or 14th-century dormitories. Perhaps it is just the way that Hamman has photographed the space, in black and white and acid-stained green. In long shots of halls and half empty rooms. In close-ups of the patients' faces, skin melting into itself, protecting itself from the lens. But the building seems already haunted.[53] The beds are narrow cots with rusty frames. Single beds. A woman lies on her side, a stuffed rabbit next to her—a comfort, a remembrance from the past. Another woman sits in a kind of courtyard. She wears a housecoat. The courtyard has palm trees and against the palm trees there are piles of old objects. The woman sits and looks and fixedly looks at the ground. She is waiting. But I am not sure what she is waiting for. Strange to name these photographs "metanoia," meaning a change of heart, a spiritual renewal, when

[51] I make a similar claim about the work of performance artist, Marina Abramovic in Chapter 3.
[52] Hamman, "Metanoia."
[53] For the potential symbiosis that can occur between object-body and human-body, see ECT and Lobotomy further into this chapter. Also, look at Chapter 2, Francesca Woodman.

there is so little change and, if there is renewal, it must be of the invisible kind, a tiny spring of water, wrapped and wrapped in many layers of muffled protection. There do not seem to be any other buildings around the hospital. I can see no medical staff, no medical supplies, no cafeteria or collective space. Only these hallways and tin beds and two old women wearing nightgowns, their faces impossibly wrinkled, supporting each other as they try to stand. I think this place must echo, but the echo would be one that reverberates back to itself, like a boomerang. [54]

These pictures are from the present day. Phillips's book was written in 2006. I am sorry that these spaces are still with us. But they are. They are not just imaginings from a past nightmare. There is a sense in both the photographs of "Metanoia" and the descriptions of Cliffhaven and Treecroft that Frame sketches that these bodies are forgotten. They have been exhumed from the collective memory of society, sacrificed to give the illusion of uniform health.[55]

The spatial arrangements of mental institutions not only separate the 'outside' world from the 'inside' world, but more poignantly, these divisions of space separate patients from one another. Patients so rarely have meaningful physical or emotional contact with people from the outside: family is scared and guilt-ridden, guests are anxious. And patients so rarely have meaningful contact with this inside the asylum: nurses are harsh, doctors are distant. You might assume that they, at least, receive

[54] See Appendix A, Figure 3
[55] See Chapter 3 on Performance Art. Particularly note Diamanda Galas and her "Plague Mass." Galas describes a similar type of maltreatment and judgment directed towards AIDS patients.

comfort from fellow patients. Instead, the separate Wards and the distinct treatment patients receive within these wards serve to reinforce the isolation patients feel. Think of Istina during her ECT treatment: she is separated from other patients by locked doors, she is furthermore separated in the actual treatment room and she is still separated in the recovery room, where each patient has a separate, covered bed, yards away from any other patient.

Before undergoing electroshock therapy, or 'Treatment' as the patients of Cliffhaven call it, the patients are sealed into a locked dormitory. Once sealed, they are no longer able to have contact with any of the other patients; they are not allowed to go to the bathroom; and they are not allowed to go into the tightly guarded ECT room (an extension off of the locked dormitory) until they are called. According to Istina, patients are taken for treatment by their 'voltage.' After they are given ECT, patients are transferred to another room where narrow beds are laid to receive patient's disturbed and uncoordinated bodies. The locked ECT dormitory and the way in which it is laid out, room by room, with each room having a specific purpose and each closed to the other rooms, is an example of the way in which space is organized in the mental hospital and the way in which that organization regulates touch. Istina is virtually imprisoned in the ECT dormitory and she is unable to touch patients not receiving treatment. While receiving treatment she is effectively cut off from any of the other patients and is only touched by the jolting ECT machine and the rough hands of the nurses. During her recovery from the ECT, she is completely

untouched by machine, nurse, or fellow patients. She lies disoriented on a single bed---the disconnection she feels is mirrored by the disconnectedness of the rooms she has been led through before, during and after treatment.

Historical precedents

The spatial arrangements of the Egyptian hospital in "Metanoia"-- buildings far from the throng of city centers, crumpled and stained walls, a boredom that has deepened into timelessness, an anxiety that has deepened into acceptance-- have been here for a long time. There is Foucault with his Great Confinement; there is Didi-Huberman with his diagrams of the Salpêtrière, so complicated, a labyrinth of tiny dungeons, and each dungeon caging different types of inhabitants. There is no sun and doctors knock on the heads of patients like coconuts—describing each rattle in profound detail.

In his book *Invention of Hysteria*, Didi-Huberman includes a blue print of the infamous Salpêtrière, a large women's asylum in France.[56] By the late 1600's, the century of Foucault's 'Great Confinement,' there were already over three thousand women housed in the Salpêtrière and, by the late 1800's, when Charcot, grand master of hysteria and proclaimed (no doubt also self-proclaimed) 'father of neurology' was in charge, the hospital represented a virtual descent into hell. Narrow passages separated the hysterics from the psychotics, the epileptics from the demented, and

[56] See Appendix A, Figure 4

those with mental or physical disability from the 'incurables.' The diagnosis were almost too various to fit into the prescribed seven circles of hell and the descent through the Salpêtrière looks to be more labyrinthine than circular, more crooked than symmetrical. Didi-Huberman notes that historians of the day saw Charcot as a veritable Dante, a divinely inspired deity sacrificing himself to the hellish chaos of the Salpêtrière. I (and certainly I am not the only one—Didi-Huberman's language is subtle and ironic in describing Charcot's role) wonder that it is who made the greatest sacrifice and who it is who experienced the greatest suffering: Charcot, the divine Dante, or the howling, half naked demons that surrounded him, the female patients at the Salpêtrière.

In his seminal book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* Michel Foucault traces the way in which mentally ill patients were organized in the space of the society which they lived in.[57] He claims that before the Enlightenment, rather than being confined, patients were (merely) excluded. "Madmen" were taken from town to town in boats,[58] were never allowed to rest in one space, but were also not confined to any one space; they would drift from town to town, eternal wanderers. No doubt such a life was difficult. The mentally ill were barred from forming a connection with land (any stable town or city), family (who

[57] Interestingly, Foucault's book and Frame's *Faces in the Water* were first published in the same year: 1961.

[58] Foucault writes "One thing at least is certain: water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man." Frame echoes this sentiment with her title, *Faces in the Water*.

had likely cast them out), and other mentally ill patients (since they were all spatially disconnected with one another). Furthermore, they were barred from receiving treatment. It was a life of literal physical and emotional isolation.

In the seventeenth century, madness was reorganized. Whereas both before and during the Renaissance the mentally ill were scattered and left to fend for themselves, during the Enlightenment all of the mentally ill were gathered ("recaptured") and placed in large houses of confinement along with other 'unwanted' persons from society: prisoners, the handicapped and the very poor. Once the 'mad' traveled freely on the water, visiting town after town; now, their house of confinement was an island, without access to any other land mass.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the mentally ill were not only confined to their island, the hospital, but they were also imprisoned by barbaric cages, chains and straightjackets. This gave them little contact with the world outside the hospital, and virtually no contact with patients or administrators within the hospital, leading to a complete physical isolation. The possibility that these patients could witness or give testimony for themselves or were given such a testimony to their experience by others is laughable—there is no possibility.

During the 19th century, the attitude towards madness changes; doctors, fascinated by disorders of the brain, poke, prod and observe; patients are touched—that is, they are not completely physically isolated—but the touch they receive is usually a gesture of curiosity or violence or both. Doctors become not so much

guards as potential healers and even magicians. Their mission: to transform the mentally sick and 'corrupted' individual into a sane, non-violent and morally healthy individual. In this 19th-century scenario, the doctor is presumed to be not only healer (and 'moral healer' at that) but Father, a representation of the patriarchal law governing society. Though Frame is writing a century later, *Faces in the Water* makes note of the nurses and the matron constantly telling patients (Istina included) that 'they need to be taught a lesson.' Usually, the 'lesson' consists, as it did in past centuries, of physical confinement (weeks and weeks of solitary) or physical torture (ECT treatments or a lobotomy). The notion of physically punishing the mentally ill for their supposed moral corruption is clearly entrenched in the European (and European influenced) mental health system. Frame's novel is not set in France, the country on which Foucault is, in large part, basing his theories, nor is Frame's book taking place between the 16th and 19th centuries.[59]

Frame critic Judith Dell Panny believes much of Frame's work is allegorical. This is particularly apt when analyzing the Cliffhaven and Treecroft's spatial arrangement. Like the Salpêtrière, both Treecroft and Cliffhaven are spatially divided

[59] The book is set in New Zealand during the 1950's and 1960's. However, as Catherine Coleborne notes, "most studies of the asylum have been 'national' in their focus and yet the phenomenon of institutional confinement crossed the national lines." Furthermore, "Historians agree that psychiatric treatment as it developed in Australia and New Zealand was largely based on British practices and was part of a wider set of developments in the western world." Unfortunately (unfortunate because so much of this development included cruelty to mentally ill patients), *Faces in the Water* is testament to the fact that the practices and the general spatial organization of asylums in New Zealand followed the same patterns as their counterparts in France and Britain and America. Coleborne, *At Work in the Colonial Asylum,49*

according to the diagnosis and behavior of each patient. There are only two wards at Cliffhaven mental hospital Ward 4 and Ward 2. The division is simple: Ward 4 patients are melancholic, but largely unviolent and they are thought to be curable. Ward 2 patients live in a guarded brick building, keep up no veneer of being 'sane'—sanity, like insanity, being, in part, a performance—and are thought to be less curable, if not entirely incurable.[60]

The spatial arrangement at Treecroft, the hospital where Istina has a brief sojourn between her two stays at Cliffhaven, is more sinister. When Istina arrives at Treecroft expecting the crudely boarded-up windows and dilapidated furniture of Cliffhaven, she is both surprised and highly suspicious; Treecroft's Ward 7 is bright and cheery, pictures hang on the wall, patients gather around a cozy fireplace and are fed plentiful amounts of bacon, eggs and cream. The ward motto is "mental patients are people too"; it is clean, it is progressive and it is like a hotel. When government inspectors come to the hospital, they are led through the shiny, newly polished halls of Ward 7. They congratulate the medical staff on their care of the patients and their exquisite and rare compassion. But, as the reader easily guesses, Istina's suspicions of Treecroft prove to be true; one day, she is helping a nurse in the kitchen and notices a sour smell coming from a door that connects to the kitchen, a door that she has never been through: this is Ward Four-Five-and-One. Through the kitchen

[60] See the photographs in Didi-Huberman's *Invention of Hysteria*. It is quite clear that many of the patients are "performing" their sickness. There are positions are overly dramatic; the doctor also makes it quite clear that he expects to see certain symptoms in a hysteric, depressive etc.

window, she glimpses a set of unkempt buildings—shacks or slums: they are another ward, Lawn Lodge. Patients of Ward Four-Five-and-One are not given plentiful food, nor do they have quaint, painted pictures on the wall. They, like the patients of Cliffhaven's Ward 2, are chronic, but they are unlikely to be violent and they are disconcertingly obedient to the rules and regulations at Treecroft. These patients, Istina dubs the workers of Treecroft: they sew, they clean, they run errands for the staff and, occasionally, they grow wild-eyed when they fail to adhere to their well-regulated routine—when they are late for the dinner bell or forget a dirty but prized possession in the common room.

Istina, as is inferable from Judith Dell Panny's comparison of Istina's journey through the wards in the mental asylum to a journey to the depths of hell, is moved from Ward 7 to Ward 4-5-1. The smell of the ward, a smell like fermentation,[61] and the resigned attitude of the patients disconcert her even more than the superficiality and high gloss shine of Ward 7 and she is, again, moved, to Lawn Lodge. If Istina's journey is truly a journey through the rings of hell, then her move to Lawn Lodge is a move to the furthest pit of hell—the pit of a burning cold (according to Dante) rather than a scorching heat, the pit where Satan chews, digests, regurgitates and chews again his most vile sinners. A dramatic analogy, but not too dramatic for the

[61] "Once there was a door opened into another ward and the sour smell of wet bedclothes seeped through and mingled with the heavy sweetness of the arum lilies on the mantelpiece, the Christmas lilies that relatives use at funerals to hide the smell of death." (Frame, *Faces in the Water,* 79) "What would they have said if I had told them that illness can be caused by a smell, that it was the smell of Four-Five-and-One which was draining all my energy and desire to live?" (Frame,*Faces in the Water*, 87.)

suffering of those patients housed in Lawn Lodge; here, the violent and the incurable mix with the psychotic, the delusional, the murderers and the simply confounding. Some patients are permanently zipped into straightjackets and fed with a spoon, others crawl from the few scattered tables to go to the bathroom in a corner, and still others slap each other through frustration. Lawn Lodge patients are rarely given enough food and their clothes are permanently soiled; unless the doctors have given up on them (which is often the case at LL), they have three ECT treatments daily or weekly—the amount and voltage level of the treatment always comes as a surprise to patients. Truly, Lawn Lodge patients are chewed up and spit back out multiple times. Unable to move (straightjackets), unable to have their basic physical needs met (wetting themselves under the table). their bodies become virtually invisible as sovereign, expressive parts of the patient.

Space: Doctors and Patients:

These doctors, these gods of fate, hurriedly walking through wards, a clipboard in hand, a heavy nurse talking at his elbow, explaining the bruise on one woman's face, the necessity for regular ECT for another. The excitement that the doctor's entrance caused, supposed vessel of all power, denier and giver. What a dangerous position for both doctor and patient to be placed in as acolytes and demi-gods. Istina notes that "Dr. Howell drank from a special cup which was tied around the handle with red cotton to distinguish the staff cups from those of patients, and

thus prevent the interchange of diseases like boredom, loneliness."[62] The separation of patient bodies from doctor bodies goes even further than the flesh of each of their bodies; the separation takes place even within the very objects they touch.

I want to catalogue the few brief moments of tactile witness in the book, many performed by these hospital 'gods' (perhaps necessarily so, since I think they have the most power to witness)-- by doctors. The first episode of witnessing happens after Istina is let out of solitary confinement after an attempted suicide and she sees a new doctor, a Doctor Trace. A 'trace' can be an object or a scent that is left for others to witness you. Think of a dog tracking a missing person by the smell on a piece of clothing.[63] Dr. Trace does not, like many of the other doctors, shy away from the patients' touch or their pleas to be heard or their inquiries about going home. While visiting Istina's ward, he asks her if she would like him to bring her pictures that she can tell stories about. The very fact that Dr. Trace asks permission of Istina rather than forcing her, holding her down or ignoring her, supports the idea that Dr. Trace is indeed willing to 'trace' and find traces of individuality and life in his patients. I think it is more the fact that Dr. Trace approaches Istina, willingly mingling his body with hers. Like Louise Phillips who leans in to listen to the patients she is interviewing and sympathizes with their bodily ailments, Dr. Trace is showing bodily signs of attending to Istina.

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[62] Frame. *Faces in the Water*, 27.
[63] This is a very simple definition of "trace" and "tracing." For a more complex and extended discussion of the trace, I would look at the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida.

This incident is interestingly juxtaposed with a second incident: Dr. Steward telling Istina that she is slated to have a lobotomy. The paragraph where Istina talks to Dr. Trace is, in the book's layout, right next to the paragraph where her lobotomy is announced by Dr. Steward.

Istina becomes understandably preoccupied with her surgery; at one point, she muses on the fact that her parents said that they would never sign the consent forms for such an operation. However, because Istina has been in and out of mental institutions for so long, they have changed their minds. The surgical procedure of the lobotomy is, as discussed, an erasure of the self – physically it actually severs brain connections.

Yet the collective agreement from doctors, nurses and parents that Istina needs a lobotomy is an erasure of Istina's self. The erasure is of brain matter as well as the connections that this brain matter represents: the connection between incidents of memory, the thin connection between feeling and thought. Istina's parents have created her, raised her, and presumably know her. Istina's doctors have diagnosed her, looked through her files and, on rare occasions, had discussions with her. Istina's nurses have, if only marginally, cared for her daily physical well-being, and she has tried to form relationships with them. But all of these people--essentially, all of the people who have been in her life—are advocating for an operation that erases her. In

some very real sense, they are advocating for her death.[64] As Istina wryly reflects, "I had never been born with an enclosed leaflet in which the management undertakes to replace all goods not found satisfactory."[65]

It is at this moment of total despair when Dr. Portman rescues Istina, "calling to mind folk tales in which a prince arrives in the nick of time."[66] Dr. Portman's name, like Istina's or Dr. Trace's or Sister Bridge's is subtly symbolic. A port makes you think of a "portal", a portal to another world or a round window carved into the otherwise sealed body of a boat. A port can also be a safe harbor or resting place. To Istina, Dr. Portman is both types of ports: a man who brings a sense of possibility and escape (as windows can be used for) and whose words bring safety.

After being told of her impending lobotomy Istina naturally broods over it, and when she sees Dr. Portman-- one of the first doctors she encountered at Cliffhaven-- coming through her ward, she plucks at his sleeve, asking, 'what is your opinion?' That is, what is his opinion of the impending lobotomy? Dr. Portman is at first startled by Istina's contact—a contact that is discouraged by the doctors and the nurses alike. But he answers Istina's question decisively: he does not think she needs the operation and he does not want her changed. Dr. Portman is neither frightened or contemptuous of Istina and, like Dr. Trace, considers her a living, functioning

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[64] "With the doctor's advice and approval and my parents' consent, the self that for nearly thirty years had fought with time and, painstakingly, like a colony of ants bearing away the slain army, had carried the dead seconds, minutes, hours, over the difficult, slowly habitual tracks to the rest, the central storehouse—that self was to be assaulted, perhaps demolished." Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 218-219.
[65] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 172.
[66] Dell Panny, *The Fiction of Janet Frame*, 28.

individual, capable of asking and responding to 'rational' questions. More importantly, Dr. Portman's pronouncement reverses the erasure of self that threatens Istina and has been threatening her in the form of ECT treatments, solitary confinement and general dehumanization during her time in mental hospitals. He also does not cringe from her touch; physically he accepts her as she is. Her memory and the body it is contained in are preserved.

In the third act of witness in *Faces*, Dr. Portman witnesses for Istina, not only against the other doctors at the hospital (namely, Dr. Steward), but also against an outsider to the hospital. A library van periodically makes stops at Cliffhaven. Istina, seeing the van from a window, is mesmerized by the books and goes to look inside the van. The clergyman in charge of the van catches her handling the books and is aghast.[67] He is afraid, it seems, that Istina will 'infect' the books and shoos her (dog-like) out of the van. Here the flesh of objects, the books, takes precedence over the flesh of the human being, Istina. The clergyman is indicating that Istina is not as worthy as the bodies of the used books stacked in the van.

Having witnessed the incident, Dr. Portman allows Istina to go back into the van (with him for protection) and asks her to choose 60 books for the Cliffhaven residents to read, allowing her to touch the books and to do this side by side with him. The clergyman is also from the "outside world", thus, again, erasing a physical line

[67] "The chaplain had spoken to me as if I suffered from a disease that would infect the books." Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 241.

that sets patients apart from other. However, Dr. Portman explicitly requests that she browse the books and Istina inevitably touches them as she browses; this allows Istina to feel that her touch, her very skin, will not infect the book or the other people who touch the book with her 'madness' or 'sickness.' Her skin is able to be touched without being destroyed (ECT machine) or without destroying.

Nurses/Patients, Nurses/Doctors: ("the nuns of the asylum")

Perhaps the most complicated relationship Istina forms in Cliffhaven mental hospital is with Sister Bridge. Sister Bridge, like many of the other nurses, is corseted, red-faced and middle-aged. Yet, as Istina notes, the patients smiled when Sister Bridge spoke to them, and her orders, though articulated in the same language as that of the other nurses or the Matron, seem infused with compassion. One day, in an impulse of confidence, Sister Bridge confides to Istina that when she began nursing mental patients twenty years ago (when things were even worse than in the 1960s, when patients were kept in metal boots, chains and straightjackets all day), she had cried every day after work: with sympathy for the patients, with horror at the workings of the institution. Sister Bridge's confession --a confession she hastily regrets--quite clearly separates her from the other nurses and Matrons.[68]

It evidences her ability to see the suffering that Istina and similar patients are undergoing, thus taking a first, crucial step in being able to witness them. Moreover,

[68] Matrons functioned as head nurses and were in charge of the patient wards.

Sister Bridge's confession to Istina effectively 'bridges the gap' between Istina as patient and herself as caregiver. Sister Bridge does, with her perceptible compassion and confidential confession, connect the supposedly sick with the supposedly well, like a bridge that touches two separate land masses. Sister Bridge's confession is dangerous in a world where, as Istina remarks, the difference between being 'mad' and being 'sane' (being on one side of the bridge or the other) could be transformed with a 'slip of the tongue'.[69] "The attendants," one mental patient remarks, "were more messed up than the patients."[70]

Sister Bridge's unspoken acknowledgment and spoken confession to Istina is, as I mentioned, quickly regretted. Sister Bridge compensates for this moment of connection with sarcastic jabs at Istina and by insisting that Istina needs to be 'taught a lesson.'[71] The relationship between Istina and Sister Bridge reaches a crisis point on the day that Istina escapes from the mental asylum. Once in the world beyond the fence, Istina panics and, unsure of what to do, calls Sister Bridge on the telephone, beseeching her not to punish her by putting her in solitary confinement.

While outside of the asylum, Sister Bridge once again builds a 'bridge' between herself and Istina: she touches Istina, buys her an ice cream and even points out her (Sister Bridge's) house to Istina. This renewal of their connection both

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[69] "*Faces in the Water* continually highlights the fragility of the boundary between us and them. That this boundary is erected through discourse makes it simultaneously all-powerful while in place but also extremely fragile: "a slip of the tongue (literally) and you could end up on the wrong side." Blower, "Madness, Philosophy and Literature" 74-89.
[70] Chesler,*Women and Madness*, 235.
[71] Frame, *Faces in the Water,* 139.

pleases and bewilders Istina—like many of the other Cliffhaven patients she has, despite Sister Bridge's sarcasm, grown to love her.[72]

When they are outside the gates of the mental hospital, Sister Bridge shows Istina her house. It's small and cottage-like, and Istina finds it unbearably lonely; it mirrors Sister Bridge's body, guarded by stays and corsets, uncomfortable in its packaging. Istina wants to connect with Sister Bridge, but she cannot embrace her. Violent touch, though punishable, is an acceptable form of touch, so (as evidenced by the ECT incident at the beginning of *Faces*) Istina pushes Sister Bridge down some stairs. As Istina explains it, "I had pushed her at last... I had pushed her and I wanted to run to her and put my arms around her because she was my mother and I had caused her pain. I knew that she would never forgive me, that our contract of enmity was signed and sealed, surprisingly enough, with my love which I had shown by rushing at her and thumping her soft belly, knocking like a demand to be let in out of the dark."[73] Istina's desperation for contact with Sister Bridge, her awareness that Sister Bridge cares for patients, acknowledges them as human, is even their 'mother', leads Istina to force a type of violent embrace between herself and Sister Bridge. She thumps rather than caresses, and knocks rather than kisses, but Istina's touch is an act

[72] Clearly, Istina and Sister Bridge's relationship changes once it is taken outside of the asylum and I will be further discussing the relationship between 'outside' space and the space of the asylum later in this chapter.
[73] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 176.

of witness for Sister Bridge and for the love she feels for her.[74] Her knocking of Sister Bridge's belly indicates Istina's need to be witnessed by and protected by Sister Bridge's body. As Judith Dell Panny succinctly puts it, "As Sister Bridge's love is subverted into sarcasm, Istina's love is subverted into anger and violence."[75]

Much of the complexity that figures into the relationship between Sister Bridge and Istina is, in fact, the mutual witnessing that they have for one another. Istina recognizes that beneath Sister Bridge's corset and layers of fat, she is compassionate towards the patients; she also sees that Sister Bridge is lonely in her life outside the hospital walls. Sister Bridge becomes aware of Istina's uncanny understanding and it scares her. The mutual recognition between Istina—a patient—and her—a nurse makes her vulnerable. The fact that Sister Bridge refuses to acknowledge the potential reciprocity of witnessing between herself and Istina—Istina sees the essential loneliness and compassion in Sister Bridge-- leads to aggression and resentment on both their parts. Istina expresses this resentment by pushing Sister Bridge down the stairs. Perhaps, she hopes that if they touch—a mutual, if violent touch—that Sister Bridge will be forced to acknowledge their similarity. Sister Bridge expresses her resentment towards Istina more indirectly; she advocates for Istina's lobotomy. The lobotomy, with its crude instruments and its erasure of memory will surely make Istina less aware and will heighten the gap

[74] "Sister Bridge was my mother." Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 173
[75] Dell Panny, *The Fiction of Janet Frame*,34.

between herself and Sister Bridge. Istina chooses to touch directly---an indication that she seeks to connect. Sister Bridge chooses to touch indirectly, through the scalpel of an unknown doctor—an indication of her resistance to Istina's feelings.

Affection between nurse and patient would be unacceptable, even scorned, as is evidenced in the heartbreaking story of Helen, another patient housed in the hospital.[76] Helen regularly opens her arms wide, while simultaneously repeating, "Love", "Love." The nurses delight in taunting Helen by promising her 'love', the embrace she seeks; then, at the moment when contact between Helen and a nurse was to occur, the nurse moves aside, leaving Helen to embrace air rather than flesh, denying Helen the love she so longs for. I don't think that this taunting comes only from cruelty but also from a distinct discomfort that many of the nurses have with their own bodies and because, by denying affectionate physical contact, they hope to make the difference between patients and nurses clear.

Istina describes the matron's bodies as being similar to one another, "huge, encased in the white uniform through which you could see the marks, like bars, of their corsets."[77] The description, interestingly, is much like the architecture of the asylum itself; the corset, made of whalebone or heavy steel, acts as a protection from any kind of real intimacy or touch. Even if Helen or Istina were given the elusive affection they so craved, they would end up hugging not flesh but steel. Istina's

[76] Frame, *Faces in the Water*,90.
[77] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 68.

description of the corset and the fact that she mentions that many of the nurses (both Matron Glass and Sister Bridge are described this way) are large, red-faced women who breathe heavily under any physical exertion make me think that nurses depicted in Frame's novels are essentially uncomfortable with their own bodies. It is difficult to tend or give affection to the bodies of others if you can not care for your own body or do not believe that it is deserving of affection.[78]

It is also true that this love is hardened into enmity, an enmity so great that Sister Bridge no longer simply uses sarcasm to distance herself from Istina, but begins to advocate for a lobotomy or leucotomy for her. Instead of causing her to be protected by Sister Bridge, Istina's thumping embrace of Sister Bridge's body has made her more vulnerable to the invasive instruments around her. Like the unfortunate Helen, whose open embrace ends not only in a denial of that embrace but in a violent rebuff, Istina's love for Sister Bridge is not only met with indifference but with hostility and disgust. By advocating for Istina's lobotomy, Sister Bridge rejects Istina and advocates for an erasure of Istina's self. The erasure of Istina through the lobotomy procedure would also effectively erase any awareness that Istina has of Sister Bridge's love and compassion for the patients.

Patients and Patients: (social rituals, but lack of intimacy)

[78] Istina notes many of the nurses are in love with doctors. Although most of their loves is unrequited and the doctors are frequently already married.

Istina sees herself as a witness to her fellow patients (and even, as we have seen, to the potential compassion that emanates from Sister Bridge). In her second stay at Cliffhaven, Istina becomes something of a champion for the other patients by speaking up for them and, occasionally, putting her body in danger for them (defending the behavior of other patients might result in more ECT treatments, since her defense may be recording as 'disruptive'). Of course, the danger in giving your hand to a drowning person is that you could so easily get pulled in, as Sister Bridge is fearful of being or, as Istina, with her sympathy to fellow patients, may have already been. Istina writes of her uneasiness and responsibility to the twice-lobotomized Brenda and relates that "I was adept at making a fuss, at arguing and trying to stand up for my rights and the rights of other patients whom I felt the responsibility of protecting."[79] It seems clear also that Frame intended Istina to become or be perceived as a witness. The name Istina Mavet links the Serbo-Croatian word for 'truth' with the Hebrew word for 'death.'[80] Istina is giving truth to the dead or those who are looked on as dead. Istina's name also obviously links truth to the state of death. You must first become 'dead' or drown in order to understand truth.

Istina does not receive a lobotomy. If she had undergone surgery, it is likely that she would be unable to narrate or testify to the experience of her fellow patients. She would be another 'face in the water.' Instead, Istina is a witness. Maybe this is

[79] Frame, *Faces in the Water,* 94.
[80] This particular insight comes from Dell Panny, *The Fiction of Janet Frame,* 28.

where Foucault and I differ. His histories are accounts of the inexorability of power; this power may be subtle, but it is ever present; the power of the institution or state makes it seem as though the individual has little or no agency. Istina has an ethical responsibility to her fellow patients, but as a patient, she also needs her own witness, needs someone to testify to her experience and in essence save her from being a permanent, forgotten 'face in the water.'

In the mental hospital, a constant routine of forced discipline is enacted. We can see this both in Foucault's analysis and in Istina's narrative. Istina is repeatedly told that she is behaving badly. Such bad behavior is widely defined: it could be that Istina chooses not to eat at mealtime, shakes in fear from ECT, or defends another patient from the wrath of the nurses—any act, it seems, that is inspired by individual desire is quenched and deemed 'immoral' or 'bad'. Conformity to the institution's codes is the order of the day. It is during Istina's disruptive attempted suicide that plans for her lobotomy solidify. Perhaps this moral reform that allows no emotion to be excessive, no action to be too sudden and no individual to be too original is worse than the chains and fetters of the 17th century. If you are constantly told that you need to be 'taught' and are morally deficient, will you not fear yourself as much as others fear you? Through constant verbal berating and the violence of ECT and insulin shock treatments, will you not be subdued into paralysis?

More evidence of the separation of patients from one another is seen through Istina's narration; she recalls the soft, pawing touch of Ward 2 patients when they

come into any brief contact with Ward 4 patients—usually during hospital holidays--as though they were making sure that they were made of the same substance as the better treated, more composed Ward 4 patients. The touch of the Ward 2 patients is reverent, but the Ward 4 patients often shun their touch for fear that they will 'catch' the deepening madness of Ward 2 patients. In this way, they imitate the nurses and doctors who resist touching all patients, but especially those from Ward 2. If, by touching Ward 4 patients, Ward 2 patients are making sure that they are still made of skin and bone, still human, then Ward 4 patients shrinking from Ward 2 demonstrates their desire to imitate the reserve and lack of vulnerability that the 'sane' (nurses, doctors, visitors) show.

There is also a secret intimacy that Istina finds with the other patients on her ward. In the night, they lay side by side in their single beds, mostly peaceful. "I like the beds side by side and the reassurance of other people's soft breathing mingled with the irritation of their snoring and their secret conversations." [81] It is a peace, a very brief commingling of bodies, that is disturbed when Istina is placed in solitary confinement. There is a straw mat on the floor and a steel mail slot where trays of food are given to her.

"I heard the distant screams and cries from the park, and I thought, perhaps it is time to eat my bread and butter for company. Once a small mouse came running in such a hurry underneath my door and over to my bed and on to the clothes... He came

[81] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 37.

again and again. I christened him Mr. Griffiths."[82] These screams and cries become a comfort to Istina; she is familiar with the patients of the hospital; she knows at which points in the day any given patient is likely to scream or "act out." Perhaps, in her damp cell, she imagines these scenarios to herself: "Mary Margaret slapped Noeline." Or "Noeline clung to Dr. Portman's coat." Or "Helen was given a double bout of ECT." These vocal sounds also mark her day: at nine, she may hear the whimpers of those bound for ECT; thus it is morning and she will eat her bread. It is the only kind of sensory stimulation or comfort that Istina has. The voices must be coming from bodies, from bodies she knows.

Let me examine the dances and the picnics. There is a dance. Patients are given cast-off fancy clothes. A few may be allowed to shower. Some patients are seen as too disruptive to be amongst so many people, with drinks abounding and the seductive sound of music, but Istina goes. If they perform well during these social rituals, then they will be closer to "recovery," closer to being able to perform these rituals in the world outside the asylum. Istina is desperate to be noticed by one of the doctors; she sways her body acceptably; she gets close, but not too close to her Erik (those fifth grade dances where your hands were a foot apart on each others' shoulders) But real intimacy, the intimacy that is meant to come from the social ritual

[82] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 207.

of a dance or a party, dressing up in frilly dresses and smoothing garish colors on the face--sex, partnership, children--is forbidden, punished. [83]

Patients are restricted like children, made to adopt the acceptable social rituals of romance, primping and dancing, but not actually allowed intimacy or sexuality. Think of Dr. Trace (one of the kinder doctors) telling Frame "that she has been a good girl." This indicates her childishness, her lack of development. The doctor's cups are separated from patients' cups: this is a clearly marked indication that the very substance of patients and doctors are different (discussed in greater detail later in the chapter), but also reminds me of the separation of adults and children during holiday meals**.**

There is a curious observation about the layout of the Treecroft/Cliffhaven wards that just barely punctures Dell Panny's theory about Istina's journey through mental asylums-- a journey, says Dell Panny, through hell. After all, the theory, though interesting (certainly more interesting than most of the pseudo-autobiographical criticism on Frame), is simple and without subtlety. It is unarguable that the patients of Ward 2 and Lawn Lodge are treated disgracefully, particularly in comparison to the treatment that patients of Ward 4 and Ward 7 receive. However, because they are physically thrown together 'pell mell', Lawn Lodge and Ward 2 patients can experience a physical closeness and occasional vulnerability with each

[83] Chesler writes " Celibacy is the official order of the asylum. Patients are made to inhabit an eternal American adolescence, where sexuality and aggression are as feared, mocked and punished.." Chesler, *Women and Madness*.

other that Ward 7 and Ward 4 patients do not. Mostly unable to witness verbally for one another, they can be physically protective and physically open with one another. For example, when Istina first enters Ward 2 (Cliffhaven) shocked by the smell and dirt and general lack of care she experiences, she cringes and hides in a corner. Seeing this, a long-term patient, Dame Mary Margaret, tells Istina that she will not let any harm come to her; as proof she places her tall, imposing figure in front of Istina and the rest of the patients in the room. Istina also recalls her own and other Ward 2 patients' fear of being placed in 'solitary'—rooms with straw carpets, where food is pushed through a slit in the door and any human contact is absolutely forbidden.[84] More amenable are the common dormitories where patients sleep close together and where Istina finds the ragged snores and loud babble and flailing arms of fellow patients comforting. Even the occasional awkward touches from other patients (note, again, Istina's own push and pummel of Sister Bridge) are preferred to the lack of touch in Cliffhaven's Ward 2 or Treecroft's Lawn Lodge, because it is a touch filled with emotion, "crude longing, dug out from their heart."[85]

It is a touch she misses during her recovery, her upward spiral out of the mental health system. Once again on the 'privileged ward', Ward 4, and ready for release, she beams with gratitude when Brenda or Dame Mary Margaret or others

[84] It may be interesting to study the role of animals, more particularly animals considered 'vermin' in Frame's novels. Istina makes friends with a mouse in *Faces* and a character in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* consorts with a beetle.

[85] The complete quote runs: "One realized that the streamlined insanity of their behavior was the product, in the beginning, of crude longing dug from their heart." Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 103.

from Ward 2 recognize her, touch her or speak to her in either conventional or their own made-up, pieced-together language. There is a loneliness, of course, to the Ward 2 patients: the loneliness of invisibility and the lack of a common language. But there is a loneliness too in the performance of 'sanity' and the emergence from hell: a loneliness no less dug out from a 'crude longing' than that of the hopeless insane, a loneliness defined by a lack of impulsive touch or connection and a thin veneer of self-sufficiency and restraint.

For Istina and her fellow patients, touch that is neither fearful, nor violent, or defiling, as a reminder, is a kind of lack of witnessing—a denial of their bodies. The spatial organization of mental institutions as seen from Foucault's description of the Great Confinement, Didi-Huberman's description of Salpêtrière and my own descriptions of Cliffhaven and Treecroft, encourages the lack of meaningful touch between patients and their families and patients and their medical caretakers. Like Janet Frame's 'crab of love'[86] who must walk surreptitiously sideways in order not to break his fragile shell, so the positive 'witnessing' touch that does occur must go virtually undetected in order to survive. For example, the touching between Ward 2 patients in their sleeping dormitory is done under cover, in the darkness of night-time; Ward 2 is itself its own darkness, so shrouded is it in invisibility (at least to the outside world) that any witnessing touch that occurs, such as Dame Mary Margaret's protection of Istina, inevitably goes unseen. Other moments of witnessing touch must

[86] See Footnote 65

subvert the spatial boundaries of the institution: note Sister Bridge and Istina's brief connection after Istina temporarily escapes from the asylum or Dr. Portman deliberately allowing Istina into the library van, a space which is usually forbidden to patients. Indeed, these spaces of witnessing touch occur outside of the allegorical spaces of heaven, hell or limbo, occupying another allegorical space entirely: the miracle. Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned the idea that trauma is a rent in the self. Witnessing and the witnessing that touch can provide are perhaps as shocking to the system as trauma. But it is a shock that, like a miracle (a word that I understand is infrequently used in criticism or critical theory), is a shock that pulls together rather than rends apart; it is a shock that coheres rather than divides the space of a landscape as well as the space of the self. Mary Magdalene is healed by her "contagion," the physical sanction that separates her from the rest of society by touch; she is allowed to wash Jesus' feet and she is the first (going on the basis of Nancy) to see the resurrected body of Jesus. It is a miracle that the very act of touching can dissolve the social boundaries between bodies and create a sense of wholeness in the individual body and the social body.[87]

Outside World

[87] Certainly, this is a grand claim and one that I can in no way, do justice to in a chapter or, perhaps, even a book.

"On all the doors which lead to and from the world they have posted warning notices and lists of safety measures to be taken in extreme emergency."[88] I think this line, placed at the very beginning of Istina's narrative, creates a tension between the "outside world" and the world inside the asylum. It is unclear, purposefully unclear, whether the warnings are on the outside of the asylum doors or on the inside of them. Because Frame's words read "all of the doors," I think that both sets off doors have these emergency warnings—both the sick and the seemingly "well" must be kept from one another, both are a danger to each other.

In Antonia White's *Beyond the Glass*, Claire, unsure of where she is, is yet clear enough to know that she is effectively trapped inside the walls of the hospital, confined. Lazar House; skin molting; those without leprosy would be in danger of infecting others, but the lepers themselves—with their open wounds and peeling skin, a skin that is torn so thoroughly that it offers little protection—must be protected from those who are not infected as well; their immune systems, exposed and weakened, would be ill suited to survive where diseases leach onto the body and are shrugged off by the tiny swords of our antibodies.

Besides these signs—it is difficult to discern whether Frame's language is metaphorical or literal-- there are other physical barriers that separate the mental asylum from the society that surrounds it. During the time of Foucault's 'Great Confinement,' there were heavy ramparts and large swinging doors and weighty

[88] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 9.

chains and padlocks. At Cliffhaven, in the 1950s and 60s the boundaries are more permeable—and, as I have mentioned, this permeability leads to increased anxiety among the 'tentatively' sane. The doctors and nurses who function simultaneously like caregivers and guards are often unduly harsh with the patients. Such harshness indicates their fear of being associated with and, moreover, contaminated by their mentally ill patients. After all, it is the doctors and nurses who daily travel through the opening and closing doors of the asylum. In their ability to travel back and forth from asylum to the rest of society, they become (like Sister Bridge) human bridges from one world to the next, connecting the island (where the mentally ill stay) to the mainland, the land of the sane-tongued and reasonable.

There are literal bridges between these worlds as well: the train to the asylum and the visitor's room within the asylum walls. Both spaces function as a type of limbo, wavering thinly between the sane world and the insane, heaven and hell.[89] The train station closest to Cliffhaven is seen as something of a curiosity. Standing at the station is an exercise in distinguishing loonies (as Istina puts it) and mere travelers. Speaking of her experience on the train platform, Istina wonders "if had any distinguishing marks of madness about, and...if the people understood or wanted to understand what lay beyond the station, up the road over the cattle stop and up the

[89] This perhaps simple comparison between the outer world as 'heavenly' and the asylum as 'hellish' will be discussed further.

winding path and behind the locked doors of the grey stone building."[90] The many prepositions Istina uses to describe the road from the train station to the asylum-- 'beyond,' 'over,' 'up,' and 'behind'-- emphasize the literal journey that must be taken from 'sanity' to 'insanity;' the use of the adjectives 'winding', 'locked', and 'stone grey' give a sense of finality to this distance."[91]

In her narrative, Istina notes the high chain-link fence that separate the asylum grounds from the town. Occasionally, well-behaved patients at Cliffhaven (those in what is known as Ward 4) are allowed to walk up to the fence and observe what happens beyond it---this is how Istina escapes temporarily from the asylum in a previously mentioned scene. The walk is seen as a privilege, but it merely reinforces the divide between patients and non-patients, the insane and the healthy-- a divide that is, in fact, so ambiguous that a physical barrier must be built in order to remind patients, doctors, and townspeople alike of the divide. The patients in the disturbed Ward (Ward 2) will sometimes throw random items over the fence-- apple cores, socks, napkins. Throwing these objects is the only way they can cross the carefully enacted barrier of the fence; more crucially, by throwing objects Ward 2 patients are leaving a 'trace' of themselves in the world beyond the asylum. It is their way of not being forgotten. Ward 2 patients may be almost invisible, hidden in crumbling buildings at the back of the asylum, but it is possible that even if you do not see the

[90] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 58.
[91] This phrase, as well as the general insight about prepositional language come from Tonya Blower's paper "Madness, Philosophy and Literature" , 74-89 .

crumbling buildings or the people who inhabit them you may see an apple or clothes on the road, may even bump into them with your foot or, as you throw the apple or shirt or rag out, touch it with your hand.

The visiting room, even more than the train station, becomes a liminal space; two doors exist—one to the outside world which closes behind the visitor and one leading to the wards of the asylum, which closes behind patients. Visitors and patients are held in a blank space, but a space that reverberates with possibility: trapped here, without outside contact, couldn't visitors take on the affectations, the clothes and the diseased minds of patients? Couldn't the patients, seeing faces from the outside and touching the presents the visitors bring with them-- clean clothes, pictures, and food-- remember how it was to be 'sane?' The potential exchange of sanity and disease that takes place between visitor and patient becomes even more potent when you realize (inevitably) that most visitors are family members of the patient. As Catherine Coleborne notes, in the 19th and 20th century's doctors became increasingly aware of the link between 'madness' and heredity. If a mother became 'mad', signs of hysteria were carefully watched for in the daughter; if a brother was epileptic or prone to 'fits', the entire family was seen as diseased (as happened with Frame's family).

During one family visit, Istina watches her father as his hands tremble, his voice shakes, he carefully lays out oranges, sweets and clean trousers and even more carefully carves out his spoken words about her mother, her siblings— home. His

care and trembling express the fear and caution he feels about his now unknowable daughter and his guilt at giving his daughter an insanity that he had no knowledge of. Istina never describes having any physical contact with her visitors, nor does she observe other patients touching their visitors. There are no enthusiastic embraces, no comforting hands on the shoulder or gentle pats on the head. In the visiting room, touch becomes dangerous. In an embrace, one flesh can become indistinguishable from another flesh. The gentle pat could, given the supposed instability of a daughter or son or uncle, lead to a sudden outburst. The reassuring squeeze of the shoulder could ignite feelings of shame for both the patient (their failure as son, daughter, etc) and the visitor (the failure of their bloodline, their helplessness). In the visiting room, touch between family members—which could be comforting, could be evidence that the patient is still loved and cared for—becomes, once again, like the touch between Istina and the ECT machine or Istina and Sister Bridge.

Memory's Body: defining the self, the body and its erasure

By containing the mentally ill body in buildings that are divided from the rest of society, society seeks to expunge its own memories of illness. By effectively making the mentally ill 'disappear,' they bury their memories of these individuals and their responsibility to them. Memories are also expunged from the mentally ill by forcing them to undergo multiple treatments of ECT and, on occasion, invasive lobotomies. Society hopes that the mentally ill patients will be "expunged" of his or

her illness by severing or jolting the connections of the brain—the same way in which society has severed the patients from the "social body."

The ill body is to be awakened from the disorientation of ECT a new body. "The magic of ECT comes from its imitation of a death and rebirth ceremony. For the patient it represents a rite of passage in which the doctor kills off the 'bad' crazy self and resurrects the 'good' self."[92] After their ECT treatment, patients are placed in narrow beds that remind Istina of coffins. Unconscious in these beds, they are awakened with sweet tea and led from their 'coffins' back to the main wards of the mental asylum. The hope is that the lightning jolt (like the lightning that brings to life Frankenstein's pieced-together monster) will allow the muddled and "effectively dead"[93] mental patient to rise again and live.[94] Likewise, the lobotomy is meant to change the patient's personality and to replace the sickness residing in the brain with a new personality, a new life; by undergoing a lobotomy, the patient's brain is re-shaped and they are reborn. But, as I have said before, in its violence, the lobotomy and ECT are de-witnessing touches; they de-acknowledge and erase the self. By the self here, I am referring (as I do at the beginning of my chapter) to the self as a set of memories that is destroyed by constant ECT and by the severing of the frontal lobe the frontal lobe (the lobe that controls emotion) is destroyed or separated from the rest

[92] Showalter. *The Female Malady*,217.
[93] See footnote 62
[94] Please see my explanation of ECT in footnote 57 and why I consider it to have negative connotations in this book.

of the brain. A virtual disjointing. The resurrection that comes from such a touch can only be grotesque (like that of Frankenstein). A resurrection such as this is embodied in the figure of Brenda, the twice-lobotomized pianist. After her 'resurrection' she cannot go to the bathroom properly, has trouble balancing and can no longer play the piano. She has been resurrected, but as what? Not as a shining Jesus-like figure, but as a zombie, scabbing and sweating and unable to see through her many bandages.

At the beginning of *Faces in the Water*, Istina is given ECT. [95] She thinks ECT is a punishment, a consequence of not having put the tea cups away or not having helped to clean up the dayroom or for a crime she committed, but doesn't remember.[96] She puts on long woolen socks so that the ECT will not kill her; the wool of the socks is a protection, warm like the clasp of a hand. Then she goes to sit in the observation room at Cliffhaven mental institution where all the doors are sealed and the nurses eye the patients beadily for signs of anxiety, violence, and the impulse to escape. One nurse casually asks for a gag (like a horse's steel bit) to put in Istina's mouth. A doctor, calmer than the trembling Istina or the sweaty nurses -- without a doubt the God of these operations-- places one finger on the ECT machine's knob and

[95] "The physical procedure that followed on from Cardiazol administration (a drug that caused seizures in schizophrenic patients) was ECT. This was introduced by Ugo Cerletti in 1938 and is still used today, surrounded by much controversy. There is no clear explanation of how ECT works… the procedure is carried out by producing electric convulsions in the patient by placing two electrodes on each side of the head. Cerletti and his colleagues found that this procedure could alleviate the symptoms of the schizophrenic and, particularly, severe depression." Louise Phillips. *Mental Illness and the Body: Beyond Diagnosis*. Routledge: New York, 2006. p 23

[96] "We know the rumors attached to ECT—it is training for Sing Sing when we are at last convicted of murder and sentenced to death and sit strapped in the electric chair." Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 23.

another on Istina's forehead, the bump of Istina's forehead matching the bump of the machine's button. Then the convulsions begin. Frame describes the experience thus: "I feel myself dropping as if a trap door had opened into darkness... Then I rise disembodied from the dark to grasp and attach myself like a homeless parasite to the shape of my identity and its position in space and time. At first I cannot find my way, I cannot find myself where I left myself, someone has removed all trace of me."

There are two times during Frame's book that she compares the bed Istina sleeps in to a coffin. In the first passage, she describes the bed Istina is placed in after ECT treatment (quote); the second mention is when a coffin is used to describe the narrow cot that Istina sleeps in at her sister's house. In both cases the coffin, with its narrow, suffocating sense of space, points to the essential loneliness of Istina—a loneliness that is symbolized by her cramped body on a narrow bed. A coffin is not only narrow, but it is a place where the body is removed from the sight of the living world (eventually disintegrating into the ground). Furthermore, the coffin imagery creates a link between the space outside of the asylum and the space within it. "In some cases at least, the alienation and estrangement that characterizes the phenomenology of illness is not a symptom of the bodily ailment alone. The knowledge of an illness can itself provoke changes in existential feeling. One is disconnected, lost, unsupported without grounding."[97]

[97] Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 117.

This is one of the first instances of bodily encounter in the novel. Through relating Istina's experience with ECT, Frame describes a body that is simultaneously touched by multiple objects-- hands holding the bodies, knees and shoulders down, teeth touching metal, a doctor's sharp finger presses both the ECT machine and the patients head-- and is, yet, essentially touched-- that is, actually touched with the acknowledgment that the patients' body is vital and unique-- by none of these things. Istina feels submerged, drowned under the weight of the doctor and nurse's hands and the ECT current.[98] The key image in Frame's descriptions of ECT is a horrific detachment from the body and an intense sense of fragmentation: the head disjointed from the torso, the limbs fading. The memory within the body (or part of it, let's say) is also fragmented, an assortment of ill-fitting puzzle pieces, an identity scattered in "space and time."[99]

"There is no past, present, or future. Using tenses to divide time is like making chalk marks on the water."[100] Yes, and how will you mark the days when there is no difference from one day to the next? There are no birthdays, no births, no deaths; you don't get a new job or get fired from your old one. Only occasionally are you allowed to glance in the mirror. You must read the movement of time on the faces of the people around you. On the faces of your visitors. Or you could, as the

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[98] Sylvia Plath's poem "The Hanging Man" is also an excellent example of the fragmentation and disassociation that ECT can cause. Plath describes being grabbed by the hair and "sizzling in blue volts."
[99] Frame, *Faces in the Water*,23.
[100] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 37.

patients of Ward Four-Five-and-One, become frantic about your meager belongings: a piece of clothing, a book or an object given to you. The institutionalization of patient's lives gives them a collectivity, a lack of individual identity; they eat the same things and, when their clothes get washed, they usually do not get any of their own clothes back. An object that has been given to you personally (and not to the "collective" of patients at the mental institution) is a trace, a marker that you have (or have had) an individual identity.

"I pretended memory and no one guessed."[101] So Istina wanders through her hometown streets with her sister. A man in a peaked cap will greet them. "Remember," he will say. It is this word which Istina goes stiff at, this word which makes resentment ball up like a tiny red fist and begin to sweat. "Remember." And she will say "yes," and "yes," to avoid the long explanations, to avoid focusing on that blank space of the brain where air blows like a wind tunnel. How does ECT fragment the self? This is how. No event focuses my senses. Have you seen pictures of melting glaciers? As they melt, they break apart. What was once a shiny undissolvable mass is now a ragged-edged jigsaw of puzzle parts floating in a cold, blue sea. Istina's brain is like these ice floes. The ECT was warm enough to separate one memory in her brain from the next. (There is anesthesia now when ECT is given,

[101] Frame. *Faces in the Water*, 128

but it was rarely given for ECT when Frame was writing—the body is jolted; the teeth rattle; the electricity is riding you).[102]

According to the historian Roy Porter, the lobotomy surgically severed the connection between the frontal lobes and the rest of the brain and began being advocated for by Doctor Walter Freeman in the US.[103] Lobotomies were, often, performed with crude instruments: a hammer or an ice pick. The "lobotomy was claimed to be particularly effective at turning the troublesome into quiet, placid, uncomplaining persons who showed little concern about their troubles."[104] The lobotomy destroyed much of the frontal lobe, severing the connection between the "thinking" and "feeling" areas of the brain.. Perhaps, initially, doctors were trying to help patients. Remember, that this is before the widespread use of psychotropic drugs, but even after a few patients were "lobotomized" it became clear that lobotomies were a very unpredictable surgical procedure. Patients, such as Brenda in *Faces*, possessed spotty memories. Another patient in *Faces*, Louise, loses all control of her bodily functions.

Such incredible fear, a fear experienced daily, with its rush of adrenaline, would be enough to cloud the brain. The lobotomy, then, was meant to turn patients

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[102] Antonia White's *Beyond the Glass* describes it thus "she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell." 211 In Coleman's *Shutter of Snow*, the protagonists memory is so compromised that she forgets that she has given birth to a child

[103] Freeman called lobotomies "soul surgery."
[104] Porter, *Madness: A Brief History*, 202-205.

into passive, unthinking members of the institution or, potentially, society that they lived in. One individual described her lobotomized sister as much more compliant, but without any of the higher faculties of thinking or reasoning. Another woman recounts that she lobotomized her young son, not because he was mentally ill, but because she wanted him to be less disruptive. The lobotomy, like the ECT machine, uses the direct and invasive touch of objects to erase the self, rather than witness for it or testify to it**.** In his *Noli me tangere*, Jean-Luc Nancy explains the different meanings of *toucher à* in French: it can mean to 'touch on' but also to tamper or meddle with.[105] The lobotomy is clearly a touch that 'tampers' or 'meddle with.' The ECT machine and lobotomy scalpel's touch, though administered by the flesh of a human hand, is as stated before, a tampering with, a meddling with, and an effective extermination of the individual it meddles or tampers with.

Istina is able to see the effects of the lobotomy, this 'exterminating touch,' on the patient, Brenda. Brenda was a gifted pianist who before entering Cliffhaven was given scholarships and was anticipated to have a successful career. Brenda is given not one but two lobotomies—the first not being the expected success, the doctors see fit to bore more deeply into her brain. When Istina sees Brenda after her surgeries, she observes that Brenda has trouble balancing and clings to the walls; she giggles and makes seemingly meaningless shapes in the air with her hands and she has no control over her bodily functions, often making a mess of the couch or floor in the

[105] Nancy,*Noli me Tangere, 2.*

dayrooms. On occasion, Brenda is allowed to play the piano in the dayroom; her memory is not so destroyed that she has forgotten the notes of simple, classical pieces, but her sense of rhythm has suffered. The playing begins well, but as Brenda plays more, she senses a loss within herself, the inability to play with the precision and beauty that she once did, and she grows frustrated and starts banging the keys of the piano, throwing a tantrum.

Brenda's story is an example of the destruction of self that the meddling touch of the lobotomy causes, a destruction that involves all of her physical and emotional senses. To read about her is to experience what Vogler claims is the experience of the sensitive reader "who has not experienced the actual agony of the witnessing scene [but] feels some connection with his pain in the attempt to imagine…what it would be like to have to witness such pain, to hear their cries."[106] It is a witnessing pain that Istina experiences first-hand. Listening to Brenda play, she says that "one experienced a deep uneasiness as of having avoided an urgent responsibility, like someone who, walking at night along the banks of a stream catches glimpses in the water of a white face or a moving limb and turns quickly away, refusing to help or search for help. We all see faces in the water. We smother our memory of them, even our belief in their reality, and become calm people of the world for we can neither forget nor help them."[107] Here Istina uses the words "urgent responsibility" to

[106] Vogler, *Witness and Memory*, 39.
[107] Frame, *Faces in the Water*, 150.

describe the act of witnessing and its necessity for those effectively buried under water in the mental health system. But she takes this injunction to witness further by changing the pronoun from “one” (impersonal, singular) to “we,” implicating the reader in this urgency to witness the people she is describing: Brenda, Helen and, even, herself—to reach out to their drowning and almost invisible faces.

Chapter 2

The Body as Object: Understanding Mortality through Touch

Argument in Short

There is a mutuality between object skin and human skin. In touching, they remind each other of their own mortality. The stone skin slowly gathers dust. The human skin sloughs off its cells. In time, skin unveils its solidity: the yellow white edges of bone. And the object concedes its vulnerability: it molts, ash heaping at its feet. They disintegrate against and with each other, attaining the kind of nakedness only seen with the approach of death.

Jane Eyre returns to Thornfield. It's a wreckage. Burned from the inside out. Its walls are husks. It sways like a sunken ship. Inside, Jane finds Rochester, no less sunken, no less scarred. His hands and face are a mottled sheet of white. He is blind.

The skin of the house tells the story of Rochester's skin. Inevitably, they have burned together. The real love story was never between Rochester and Jane. Rochester did not follow Jane. He did not come back to her after years of sailing and selling and accumulating. He did not keep his secrets locked in the cupboards of Jane's pale flesh.

And if she returns, Jane returns to the both of them: house and Rochester. Tending one as she tends the other, scrapping char from the walls as she presses a damp cloth against Rochester's eyes.

Merging Skins

In her photograph, "House 4", Francesca Woodman emerges—or is swallowed by or is caught in-between (the ambiguity is intentional here[108])-- an old fireplace. It looks as though Woodman is hugging the fireplace, as one might hug a human being so tightly that two separate skins—the skin of the stones from which the fireplace is built and the softer, lighter skin of Woodman-- become one. Woodman's knees are wrapped around the base of the fireplace; she carries it like a protruding limb, a third, clumsy leg. One of her hands, the left, is invisible in the dark interior of the fireplace. The second is a rapid blur of light and mist like the smoke the fireplace, when new and working, might have once produced. [109]

Woodman's photographs, often, merge object to skin or juxtapose an object to a body part[110]; they "create a trade between the body and the material world that brings out the latent meanings of both."[111] The hardness of the fireplace is

[108] I am using multiple descriptions of how Woodman's body is positioned because it is the position of Woodman's body and the intention of that position that is stake in this chapter.
[109] See Appendix B, Figure 5

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emphasized next to the pliability of Woodman's skin and its solid, aged pillars by Woodman's leg, its Mary-Jane shoe a marker of youth. The fireplace's open, dark mouth is emphasized by the light of Woodman's blurred hair and hands and the light coming from the windows. The fireplace cannot move like Woodman can; it cannot intimate the same amount of molecular frenzy. It does not have the variety of textures that Woodman has: the skin, the dark shoe, the blurred and lit hair, the long and vaguely patterned dress. But by being touched by Woodman, by being hugged and pulled into her, the textures of the fireplace are inseparable from the textures of Woodman's body. In this picture, Francesca's touch is a merging, or, more accurately, a melding with the objects she touches.

Combining surrealist aesthetics and the Victorian interest in the occult with the slyer, more subtle sensibilities of the newly emerging artistic movements of performance art and fashion photography, Woodman's photography reveals the ways in which object skin and human skin can create an intimate, tactile relationship. Moving from the Victorian house to shape-shifting surrealist walls to the molting of animal skins to the fragile couture garments, I will (or rather Woodman's photographs will) reveal how Woodman's body and the body of the object can be mimetic, can "become" and can, ultimately, merge. The intimacy that Woodman created with objects, I believe, helped her to confront the possibility of her own death. Through placing her seemingly young, healthy body next to objects that were often

older and in a more obvious process of decay, Woodman brings attention to the process of mortality.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty intimates that human flesh forms itself around objects, but cannot become object (these frozen things without the same animation as human flesh). This does not, I think, glorify the human skin, but underestimates the object's life. The object, like the body, has the capacity to hold memory in its skin. "Now the permanence of my body is entirely different in kind. The object, like human skin ,will one day decay."[112] But the human skin is not immortal; it does not persist; no skin, whether it is flesh, fur, or wood does. Each equally "haunts space" through the very knowledge of its inevitable dissolution.

A greater symbiosis between objects and body is proposed in Benjamin's "On the Mimetic Faculty." Benjamin even uses the word 'mystic' and occult to describe the process of mimesis—one shape conforming to another, this imitation that is so much a part of intimacy. Watch as the cushions on a sofa conform to the curve of your back or a cat's tail conforms to the crook of your arm or a garment stretches to fit your shape or the reverse; you "mimic" the object, your bones are reshaped by the plastic and steel bones of a corset.

"Such correspondences (that is, the perceived, felt and culturally relevant mutual connections which cast human and nature, self and other as part of an intimate and causally interrelated cosmological whole) are highlighted in mimetic production

[112] Grosz. *Volatile Bodies,*

through dance (its "oldest function") or in occult practices, "entrails, the stars," magic, which sought – and produced – a mystical connection between macrocosm and microcosm, individuals and objects. The basic human impulse to such production is illustrated in children, who play not only at being a shopkeeper or a teacher, but a windmill or a train."[113]

A beautiful example of Benjamin's concept of mimesis is an "Untitled" photograph by Woodman. Woodman has her back to the camera. She is facing, as in so many of her pictures, a crumbling old wall. She wears a garment of two patterns, one lighter and larger like light on a mossy pond, and the other darker and denser, almost leopard-like. Woodman's back is bare and against it she holds a fern, a delicate plant with a thin spine and even thinner fronds moving symmetrically out from its spine. The fern is meant to mimic Woodman's spine, the delicacy of its bones, but the fern also looks remarkably like a corset. A corset spun of silk and spider webs to be sure, but a corset that almost impresses into the skin, becoming the spine. I think Woodman both shows the differentiation between object and spine, spine and corset-like fern, and shows how both object and skin can become malleable, can form into another texture, another skin altogether. Skin and object become a hybrid skin.[114] The likeness of the plant to a corset is purposeful as well. Corsets are usually boned, structured, meant to pull and forcefully shape a body into a

[113] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 720.
[114] Demonstrating Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "becoming"

specific (and traditionally female) form.[115] The skin, the female body, yields to the corset. But Woodman's fern-corset is, as mentioned, pliable, emulating the shape of her body, rather than contouring it into a different, more idealized shape. The fern-corset and Woodman move together, object and body in harmony.[116]

Touch: Extending the Skin

The very first chapter of Derrida's book *On Touching* describes the figure of Psyche.[117] Psyche is both a Greek goddess, with her blonde hair and draped garments, and the individual's psyche, that tenuous word that signifies the space in between a person's "mind" and their mood. Psyche lies recumbent; she sleeps on the grass or on a stone or on some carelessly flung sheet, but she sleeps deeply.[118] She is unaware of what Derrida calls "the extension" that emanates from her: her arms are flung gracefully, her legs are curled or wildly sprawled. In any case, she is sleeping, unaware of their grace or sprawl; the extension moves and breathes, not separate from her, but moving separately from her awareness. Psyche's "extension" is, of course,

[115] The corset is meant to exaggerate the idealized hourglass shape. Interestingly, in recent years, the male corset has become more popular.
[116] See Appendix B, Figure 6
[117] Derrida's , *On Touching*, is dedicated to fellow philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy. It considers the nature of touch and the nature of the "extension" through a number of philosophical lenses beginning with Aristotle. I think that "at the heart of" Derrida's book is Nancy's heart and the transplant that inspired Nancy's book, *Corpus.* Also important is the way in which Derrida and Nancy are able to touch through their connection with language and philosophy.
[118] "Psyche is the only one who knows nothing (nothing of herself, of her extension, of her recumbent being-extended); but, further, by being alone *in* knowing nothing of this, she is alone *for* not knowing anything of this." Derrida, *On Touching*,15.

her body—the flesh that manifests from but is not an exact replica of her "psyche." Unlike the Psyche whom Derrida describes, I believe that in her photographs Woodman is profoundly aware of "her extension" in space, profoundly aware that she needs to be aware of this extension. Looking at "House 4" you can see that Woodman's torso—her extension-- rather than her psyche—her head—is the *punctum* of the photograph. The head is hidden, barely connected to the extension of her body and her body's extension, the fireplace. [119]

This focus on the extension—the torso and limbs of the body—rather than the head, the site of the "psyche," is evident in many of Woodman's photographs. Note Woodman's "Untitled" where her psyche, her head is cut out from the picture in a Derridean fashion-- the photograph clearly shows Woodman's naked torso, her thighs, and the very tip of her chin and some straggles of hair and her arms.[120] It seems her darkened hands are cupped around her breasts. There is something amusing, even ironic about this photograph. Because of the way in which Woodman is placing her hands, her torso looks like it could be a head–- the psyche's dwelling place—with a smiling face.[121] It is almost as though Woodman is reproaching Derrida for creating an artificial separation between "Psyche" and her extension:

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[119] The word *punctum* was coined by Roland Barthes; Barthes used it to describe his theory of photography. Of the *punctum*, Barthes says "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" *Camera Lucida*, 26.

[120] See Appendix B, Figure 7

[121] Note: Susan Rubin Suleiman's discussion of Woodman and Magritte in Whitney Chadwick's book, *Mirror Images*. Professor Tyrus Miller notes that the moth is the traditional symbol of Psyche and that there is a kind of mimesis going on between symbol/psyche-moth/face

inherent in the extension is the "psyche" and, while Psyche may not always choose to be aware of the extension, this lack of awareness does not mean that the psyche is not directly integrated into the extension.[122]

Woodman's photographs of her "extension," particularly of her extension without a clear face or head, always seem to prominently display her hands. Woodman's display of the hands points to her fascination and experimentation with touch and the tactile. In "Untitled", she is touching her own breasts and the wall behind her; the length of her fingers brings out the roundness and lightness of her breasts.[123] In "Untitled", she has so fully touched the wallpaper that her torso has become a part of it.[124] Similarly, in "House 4," Woodman touches the walls of the house and the fireplace until she merges with them—and they merge with her. This reciprocity is important, since, I believe, there is a kind of mutuality of touch between object rather than the touch being "one-sided" (only Woodman touching). One of Woodman's friends and occasional models attests to Woodman's fascination with tactility, saying: "But to more fully understand the nature of her work—one needs to feel the texture of the surfaces and objects in the pictures against bare skin. I know that because on many occasions I was immersed in flour or some other material. And

[122] I think Derrida would ultimately agree with this; he discusses this separation or "rupture" throughout his book

[123] Some of Woodman's later photographs would have well illustrated "Psyche." Woodman created a large, photographic series of caryatids. The caryatids are draped in white robes, but their heads are missing.

[124] See Appendix B, Figure 8

once she covered me with thick slivers of clear, cold jello in order to 'outline me in neon' for a photograph." [125]

Substituting the hands for the face may have allowed Woodman to give precedence to the sense of touch over the sense of sight—despite the fact that her chosen medium, photography, was visual.[126] Woodman's focus on touch highlights the tension between touch and vision, the ability to see a body, an "extension" in a photograph and literally touch it with your hand.[127]

Woodman's experimentation with touch is also why I believe she so often places her body next to objects: to compare it as a child might, to say "my body is not hard like the fireplace, but in touching the fireplace, my skin takes on some of its hardness." More profoundly, Woodman uses objects as a way to locate her body in space—a way of seeing herself without the impossibility of being outside of herself. In effect, these objects are a camera within a camera (this is one of the camera's most literal functions: to see one's body in a removed and secondary way through an object, the camera). Sometimes I forget though, that while Woodman meticulously created, arranged and developed her photographs, she was not always the one who clicked a button and actually took the picture. So, while Woodman felt her body in space and touched objects, another eye initially saw Woodman's location in space.

[125] Woodman, *Francesca Woodman*,35.
[126] The interplay of touch and sight will, as in each of my chapters, be seminal to this chapter. However, it should be noted that the concept of the "haptic", a concept which helps to elucidate the simultaneous stimulation of multiple senses will be extensively discussed in Chapter 3.
[127] There has been much discussion of this in photography and in erotic photography, in particular. The "erotics" of Woodman's photographs will be discussed later in this chapter.

By placing her body in front of the camera, Woodman also becomes the witness of her own dissolution. In some sense, we are all witnessing our decline; we see wrinkles forming and the pages of old notebooks yellowing. Francesca recorded her dissolution in order to see it more clearly. It was only by using both the touch and sight : taking photographs (visual) of herself touching and fading into objects that Woodman could imagine the transformation death would have on her own body.

As you can see from her photograph "House 4," Woodman's explorations between touch and object do not stop with the merging of one object to one body. She does not, simply, want to see herself, her "extension," against other objects. Looking at Woodman's photographs one after another, it's hard not to notice that she is almost obsessive about exploring the way in which her own body and objects interact in space. This can be seen in her "Space series" or in the aforementioned "House series." Woodman captures the most minute changes between her own body (or her model's body) and that of the object. It sometimes seeing her pictures are part of some tedious exercise or a roll of takes and retakes of a scene in a film.[128] By experimenting with every configuration a body can have with an object, Woodman is trying to explore the boundaries or boundlessness of the extension. Is Psyche's extension a part of her dreaming sleep? Does the extension "extend" to the grass she sleeps upon? The mud which she has unwittingly smeared against her fingertips? In

[128] In fact, much of Woodman's work was an 'exercise' developed for her classes at RISD. An interesting exploration of Woodman's 'exercises' is Anne Gabhart's essay in *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work.*

her pictures, Woodman's body is in a constant state of flux, always allowing it to become different skins through its various touchings. As Chris Townsend writes in his lengthy essay on Woodman's biography and influences, "There is, seemingly, nothing that she wants to be; all things are of equal value as sites in which the self may simultaneously place itself."[129]

Becoming

The photograph titled 'I could no longer play/I could not play by instinct' bears the words, 'Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly into my hands.' Only a few of Woodman's photographs are captioned or titled; in this photograph Woodman has her back to the camera and her hands are pressed against the wall. A large peel of wall has come off; it looks like a large, speckled tongue and it covers much of Woodman's body; the wall is consuming Woodman. By turning her face to the wall, away from the camera, Woodman is indicating her complete engrossment in the wall.[130] Her hands almost look as though they are reading Braille; she is searching for some meaning, some story in the wall. 'The notes are going directly into her hands.' Mysterious words, but few words could be more precise when describing the self as a medium, a conduit, a plane of passage;

[129] Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*,59.
[130] See Appendix B, Figure 9

as the skin of wall and Woodman merge, the silent language of their bodies becomes the same.

In allowing her body to be in a constant state of flux, Woodman is participating in what Deleuze describes as "becoming". "Becoming" as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (discussing their most involved definition of becoming, "becoming animal"), " involve[s] a mediating third term, a relation to something else, neither animal nor human, through which the subject enters into connections with the animal."[131] In the first part of this chapter, I am making two primary arguments. Firstly, as detailed above, Woodman's photographs focus on the sense of touch, by placing photography—a visual medium—in tension with the way in which her body touches the objects in her photographs . Secondly, I am suggesting that in her photographs Woodman is "becoming object" by touching objects. She is neither entirely subsumed by them nor separate from them (becoming is much akin to Benjamin's "mimesis"). Her skin communicates with these objects. Perhaps it is her skin, her touching, that is the "mediating third term" between herself and the object she becomes.

I believe that Woodman "becomes object" by allowing the object she touches to "become human". Therefore, in her photographs, Woodman's body and the objects are in a reciprocal relationship—as Woodman touches the fireplace, her body "becomes" cold, hard and sturdy like the fireplace; the fireplace, in turn, takes on the

[131] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*,174.

softness and fleshiness of Woodman's body. This is all very 'mystical', I know. The nature of the mystic is its very lack of wordedness, its refusal to be brought into the symbolic. Perhaps Woodman's photographs are undeniably, deliberately 'mystic.' There is a point at which human skin merges with object skin where neither skin is definable—a smudge, a quick turn of the head. The point of this merging is indescribable, a mystic space.

Woodman Manifest

Woodman was a Victorian heroine of sorts, walking through the campus of RISD with branches, dirt smeared, wearing long vintage skirts, hair knotted in a nape at her neck, the fabric around her ankles swishing brusquely as she moved. It is no wonder that she liked old houses—houses whose dusty light was undistinguishable from ghostly ether. Francesca Woodman was the daughter of artists. She began creating pictures at the age of 13. She went to Rhode Island School of Design. She went to Italy. Italy, her father said, was where she felt the most at home.[132] In Italy, she rented a large, old, light-filled studio where she could store her objects and herself against her objects. She exhibited at a Surrealist bookstore, The Maldoror. She came back and lived in New York. She peddled her photographs to gallery owners, who dismissed her as being too young to exhibit. Importantly, she became interested in fashion, a fact that is surprising to some but that becomes obvious when looking at

[132] Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 26.

Woodman's photographs with their love of textures—peeling paint, silken hair and objects such as an eel, an orange, a piece of cloth strategically placed around the hips. At the age of 22, she jumped out of her apartment building in New York and committed suicide.

Her suicide, like most suicides, has been delicately stepped over and on. However, recently (most notably in an excellent, if controversial essay by the scholar Peggy Phelan), some critics, instead of dismissing her suicide or being afraid of it or weighing it too heavily and giving her a place amongst the phalanx of "woman artists who have committed suicide,"[133] have begun to discuss it as a way to understand, engage with her work and ask questions about her work: Why is Woodman's body so often disappearing? Why does it shimmer and shiver ghost-like? And, more relevant to my discussion in this chapter; Why does her body seem to weigh less, to evaporate more easily than the objects she touches? Francesca Woodman's work was produced in the 1970s; then, it was not unusual for the body of the artist to be used in her work or for the naked body to be placed on the stage of the photograph or on the theatrical stage. Performance artists such as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneeman used their bodies to explore the wider implications of what it meant to be a female body in

[133] For example, around the same time that Woodman lived, both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton committed suicide. Although they were both hugely talented and successful poets during their lifetime, they developed an even larger cult following after their deaths.

society.[134] In one of her performances, Schneeman slowly pulled a rolled up scroll out of her vagina**;** the scroll had writing on it, implying that the body of a woman, the sexed and sexualized body of a woman, was very able to speak. Schneeman's scroll performance, like Woodman's photographs, also intimately relates objects to the body.[135] "The performative aspect of Woodman's photographs, which has been only recently highlighted, is significant in a larger context since it situates her work at the crossroads between two important movements in the history of the visual arts from the second half of the twentieth century."[136] In Chapter 3, I will note that in the 1980s performance art splits off into two fairly distinct schools: theatrical performance and performative photography. My examination of Marina Abramovic and Diamanda Galas explores the theatrical side of this split, while my examination of Woodman and Sherman in this chapter discuss the performative photograph.

Again, what does it mean for Francesca's body, as in "House 4," to become a part of a fireplace? To embrace, as her own skin, the skin of the fireplace? Kathryn Hixson claims that "Woodman's concerns are most similar to a more contemporaneous movement in the feminist work of the 1970's of American artists (like Schneeman, Wilke and Anna Mendieta)[137]who used the female body as a site for

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[134] As art historian and critic Whitney Chadwick points out, "since the early 1970's, when women artists mobilized the female body as a marker of a new sexual and cultural politics, they have continued to use the body to challenge social constructions of gendered sexuality." Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 15.

[135] See Appendix B, Figure 10

[136] Crisofovici, *Touching Surfaces*, 189.

[137] my examples

exploration of identity inextricably melded with the chosen medium."[138] It is remarkable that Woodman's photographs, given her youth and her early death, are so much discussed, critiqued and exhibited. It is less remarkable that her photographs, when first exhibited after her death, elusive and unusual as they are, were put into the "canon" that Hixson suggests—the canon of 1970s female artists, primarily performance artists, who used their bodies as a way to explore their identity.[139] Woodman's use of her body, along with her use of objects in relation to her body, was viewed as the way in which she explored her burgeoning identity and, perhaps, pushed against the typical depiction of the female body and how that female body should be posed in space. [140]

One of the first exhibitions of Woodman's photographs was held at Wellesley College and Hunter College in 1986. Three essays were written to accompany the exhibition, one by Ann Gabhart, one by Rosalind Krauss and a third by Abigail Solomon-Godeau. Solomon-Godeau, like Hixson, believes that Woodman used her photographic body as a way to assert female identity. More specifically, she believes that Woodman used her body to explore "the operations of fetishism as they are

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[138] Lux, *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Works*,29.
[139] There have been numerous citations of "narcissism" regarding the nude display of the female body in performance art and in Woodman's work. For a nuanced discussion of Woodman's "narcissism," see the article "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered" cited in the body and bibliography of this chapter.
[140] "Woodman's use of the female nude, and of her own body, seems not to be overtly political, neither a reclamation of the female image from patriarchal culture, nor a display for that culture's exploitation. Rather, she unapologetically and unabashedly uses the female nude to explore her own identity." Lux, *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Works*,29.

mobilized in the metamorphosis of female flesh into image."[141] She believes that Woodman becomes an object, a fetishized object (as apparently the image of the naked female body always is!) in order to disinherit herself of her object status. In interpreting Woodman's "House Series," Solomon-Godeau writes that Woodman is equating her body, the surface of herself, with the surface of the walls of the house. By doing this, Solomon-Godeau believes that Woodman is commenting on the fact that women and their surfaces (i.e. their bodies) are read *only* as surfaces, seen as *only* surfaces. The house, she goes on to say, is a particularly apt choice for Woodman since the house is a representation of the domestic sphere, a place in which women's bodies have been entrapped and enslaved. "In photographs such as ["House 3" and "House 4"], the woman's body is physically devoured by the house. As in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper,"[142] the space of woman's seclusion and worldly exclusion not only imprisons, but consumes... Woodman presents herself as the living sacrifice to the domus."[143]

Solomon-Godeau's interpretation of Woodman's interaction with objects, particularly "the house," is that, instead of embracing them and trying to merge the skin of the objects surface with her own skin, she is swallowed by these objects; they devour her, creep over her fragile female body like the vines that cover the beautiful

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[141] Woodman, *Photographic Work*, 20-21.
[142] Note that Solomon-Godeau incorrectly attributes the authorship of "Yellow Wallpaper" to Olive Schreiner. The correct author is Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
[143] Woodman, *Photographic Works*, 31.

brick of old buildings, suffocating it. By being devoured by these objects—the fireplace, the walls of the house—Woodman becomes *only* an object, only a fetish. Inherent in Solomon-Godeau's analysis of Woodman's photographs is the idea that objects are always oppressive when placed against the female body.

I believe that Woodman's photographs defy Solomon-Godeau's analysis—clear-cut and well-defined as it may be—for there is nothing about Woodman's photographs that is clear-cut and well-defined.[144] It is their allusiveness, their mysterious lack of separation between object and body, the frightening fade and dissolution of the human flesh that gives them their magnetic interest and originality. You can see such dissolution in Woodman's "House 3" even more clearly than in "House 4," where the House and the figure of Woodman are wrapped inside one another. Most of Woodman's body is two large scabs of wallpaper. From the wallpaper a head dimly emerges; again, a Mary Jane shoe is thrust forward. More than the house *devouring* Woodman, it looks as though the old, papery, blotched and veined skin of the house is *protecting* Woodman. She is wrapped as in a blanket. Protection is not always offered in a predictable guise: soft skin or fluffy objects: the quiet of rambling old houses, heavy with memories; one's own blood, hot with life.

In a more contemporary essay published in 2004, critic Jui-Ch'i Liu comes closer to my own interpretation of Woodman's bodily relationship to the house and

[144] I am not the first to criticize Solomon-Godeau's essay; Margaret Sundell, Laura Larson, Chris Townsend and Peggy Phelan, among others, have sharply criticized it.

the objects within it. Contesting the Solomon-Godeau essay that I discussed above, she writes: "Unlike Gilman's character, I contend, however, that Woodman shows an active longing and a positive struggle to merge with the wall. She is not afraid of this absorption of her ego within an ominous abandoned setting."[145] Again, there is no fear of the devouring house here but an almost erotic desire to merge with it. Liu's larger interpretation of Woodman's "House Series" includes the idea that Woodman's body is attempting to merge with these objects in an attempt to merge with a wholly feminine space: the womb. Using some of Julia Kristeva's theory about feminine space,[146] Liu argues that Woodman is trying to reintegrate with the "semiotic chora" and that her physical position in the "House Series"—crouching, curling and hiding—is deliberately fetal. Unlike Solomon-Godeau, who writes that Woodman's body is being unwillingly devoured, Liu believes that the devouring is purposeful and desired. However, she does not believe that Woodman is anymore "in charge" of her own body; she calls Woodman's desire to merge with the walls in the house "infantile". Liu sees it is "infantile," even regressive, for a woman or a girl on the edge of womanhood to want to crawl into the safe, enclosed space of the womb—or the womb as represented by the house. This is where Liu's analysis begins to elude me.

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[145] Liu, "Francesca Woodman's Self Images," 26-31.

[146] "Kristeva asserts that before a child enters into the symbolic order, it has experienced *jouissance* of the flu-id and heterogeneous semiotic motility through contact with the maternal body. After the Oedipal phase, the child must repress this semiotic relation in order to acquire the symbolic order of language. The pre-Oedipal, which she terms the semiotic chora, is evoked as a possible way of recalling the suppressed maternal space." Liu, "Francesca Woodman's Self Images," 27.

Why should merging always be infantile, and why is the ability to merge, to test and experiment with the limits of the Derridean "extension" a desire to go back to the state of pre-birth? Looking, again, at the "House Series", I see very little about it, excepting the enclosure of the house, itself, that is womb-like. The house and its walls are old; it is disused; rather than being the site of a birth, it looks like the site of dissolution, even death. The floorboards are wide, half-rotting and drafty. You can feel the cool, damp air coming from the cracks in the wall and the light from those old windows is cold. It is a winter light. I see no warmth, no amniotic smothering here. But I do see, as I have mentioned before, a desire to merge, to merge until the point of dissolution—or where a clear line between human skin and object skin is impossible to see.

I believe that Liu simplifies Kristeva's concept (via Plato) of the chora; I would agree that some of the way in which Woodman's body is shown in her photos is chora-like, representing a nourishing energy beyond the symbolic of language, but in her article Liu makes the chora sound more directly womb-like. In Liu's interpretation of Woodman's pictures, rather than originating from a mystical Kristeva-like 'chora space,' Woodman's images are regressive, a desire to return to the position of the fetus.

Surrealism, particularly female Surrealist artists, influence the way in which Woodman used objects to fragment and diffuse her physical self. Think of Cindy Sherman's photographs and their strange juxtapositions of object and body— a

strangeness undoubtedly gleaned from the Surrealists.[147] After all, the first place that Woodman exhibited her photographs was in Maldoror, a Surrealist bookshop in Italy named after the Comte de Lautréamont's "proto-Surrealist text," *Les Chants de Maldoror.*[148] Although women were an integral part of the Surrealist movement, their work (the smooth surfaces of Dorothea Tanning's paintings, the strange, lumpish creatures in Dora Marr's photographs or the performative androgyny of Claude Cahun) was often ignored in favor of that of their male counterparts (and frequently paramours), including the booming André Breton, bird-like Max Ernst and cinematic Salvador Dali. The ideal Surrealist woman was both ethereal muse and violent and violently eroticized child; she was baptized the "femme-enfant" –an eternally young, beautiful and rebellious woman-child. As Whitney Chadwick, a scholar who writes extensively on female surrealists, writes, "'Women Surrealists' often astutely wove self-awareness into images of identity as a juggling of incompatible roles, a balancing act, a series of performances that have the subject frayed around the edges, fragmented, not one but many into complex narratives that simultaneously project and internalize the fragmented self."[149] ."[150] Like Chadwick, I see this desire as a way of escaping definition as a Surrealist "femme-enfant" or as a

[147] I talk about Sherman in greater detail later in this chapter
[148] Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 32.
[149] Chadwick, *Mirror Images*,12.
[150] Chadwick, *Mirror Images*,158. Posner goes on to say that "this wish for physical and psychic merger with the external world finds precedence in several significant self-portraits by first generation women Surrealists." Along with Tanning, I would point to Claude Cahun's "Autoportrait" and Frida Kahola's "Little Deer" as examples of this.

"muse" and as a way of escaping a particular visual definition and, thus, as a particular way in which the physical and sexual self is defined.

So, you look at a picture of Dorothea Tanning's, Max Ernst's longest companion-- the picture is called "Jeaux d'enfants" ("Children's Games") -- and you are, as in Woodman's "House Series," in a house where the walls are being peeled off, where human hair and flesh is merging into the wall. There is more violence, more immediate energy here, than in Woodman's photographs. The wall looks as if it is literally leaping out of its own skin, desperate to peel off its cold, staid surface. What is under the staid grey walls is not ghost-like or so shadowed as to be obscure (as, again, in Woodman's photographs); what is under these walls is pulsing, fleshy and mouth-like. It is an unmistakably sexual image. The young girls are assisting in the house's "undressing." Along with the house, they exude a deliberate, creative sexual energy; their clothes are tattered, half torn off their bodies, and their hair is wild and spitting-flame-like. Tanning's painting exhibits Chadwick's assessment of Surrealist women artists and their aims: "they deeply internalized this refusal of bodily and psychic fixity, often presenting themselves using images of doubling, fragmentation and projection."[151]

In "Children's Games," identity is projected, not just on the two girls in a state of active transformation, but in the transformation of the wall and in the strange shapes of the girl's clothing (note the obvious similarity between the shapes of the

[151] Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, Plate 8

girl's hair, the shape of the peeling paint on the wall and the shape of the girl's skirts). The wall, the clothes and the girl's bodies are simultaneously projections of one another and a part of one another: mirror and skin. The skin you see in the mirror and the fleshy hand that reaches up to touch the skin in the mirror blend as flesh touches image, thus the separation between flesh and skin-image is, often, impossible to trace, just as the separation between a projection of the self and being a part of the self is difficult to trace in Tanning's painting.[152] "This fusional relation with the environment is metaphorically suggested in the images in which the body of a girl or that of a young women merges with or emerges from the peeling wallpaper of an abandoned house like the sudden materialization of a figure in the carpet."[153]

Woodman's work, projecting a less obvious sexuality and fury than Tanning's paintings, uses objects in relation to a human body (usually her own) in a similarly Surrealist way. In her photographs, Woodman exhibits "the Surrealist desire to dissolve difference as the female body blends with furnishing, architecture or nature. In her painting, Tanning may be commenting on the way in which both female child and the house—a domestic space—are defined by one another; in the painting, the girls and the house ally with one another in order to escape the rigid definitions that are given to their identity and to their visual form. Similarly, in Woodman's photographs "House 3" and "House 4," the peeling, exposed paint of the house gives

[152] See Appendix B, Figure 11
[153] Chadwick. *Surrealist Women*, 173

identity to the girl in the photograph rather than swallowing her into a domestic space. [154] The body of the girls in Tanning's painting and Woodman's body in her photograph help to reveal the energy and visual capacity of the staid house. Against the skin of the girls' bodies in "Children's Games" and against the skin of Woodman's body in "House 3" and "House 4", the space of the house becomes enlivened, dynamic.[155] In short, rather than suffocating one another or reinforcing stereotypical notions about domestic space and the female body, Tanning and Woodman are able to show how identity can be revealed through the mutual creativity between object (house) and body.[156]

Haunted Houses: Gothic Decadence and Decay

As much as I might disagree with the conclusions that both Solomon-Godeau and Liu come to in their interpretation of Woodman's "House Series," when discussing her photographs they both insightfully mention the Gothic. Solomon-Godeau writes: "it is, perhaps, the House Series… where the Gothic aspect of Woodman's work is most apparent."[157] In conjunction with this, Liu says that

[154] See Appendix B, Figure 12
[155] Another interesting point of comparison, particularly in regard to domestic space, is to look at second generation Surrealist Louise Bourgois's "*Femme Maison*."
[156] Note Harm Lux's words here when discussing Woodman's "House Series": "The wall serves as a metaphor for one's own skin and one's own body in ever deeper layers." *Francesca Woodman*: *Photographic Works*, 18.
[157] Woodman, *Photographic Works*, 31.

"Woodman deploys the dilapidated house precisely in the register of the uncanny."[158] Other critics have noted the "gothicness" of Woodman's photos: the cold, eerie light, the crumbly structure of a once massive and (perhaps) once aristocratic house and, most obviously, Woodman, situated in the midst of the cold light, the dark recesses, the crumbling walls, as half solid flesh and half almost invisible ether.[159] Her body in this gothic house is the space of the uncanny; it cannot be articulated as any one thing. It is neither a visible and live flesh nor an invisible and dead ghost. It is neither entirely the peeling bark of the wallpaper or the skin of a young woman. Woodman's body is the medium between these things. She is the site of a transformative "becoming." In the "House Series," she is *of* the house, but not completely the house itself. In the Gothic, the space of the house is the space of power; the walls absorb generations of feelings, expectations, layers of wallpaper hide secrets, worn curtains whisper. The house is the haunter, the generator of ghosts—the people within the house are the haunted. By becoming the wall, merging with it, Woodman becomes not the "victim" of the domestic sphere, as Solomon-Godeau claims, or the reabsorbed child in the mother's womb, as Liu might say, but an "unmarked"[160]

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[158] Liu, "Francesca Woodman's Self-Images," 27.

[159] "We should remember that, in addition to the presence of certain seemingly Gothic tropes, such as ruin, veiling and immurement in her work, there is another aspect of Woodman's life that encourages such a reading: her self-identification as a Victorian heroine. There are moments, after all, when she seems to do little more than cower in the corner of a dilapidated room like a mistreated heroine of a Victorian melodrama." Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 21.

[160] Very simply, Peggy Phelan's book, *Unmarked,* posits the theory that visibility does not always create more power or privilege. This is of interest in relation to Woodman's constantly appearing and disappearing body.

power of the house, the specter, the witness to the house's power. By becoming an apparition in the house—able to be absorbed into its walls and emerge at will—Woodman subverts both Liu and Solomon-Godeau's narratives. She is not being absorbed by the patriarchally-ruled house, nor is she willingly submitting to absorption by a giant, matriarchal womb; her body is able to occupy a constant state of becoming. She is able to escape and re-enter the object of the house by allowing her "extension" to be in a state of flux. "What is striking about this is that there are few contemporary artists who so effectively pose themselves as an enigma in their work by suggesting that they are symbolically replicated and dispersed elsewhere within its boundaries."[161]

Woodman shares this tendency towards the Gothic with contemporary photographer Anna Gaskell. Gaskell's work, produced in the 1990s and 2000s, while done in vivid color and while being more deliberately narrative than Woodman's black and white serial photographs, shares a preoccupation with the almost visible body within the large intimidating structure of the Gothic House. In her collection "half-life," Gaskell weaves together narratives from Gothic literature such as Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw" and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca.*[162] Both of these texts contain the possibility of a ghostly haunting—their stories, like Woodman and

[161] Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*,58.
[162] In "The Turn of the Screw", a governess believes the ghosts of workers who once lived in the house are luring the children she takes care of to their death. In *Rebecca*, traces of the former mistress of the house are everywhere. In both texts, the haunting is never fully realized or discussed. It is a mystery resting within the very walls of the house, felt in the bones of the inhabitants of the house. When the characters leave the site of the haunting, the gothic house, the haunting ceases to be threatening.

Gaskell's photographs, hint at the possibility of ghostliness emanating from the structures of the house though they never give you a visible or factual certainty of these ghosts. "Half-life," which through its very title suggests the body poised between life and death, between living within the confines of the Gothic house and breaking free of it, depicts a luxuriously outfitted house—a house that reaches the opulence of a luxury hotel. The ceilings are high, though shadowed by a dark wood, and large chandeliers hang from them. The carpets are red, oriental perhaps, and there are wooden archways, portraits framed in gold and, in the background, what look like expensive sculptures. The foreground of the picture shows a girl. You can guess that she is a girl from the long, black, matted hair that almost accosts the viewer of the picture. Her blouse, like the rest of the picture, is gothic-Victorian, white and buttoned down the back, with puffed sleeves. There are no windows in the picture and, despite the grand size of the house, it feels claustrophobic; it feels, as Solomon-Godeau might say, as though the house and its luxury are closing in on the girl with the long hair. The walls seem to be watching her and she seems to be wary of them. Though there is fear, menace, hinted at between the girl and the walls, they are an inextricable part of one another.[163] The girl's hair seems to melt into the dark wood

[163] There is a clear, erotic element in Gaskell's "half-life"—an eroticism that feels threatening and, perhaps, incestuous. Woodman's photographs doe not have a similarly incestuous feel, but there is an eroticism that is clearly present in the way in which house and body mingle and merge.

of the walls and archways and her blouse is the color of the chandeliers and the color of the lighted pictures in their frames. Visually, she is born from this house. [164]

There are obvious similarities between Gaskell's work and Woodman's "House Series"; they are both set within large Gothic or once Gothic spaces, they both contain the body of a girl or a girl in the process of becoming a woman, and they both contain a possible haunting, a mystery revealed in the body of the girl, the body of the house and the relationship between the body of the girl and the body of the house. [165] There are obvious differences too: the luxury of Gaskell's house versus the crumbling, unkempt house of Woodman's photographs and the wary fear in Gaskell's photographs do not seem to be present in Woodman's "House Series."

In comparing these two potentially Gothic series of photographs, Gaskell's "half-life" and Woodman's "House Series," let me posit this theory or story. Let me hypothesize that Gaskell's "half-life" is the Gothic story as it is happening, in *present time*. So, the girl in the photograph is the heroine in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, the protagonist in Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw." Though she is part of the house, she is wary of it because she is trying to understand its secrets, find its hidden passageways, and understand her own feeling of oppression within the house.[166]

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[164] See Appendix B, Image 13

[165] The idea of "becoming a woman" is included in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of Becoming.

[166] The theory I am positing about these photographs is supported by the trajectory of the gothic texts I am referencing. The protagonists of both "The Turn of the Screw" and *Rebecca* are compelled by and frightened of the homes that they enter (the protagonist in *Rebecca* enters the house as a new bride, and the woman in "Turn" enters as a governess); they are compulsively driven to find out the mysterious

Woodman's "House Series," contrarily, is the aftermath of the Gothic story—the aftermath of *Rebecca* and "The Turn of the Screw."

Like the Thornfield of *Jane Eyre*, the luxurious house with its glittering, glimmering chandeliers is stripped of its luxuries and its massive wooden arches and pillars. But the peeling paint, the crumbling floorboards, and the broken windows do not only reveal the age of the house, but have opened up the secrets of the house as well. The Gothic heroine is no longer mystified by the house's secrets or trapped within the house's walls; the house's imperfection allows it to be penetrable. In her photographs, Woodman is the enlightened Gothic heroine. She is not Charlotte Perkins Gilman's protagonist suffocated by the pulsing flowers on the yellow wallpaper, but has become the wallpaper. By becoming the wallpaper, she has become the secrets that the house, the wallpaper, contains. Woodman's Gothic is an aftermath of the Gothic—a Gothic where the cumbersome, patriarchal house does not oppress the woman within it. Woodman has made an alliance with her house. Her body is able to move within its walls, a keeper of its secrets, but she is also able to escape the house's walls by fading into the sunshine particles that come from the windows or by becoming solid again, emerging from the wall as a knowing body, able to manipulate the objects--and the secrets-- around her.

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power of the house they live in. Once the mystery of the house is revealed, they still feel themselves attached to the
house, but are no longer afraid of it.

In juxtaposing her physical image against objects, Woodman is subject to the criticism that Abigail Solomon-Godeau makes of her work: that her body becomes an object, becomes a fetish in its attempt to show that it is not a fetish. Sundell explores the tension between body and object in Woodman's photographs insightfully. In her photographs, Woodman acknowledges that the body in a photograph is inherently a fetish because the photograph is, itself, an object—a visual object that is assessed and judged. And yet, she is also trying, as Sundell says, to "engage phenomenology and its limitations," to see how far her body can stretch beyond its skin, to see how it might be possible to be an object and not be a fetish. I think Woodman does this by not only allowing herself to become object but by allowing the object to become her. That is, in Woodman's photographs doors become leg and skin—neither Woodman's body nor the doors can be fetishized because by touching one another neither are unmoving, dead and mute in space, and neither conform to the fetishistic visual model that they are expected to look like.

This is something that Tanning and earlier women Surrealist painters share. "Children's Games" is clearly making a commentary on the concept of "femme-enfant" and its idealized rebellion and passion. But, like Woodman, who does not entirely reject objects and their visual and textural value, Tanning does not entirely reject the idea that women are capable of great creativity, rebellion and beauty.

Rather, she shows them in control of this creativity and beauty through their interaction with and fragmentation within objects.[167]

Animal Skins

There is an object in a picture of Tanning's painting called "Birthday" that you have not seen in the other pictures I have examined thus far. There is not only the house, the domestic space—the doors opened like half-parted lips. There are the smooth, knotted branches on the woman's back and there are the brown fur and wings of the gryphon creature. It is as though the woman in Tanning's painting is half-tree; the curled branches indicate that her skin is still growing, still expanding—that her skin is, in fact, capable of encompassing more than her smooth, seemingly contained human skin. The creature in front of her, like herself, is another hybrid, winged and tailed and clawed in the same body; the creature is another projection of the woman. The creature is a type of daemon[168], a representation of the soul[169], and like the

[167] I imagine Tanning and Woodman as tightrope walkers (a cliché, perhaps) . On one side of the rope is the fear that by juxtaposing objects against their bodies and by exposing their bodies in an explicitly visual way, they will be seen as a fetish or as the idealized "femme-enfant". On the other side of the rope is a rejection of their visualized body, a blatant attempt to keep it out of the visual field.

[168] I am referencing Philip Pullman's fantasy saga, *The Golden Compass*. In Pullman's series, every human being has an animal companion, an embodiment of their "soul". I would argue that the daemon works less as a soul and more as an extra –and vital—sense. I will discuss Pullman and this concept when I discuss Woodman's work in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming woman".

[169] I know that the word "soul" is problematic in current academia, given its ambiguity and its tendency to refer to multiple and various concepts in world religions and world literatures. I am using it here to suggest the importance of the hybrid creature in this painting and to emphasize the way in which the woman in the painting and the creature mirror one another.

woman whose soul he represents, will never be one contained form or a form that can be easily defined or named.

Woodman, in her photograph "Providence, 1975-1976"**,** half spilling out of a cabinet that contains taxidermied animals.[170] Above her, there is a fox, in the act of yelping, about to spring forward. To Woodman's side, there is a raccoon, mouth open, speaking into Woodman's ear. Woodman, curled in the glass case, her hair colored and textured like the animal's fur, is another animal, caught and stuffed and placed in the middle of a glass cage. However, Woodman spills out of the glass cage—if she has been trapped in the glass, then, by spilling out, she demonstrates that she is not entirely contained by it.[171] She is an animal to be looked at, yes, but she is also something else. Analyzing Woodman's photographs, Chris Townsend references another woman Surrealist artist, Leonora Carrington: "In her late paintings and texts, for example, Leonora Carrington creates hybrid creatures that blend human and animal.[172] Woodman's conjunction of these feral creatures with the model might suggest not that she is being devoured by them but that she is in the process of

[170] See Appendix B, Figure 14

[171] Its interesting to note that the square glass 'cages' in this photographic have a resemblance to the shape of Woodman's photographs; most of Woodman's photographs are small and perfectly square shaped. They remind me of Joseph Cornell's boxes or delicately carved music box. In these boxes, Woodman and her object are held, preserved. But (as in the picture with the taxidermied animals), in contrast to the still, geometric frame they are held in, the objects and bodies Woodman places in these boxes are in constant movement.

[172] The paintings of Pierre Klossowski—their faded quality and the fact that his paintings have mutable outlines and often takes on the shape of other creature (fairy tale like) by touching it or merging with them –remind me of Woodman. Klossowski's paintings are certainly more sexual than Woodman's, but they give the impression (like Woodman's) that the sexual act is not the important things, but the shape-shifting is.

changing either from wolf into woman, or from woman in to wolf."[173] The key words in Townsend's analysis are "she is in the process of changing." That is, Woodman has not entirely become a wolf or a raccoon, but neither is she entirely a young, human woman.[174] This photograph is reminiscent of Angela Carter's stories (also influenced by surrealism). In particular, Woodman's picture recalls Carter's retelling of "Red Riding Hood in which , instead of being scared of the wolf, Red Riding Hood becomes a wolf-like creature. The story is also about sexual awakening; it is her relationship with the wolf that allows Red Riding Hood to transform.[175]

Like the Red Riding Hood of Carter's story, in this picture Woodman's body is the site of a Deleuzian "becoming"; she is neither human nor animal, but the medium between them. Moreover, "becoming" and "in the process of" imply a state that will never be fixed, a becoming that will always be becoming, a process that will always be a process, not something that will harden into a finite shape (an after becoming—"she became").

In her paintings, Leonora Carrington is often both the body of a cat or leopard and the body of a woman; the resulting hybrid is a creature that is entirely new, neither deer nor woman.[176] Tanning's body in "Birthday" is neither tree, nor woman, but both. Her physical identity as a tree-woman is entirely new and entirely her own.

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[173] Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 41.

[175] I am referring to Carter's "In the Company of Wolves"

[176] See Appendix B, Figure 15

This is true of Woodman in the photograph "Providence 1975-1976," as well as in the "House Series". In the "House Series," Woodman is in the process of becoming house, but has not become the house. However, the process of "becoming" is more graspable when the object Woodman is touching ,is alive or has been alive, like the raccoon or the fox in their square framed boxes. It is easy, easier than with the walls of a house, to image touching the bristly roughness of the raccoon or the fox in conjunction with the smooth bumpiness (I imagine goose bumps, bones, veins) of Woodman's skin.

The liveness or potential liveness of the animals in "Providence" allows you to imagine texture against human skin, the way in which animal skin can be used to drape the human skin as with a fur coat or leather shoes.[177] Yet fur and leather are not only used to cover human bodies, but are also a part of them. Hair, fine or coarse, barely visible or lush and long covers almost every inch of the body and our skin, and, like that of an animal, our skin can be dried and tanned into leather. By covering human skin with animal skin or with silk or with fur—all once-live materials and all materials that (texturally) resemble the human body—you are covering yourself with your own body. The distinction between the human body and the object that the

[177] Given the recent interest in animal studies or studies that involve the concept of being "beyond the human", I am acutely aware that I am using "human" to refer to Woodman's body and "animal" to refer to some of the creatures she touches. I fully grant that Woodman is a "human-animal" or, simply, a type of animal (and I feel that the blurring of human-animal categories is clear in my analysis of her work). However, because there are so many visual boundary blurrings in Woodman's work, it helps me to keep my analysis somewhat clearer to use the terms "human" and "animal", even if these terms seem antiquated to some scholars.

human body is wearing, is constantly touching, becomes indistinct. I think this is why Woodman is naked in so many of her pictures; I think that she understood that the object is always significant when placed against the human skin, that it becomes almost immediately an extension and a part of the human skin. [178]

Thus, while the body of the fireplace may be the most important object in Woodman's "House 4," so is the dress she is wearing, so are her shoes; each of these objects contributes to the way in which she is "becoming object," merging with the fireplace and the house. Were the picture taken without the dress or shoes, it would have to be interpreted slightly differently. There would be fewer allusions to the Gothic and more towards the erotic; the trunk of the fireplace might look more phallic and less like a third, clumsy limb. Woodman touched her objects strategically in order to highlight the meaning and meaningfulness of this relationship.

Fashion

Something about this merging of the body and object, body as the substance of the object and the identity of the object, intuitively contextualizes Woodman's photographs in the domain of fashion. Even such a trite, oft-repeated quotation about runway fashion such as "the model should be a hanger for the clothing" implies that the merging of body with object in space is complex; the body gives identity and

[178] I abbreviated my discussion of texture and skin here because it detracted from the primary arguments of this chapter. However, a broader, more extensive discussion of the history of texture and Woodman's place in it would be interesting and useful.

gravitas to the clothing, the object, and yet the identity of the body is and should be (according to the hanger quotation) subsumed into the color, the form-- the visual narrative—of the object.[179] Woodman's photographs are less slick and colorful than most fashion photography; they are serious, fragile and involve little, if any, clothing but, like Tanning's fire-like garments in "Children's Games" and the tree dress in "Birthday", Woodman's pictures always involve texture.

Look at Woodman in "New York 1979-1980": she lies seductively on a bench, her back to the camera. Undergarments are draped around her body: two lacey bras and underwear with garters. On the wall hang two willowy, sheer pairs of tights, like four long, dropping arms caressing the recumbent Woodman.[180] The extension reminds one, again, of Derrida's "Psyche."

The fragmentation of the self that Tanning displays in "Birthday," simultaneously placing her identity in the doors tumbling behind her and the tree

[179] The commentary at a recent exhibit of Woodman's at the SF MOMA observed that Woodman's interest in fashion may also have been inspired by her desire for recognition. Fashion photography was one of the few ways that a photographer could make money and gain a certain status. As the daughter of two artists, Woodman was probably quite aware that in order to support herself as an artist, she would have to make commercial, as well as more 'esoteric' art. The exhibit mentioned Woodman's interest in her 'legacy' a number of times; its interesting that at such a young age, Woodman was so concerned with achieving immediate recognition. Woodman has a series of photographs called *Reputation*. The series consists of four small photographs. In the first, Woodman is clothed and has a gloved hand crossed across her chest. In the second photograph, she is topless, but her hand is still gloved. In the third photograph, she is entirely naked; instead of wearing gloves, her hands are covered in paint. In the final photograph, there is no body, only handprints on the wall. Woodman's photographic series indicates the gradual 'nakedness' of the individual as it is exposed to the gossip that makes up its reputation; the individual appears more and more vulnerable in each picture. At the end, only 'the reputation', the legacy—hand prints on the wall—remain of the individual. I think Woodman was keenly aware of the persistence of objects, of reputations compared to the brief life of the human body, the human individual.

[180] Appendix B, Figure 16

branches growing from her back, and the way in which Woodman becomes the house, her dress and the sunlight in "House 4," is a method that has been appropriated by fashion photography. After all, if clothes and objects are an intrinsic part of "becoming" in Surrealist painting, if they are an extension of the human skin, then why not display the couture clothes you are trying to advertise in a similarly Surrealist way? You can see how fashion incorporates Surrealism and Surrealism's relationship with objects in Tim Walker's ad for Italian *Vogue*. In the ad, a model stands in the back of a moving van; she looks as though she is in a bridal gown and her face is covered in a bridal veil. Upon closer inspection, the veil and gown look like they are made of plastic, the same type of plastic that is used to pack objects, particularly delicate objects, when they are being moved from one place to another. The plastic of the model's clothes also make her skin look plastic, waxen, doll-like. The objects on the model's body, the plastic veil and dress, transform her into a large, plastic doll, wrapped up and ready to be driven to her next house or building, the next space where she will be displayed.[181]

There is a literalization in this advertisement, as there are in many fashion advertisements that play with the relationship between object and body in a Surrealist manner. In the *Vogue* image, the model actually becomes the plastic wrapping, becomes the plastic doll, becomes the object in a way in which Woodman, Tanning and Kahlo, in their pictures, do not; there is always the possibility that these artists

[181] See Appendix B, Figure 17

can become something else; they, particularly Woodman, are shape-shifters in a way that the model, stuck in her plastic sheet, like a toy caught behind a glass display case, is not. [182]

. I imagine that the way in which Woodman was trying to create a relationship between objects and human body parts, skin and texture was, as Sundell points out, too complex, certainly too complex for the fashion world. She is neither trying to become the object—the model as a hanger, Francesca as the wall—nor is she trying to refute the intimate relationality between object and body. [183]

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[182] Woodman has a photograph that is similar to Walker's photograph; she is wrapped in plastic sheeting; the sheeting becomes a cocoon—protecting her. By contrast, the model in the Walker photographs is pressing her hands against the plastic, trying to get out like some dazed rapunzel trying to find her way out of a doorless, windowless tower.

[183] In Chris Townsend's essay on Francesca Woodman, he discusses Deborah Turbeville, a fashion photographer who worked during the 1970s and 80s and who exhibited in fine arts venues as well as fashion magazines. Woodman took Turbeville as one of her idols. Likely, Woodman saw Turbeville as one of the rare examples of a photographer who had success in both commercial and fine arts venues. Turbeville's portraits depict women trapped in narrow, pencil-slender walls trying to claw their way out. The clothes they are in and the walls they are enclosed by are a problem; the object and the body are at a stand off, defined by one another , but resentful of their need for one another.

Like Tim Walker's images, Turbeville's portraits make a negative commentary on fashion photography; with her portraits , she says that the model, the female body is indeed trapped in objects, trapped in the plastic clothing, the leather, the lace, she is meant to display; She has been turned into a visual object like the clothes she wears. Turbeville's portraits are grittier, more "angsty" (like Woodman's) than the smoothly contoured traditional fashion photograph; Turbeville is, indeed, trying to show how objects -- such as clothing are the stage on which models' bodies are presented -- can swallow the body of a woman; how she can, through displaying objects become an object. I imagine that the way in which Woodman was trying to create a relationship between objects and human body parts, skin and texture was, as Sundell points out, too complex, certainly too complex for the fashion world. She is neither trying to become the object: the model as a hanger, Francesca as the wall, nor is she trying to refute the intimate relationality between object and body.

There is a similar complexity in the work of Cindy Sherman, particularly her black and white film stills created in the late 1970s at the same time Woodman was taking photographs. Sherman also became—arguably more successfully—involved in the fashion world.[184] Looking at the film still "37" where Sherman leans against a fire place, her hair and make up naturally though carefully applied, her body clothed in well-fitting pants and a black top—or at the very different film still, "33" where Sherman, sitting on a bed with an opened letter in front of her, clothed in loafers, leggings and a 1960s mini dress—you can see how her photographs would appeal to the fashion world.[185] By changing her clothes, her make-up and the props around her, Sherman creates a different character, a different identity. Each character that she creates seems vaguely mysterious; the viewer only has a glimpse into the woman's life: an opened letter, white socks, dim light. Has she been given a letter by her lover who has left her? Has she, herself, written the letter? The objects that Sherman wears and the objects that surround her create her character's identity. Traditionally, this has been the fashion advertisement's aim—to create an interesting, desirable female character, a female character so desirable that clothes she wears, the jewelry that hangs from her neck and ears, are also desirable.[186]

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[184] Although her photos commissioned for Vogue were judged as "too disturbing" – like Woodman's, too complex to completely cohere with the mainstream fashion world.

[185] See Appendix B, Figure 18 and 19

[186] This may be a bit simplistic, but looking at the photographs by Mat Collishaw (Evans, 14)-- or , for that matter, in any traditional fashion magazine (Vogue, Glamour)—it's fairly easy to trace the line between the clothes a model is wearing, the character that is trying to be created through her clothes and the potential desirability of both the model and the clothes.

Part of Sherman's vision was to question this easy elision between the clothes a woman wears or the objects she chooses to keep in her apartment and her identity. Describing her characters in "Film Stills," she says, "the clothes make them seem a certain way, but then you look at the expression, however slight it may be, and wonder if maybe 'they' are not what the clothes are communicating. I wasn't working with a raised 'awareness,' but I definitely felt that the characters were questioning something—perhaps being forced into a certain role… There are so many levels of artifice. I liked that whole jumble of ambiguity."[187] So, maybe the woman in white socks and loafers is not as demure and melancholy as she might seem; maybe there is a fixedness to her jaw, a stubborn decision to the way in which her arm is placed on the bed. Yet her clothes are not entirely at odds with her identity either. It's just, as Sherman says, that there is ambiguity; the clothes are both her (the character) and not absolutely her, like the way in which Woodman is the wall in "House 4" and is not absolutely the wall.[188] Woodman's clothes, like Sherman's clothes, are used in a similarly ambiguous way. [189] The Mary Jane shoes and flowing, patterned dress evoke an Alice in Wonderland precociousness and childishness. Is Woodman identifying herself as a child,[190] or could she be identifying herself as a rag doll thrown in a corner of an old house? Or is she, as I suggested earlier, ghost-like,

[187] Sherman, *Film Stills*, 9.
[188] I think it is obvious (although Sherman never explicitly mentions it) that Sherman, like Woodman, is influence by Surrealism. For more on this see the book , *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation.*
[189] I mentioned this at the beginning of my discussion on Woodman and Fashion.
[190] See the Liu essay discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

with the clothes lending themselves to multiple historical time periods? The clothes are suggestive of her identity, but they do not point to any one formation of that identity.

In recent years (the end of the 1990s and early 2000s), Caroline Evans, in her excellently researched book *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*, points out that designers like Alexander McQueen and Victor and Rolf have been able to construct a different—and more complex—relationship between object and body. Take Alexander McQueen's "Dazed and Confused," a photograph in which the athlete and model Aimee Mullins is wearing a McQueen sport suit that leaves the upper half of her body bare. Looking at the lower half of her body, you see that she wears prostheses from the knees downward; it looks as though she is wearing a pair of stilts or, as was more likely intended, that the prostheses are part of McQueen's garment, part of his fashion design. I do not believe that the model here is subsumed by the objects she is wearing, either the prostheses or her sport suit. The flesh of her legs and the hoof-like curve of the prostheses seem to be in a dynamic, if not entirely harmonious engagement with one another. [191]

The picture of Aimee Mullins also has a fairy tale like quality; poised on her curved prosthesis, she could be a modern day satyr—a satyr who runs through city streets, rather than through a sunlit wood. Much of McQueen's work has this fantastical quality; it is a quality that is not associated with any one time period, but

[191] See Appendix B, Figure 20

like Woodman's photographs, borrows from contemporary aesthetics, the gothic and surrealism equally.

Spectral Bodies: *Less than image: Apotemnophilia: when you see yourself as limbless—the opposite of phantom limb. Here, the invisible, the spectral has more substance than the flesh: the arm made of air is infinitely more real than my arm of flesh.*

McQueen's shows have names like *Nihilism* and *Highland Rape.* His clothes are raggedly beautiful—they already imagine the process of their decay, imagine it in the same way in which the models who wear them seem to be in a premature state of decay (McQueen was famous for his pale, wasp-waisted models, made even waspier by being laced into impossibly tight corsets), their skin laid so thinly over their bones (the flakiest of crusts)… isn't this part of the model's allure? Her breakability, her fragility, the breath of death without actual death?

Perhaps the most striking and most theorized aspect of Woodman's work is her disappearing body, the way in which her flesh dissolves, not only into the objects around her (the wall, her clothes etc.), but, simply, dissolves into air, ether, light. The body of the model, too, seems to disappear. This may be because of her almost impossible thinness or because she is meant to dissolve under the artistry of the clothes she wears. "The fashion model invokes the twin themes of doubling and

deathliness."[192] I began my chapter by invoking the decay of a house; I compared the walls of the crumbling house to the walls of gradually eroding flesh. Object and human are keeping each other company as they transform from a solid manifestation into a lighter than light specter. I believe that Woodman is visualizing her own "specter," effectively touching her own death in her photographs.

What if Francesca simply saw herself as both existent flesh and dissolving flesh—manifest in another world and manifest in an invisible world? What if this is how the anorexic body sees itself? What if it always want to be less than flesh? What if you always imagine you are air, rather than flesh. The anorexic body is a skin that purposefully disintegrates; a slow, painful process of making oneself a specter.[193] Certainly the anorexia makes you a "witness to your own death" or, in any case, your transformation from human flesh to an invisible, molecular flesh. "The act of erasing the body *is* magic."[194] Every day your skin dissolves, your hair sheds; you eat only air and drink only oxygen; you hope that consuming air and objects (taking them into your body) will allow you to become the substances you consume. And eventually you might. Flesh uncovers bone, dust dissolves into air, lighter than any feather.

While I am not entirely sure that Woodman's photographs—with their uncanny resemblance to the ghost or spirit photography of the Victorian era (a blur of light, an unidentifiable shadow)—are a *conscious* preparation for death, I do think

[192] Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 175.
[193] Please note that I am not saying that all models are anorexic.
[194] Hornbacher, *Wasted*, 129.

that Woodman is trying to explore the transitive state of the body—the body not as bone and flesh and sinew. The body not as human body, but as ghost, spirit, angel—the body untethered from its living, human form. In her earliest work, this movement from flesh to another, unidentifiable form can already be seen.

In "Self-Portrait at Age 13" Francesca sits in what could be a church pew.[195] The features of the face, which give particularity to the individual, have been entirely obscured by hair. Francesca, or who the viewer imagines to be Francesca, has a beam of light coming from her hand. The light envelopes the bottom half of Francesca and seems to seep in from every other corner of the photograph. While the beam of light could be coming from Francesca's hand, indicating that it is she who is the creator of all this miraculous light, it seems more accurate to say that she is pulling the light towards her in a great sword-like sheath. She is, in fact, inviting this boundless misty light: a light like the ether said to surround psychics when they make contact with the ghostly world. Even if she is not becoming specter as she does in later photographs, she is touching, asking to commune with a light presence that could be a specter.[196]

Anca Cristofovici argues that Woodman's ethereal shape-shifting has little to do with death or the anticipation of death, but more with the transformation that

[195] You will note that I am switching from using 'Woodman' to 'Francesca.' I am doing this deliberately. When I discuss the critical material on Woodman (where she is an 'object', talked about), I use the more formal 'Woodman'. I use the less formal, more personal 'Francesca' when I discuss her photographs directly.
[196] See Appendix B, Figure 21

adolescence and its openness to change brings.[197] Death and transformation are clearly not opposing states: the openness to dream and reality, intuition and reason, as Crisofovici puts it this blurring of the boundaries between them, naturally means that the lines between life, death, afterlife become equally blurry and the line between them becomes equally well-conceived. Francesca is thirteen; her face is hidden because—like the light she is pulling towards her, shaping as she pulls—it is still being shaped into its final marble form its final flesh mask. It is quite possible, too, that Francesca's face is covered because it is turned, turned in expectation. In *Specters of Marx*, I think Derrida sees the specter as announcing himself with the clank of the specter's helmet, the sigh of his chains, the murmuring musical sounds of his 'O' mouth that give evidence of the specter—but Francesca turns her head, turns to sees the specter, see what shape it has made itself into-- in and out of light.[198]

In later photographs, the images of Francesca become the shape, the specter she had, in her self-portrait, turned her head to see. In "Untitled", we see a figure—again, the figure and face are blurred—climbing through a grave; the torso and the head are the most unclear, the hands are the most focused, shapely body part: we can name them as hands. I see this figure as *already* being a specter. The molecules of the body are *already* in movement, the transformation from solid flesh, from life, has already occurred. Francesca is anticipating this occurrence, this transformation. Her

[197] Cristofovici, *Touching Surfaces*, 167-191.
[198] A more detailed analysis of Derrida's *Specters* is given in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

picture is a visually marked time; her body is the site of time in constant movement; she is both the psychic who predicts death and the ghost who comes to whisper in the psychic's ear.

The opaqueness of some of the body parts in the picture, the clarity of others and the seeming randomness of both clarity and obscurity, also mirror the imprint of memory.[199] Memory is where Derrida begins his own definition of the spectral: that which he remembers or does not presently see. [200]

Woodman has one image—an image of how the specter might speak. I spoke of this picture at the beginning of my chapter as a mystical image. Let me introduce this image again so that I can try to expand my understanding of it. At the bottom of the image, Woodman writes: "And then, at one point, I did not need to translate the notes. They went directly into my hands. [201] Notes, which are language, do not need to be translated, do not need to be sounded—they are touched, they come seeping into the skin ring, not into light or into a grave, but into a commonly imagined space for specters: the space of the house. Again, the face is hidden, ducked under, turtle-like; the hands read the wall as though they are reading Braille. Francesca's body is, again, a medium for the spectral; the notes come directly. The picture is one of direct

[199] There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation… "Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 114

[200] See Appendix B, Figure 22
[201] Mentioned in this chapter's section on becoming.

contact, of direct experience. It could also be a picture of the "spectral muse;" inspiration, art comes directly into the hands through access to the artist's vision.

But, it could also be that Woodman is saying that art, that the translation of these notes, is no longer necessary--that in death, artistic expression, which is almost always a translation, is not necessary. Death comes into the hands, *into* the body; it does not need to speak to the body. This is one of Woodman's most mysterious photographs (given the ambiguity of so many of her photographs, this is saying a lot), a picture of which Peggy Phelan, one of Woodman's most skilful critics, says "I am unable to translate this image or find a way to enter it."[202] Woodman's images, particularly this image, are a loss. They display loss: the loss of a face, a limb, the ultimate loss of Woodman herself.

I would like to think that if Woodman was haunted by her own death, she saw herself as already-specter, that her haunting was as satisfyingly complex and lovely as her work-- aurora-like and startling at first and then becoming absorbed into a quiet pulsing darkness.

[202] Phelan, "Death and the Image One More Time," 996.

Chapter 3

Social Skins: Performing History in the Work of Marina Abramovic and Diamanda Galas

"There is a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" of the seeing body in the visible body: we are both subject and object simultaneously, and our "flesh" merges with the flesh that is the world. There is no limit or boundary between the body and the world since *world is flesh."*[203]

I. Settings

In 1990, Diamanda Galas, performance artist and opera diva (though she objects to the term, opera signifying an art too stalwart, too traditionally European), sings her *Plague Mass* in New York's St. John's Cathedral.[204] St. John's is large and airy and vaulted. It has neo-gothic aspirations and gargoyles hunch into the stone and widen their eyes on the outside of the church. It is not perhaps so decorated as its European counterparts, nor so imposing or scalded with age. In this echoing cathedral space Galas' voice, almost four octaves and amplified by multiple microphones, would have the proper degree of gravitas and depth. If anything it bears an excess of emotion: a screech so piercing and a vibrato so tremulous that it

[203] Jones, *Body Art*, 41.
[204] *Plague Mass*

makes the polished wooden benches and heavily framed paintings of the cathedral quake. The cathedral, solid as it is, quakes before her voice.

Less solid and more easily penetrable than the stone skin of the church is the skin of the audience members. I could describe them as service goers or even devotees, for *they are* in a cathedral and Galas *is* singing a self-described Mass. Her voice, as imitatively gothic as the cathedrals, beats into the blood of audience members, rattling their bones. Like well-preserved relics, the bodies of audience members are summoned into life by Galas' performative singing.[205] It is 1990 and the 'Plague' of the Mass is not bubonic, bulbous or spread through the scavenging of rats; it is AIDS.[206] By having their blood shake and their skin hum through her voice, Galas instills some of the fear, anger and formidable sadness of the Plague into the bodies of audience members. [207]

In 1974, a young Marina Abramovic, now self-named the 'grandmother of performance art,' performs her "most heavy piece," *Rhythm O*.[208] She is not in so grand a venue as Galas for her performance. Such grandness and the technology that amplifies Galas' voice will only come later in the history of performance art, in the

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[205] The setting of Galas' performance is gothic; her attire and general appearance also have a strong gothic flavor

[206] I think that it is important to note that just days before Galas performed at St. John's, she was arrested during an ACT UP protest at another famed New York cathedral, St. Patrick's. Protesters were demonstrating against the Catholic Churches view of safe sex practices in light of the AIDS crisis. I will be discussing the powerful historical resonance between Galas' arrest at such a demonstration and her subsequent performance of *Plague Mass* later in the chapter.

[207] See Appendix C, Figure 23

[208] Abramovic stated "This was the heaviest piece I ever did because I wasn't in control. The audience was in control." Abramovic, *Marina Abramovic: Artist Body*, 16.

sleeker 1980s and 90s. Abramovic is in a small gallery, Studio Morra in Naples, Italy.[209] The space is intimate and gallery goers include art critics as well as the general public. Next to her, Abramovic has laid out seventy-two objects. They vary from the soft and seemingly harmless (feathers and roses, handkerchiefs) and soap to the potentially more dangerous: an axe, a knife, a gun, a whip. Abramovic writes instructions for the performance. "There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object."[210] Here, the touch between audience member and performer is not vibratory, mediated by the air between voice and skin, as in the Galas performance. It is, though possibly mediated by the objects lying on the table, direct and personal. There is no cordon around Abramovic and no protective guard. As audience members—now participants— write on her skin, cut off her clothes, or gently graze her cheek with flower petals, they can also look into her eyes or accidentally brush the back of their hands against her flesh. [211]

The relationship between Abramovic and her audience (or the "participants") is fraught: how much responsibility do they have for her well-being? How much responsibility does Abramovic have for it? The performance was stopped after six hours when a gun was put in her hand and her hand was lifted to her head. A participant posed the gun and likewise, participants stopped the performance. In 1974, Abramovic had recently immigrated from the Socialist Federal Republic of

[209] *Rhythm O*
[210] Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 80.
[211] See Appendix C, Figure 24

Yugoslavia, a communist country. Remember that Abramovic's parents were not only citizens of such a country but, as communist partisans in the National Liberation War of Yugoslavia, active participants in its politics. This politicization of Abramovic's family as well as the complex transformation that occurred during Abramovic's youth contributed to the way in which she experimented on the body. Unlike those in more tightly controlled communist countries, Yugoslavian citizens were allowed relative freedom; they were able to travel outside of the country and their artistic and verbal expressions were minimally restricted. Abramovic's performances, which combine a sense of "western" individuality and personal responsibility with many eastern spiritual practices (for instance, the silence that Abramovic keeps during "Rhythm O" is almost akin to meditation and the objects she uses could be thought of as "relics" imbued with a special symbolism), reflect the ambiguous political position of Yugoslavia. Abramovic's "Rhythm O" was further politicized because it was performed in the early 1970s, the years when the Vietnam War was still—though with increasingly less energy and support— trickling forward.[212] In this context, Abramovic's performance dangerously plays with the question of responsibility between her body and an audience member's body. But, more broadly, it addresses the responsibility that *each* individual has towards all other individuals and their embodiment. Should you react violently towards other bodies simply because you can? Clearly some audience members at Abramovic's

[212] The Vietnam War ended in 1975, the year after Abramovic performed *Rhythm O*.

performance do (the cocked gun towards the head), while other audience members clearly do not (the uncocking of the gun, the halting of the performance). As critic Kathy O'Dell notes, "Such performers reminded viewers of their own role as witnesses and of their own capacity to occupy the position of either perpetrator or victim."[213]

I have begun my analysis of each of these performers, the subjects of my chapter, very purposefully with the preposition "in." This preposition, as may be obvious, situates these performers and their performances in a locatable time and place, a time and place that I believe is incalculably significant to the way in which they interact with the audience members/participants of their performance and significant, moreover, to the way in which their performances interact and "touch" the society and history that surrounds them. I caution the reader that I will not be making a directly historical argument in this chapter—that is, I will not be claiming that the genre of performance art arose because of the Vietnam War or the AIDS crisis. Plenty of critics, including the well-respected and prolific scholars of performance art Amelia Jones and Rosa Lee Goldberg, have made this argument before and made it convincingly. Goldberg, speaking of the performers of "live art" or as the British call it, "time based art," states "Their actions more often than not were provocative and ironic, and they were frequently responsive to the political and socially transforming

[213] O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin* ,6.

developments that raged around them."[214] Jones goes into more critical and theoretical detail when she explains "the emergence of the artist's body in the radicalizing 1960s is linked to the problem of subjectivity and sociality endemic to late or "pan-" capitalism, characterized by a single globally dominant economy that demands that individuals submit their bodies so that they can function more efficiently under its 'obsessively rational imperatives.'"[215]

While the political imperatives that inspired performance remained during the 1980s and 90s, they became less pronounced. During the 80s performance art also seemed to split off into two fairly distinct categories: large, theatrical work or photographic performance. "Body art mutated into either performative photographic work, such as "film stills" of Cindy Sherman, or large-scale, ambitious, at least semi narrative performance art practices such as Laurie Anderson's theatrical, proscenium-bound United States."[216] I think it is obvious that both Abramovic's and Galas' performances belong to the more dramatic, more theatrical direction of performance art. Indeed, both took themselves far too seriously to venture into the pop culture critique or subtle irony of artists such as Cindy Sherman or Hannah Wilke. Think of Abramovic naked and bloodied or Galas prostrate on the floor of a large cathedral—for both of these artists, their performances were, literally a matter of life and death;

[214]Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art since 1960*, 15.
[215] Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 21.
[216]Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 19.

their bodies became the medium on which the struggles of life and death, personal responsibility and violation, were enacted.

I do not disagree with either Goldberg or Jones and their arguments. No doubt, without the political climate in the Balkans and the political unrest generated by the Vietnam War, Abramovic would not have placed her body in such a precarious position as she did in *Rhythm O*. Her body in this performance is, as Jones points out, linked to the submissiveness that individual bodies are expected to have during times of war and under certain economic regimes. Galas' intensely felt *Plague Mass* would not have been so potent if outside of St. John's Cathedral, on the streets and in the claustrophobic apartments of New York City, thousands of individuals were not becoming increasingly sick, dying without government help---in fact, were not being shunned by factions of the government.

While not being my own, Jones and Goldberg's arguments fortuitously aid in the construction of my arguments for this chapter. I am claiming that in a performance like Galas', the skin of the performer (Galas) and the skin of history (the AIDS crisis and the skin of the audience members listening to Galas) overlap. These skins intimately touch and reverberate against one another almost as though they formed one singular body. Thought of like this, my argument becomes unnervingly literal. When I say that these performances 'touch' their audience and the society around them, I am not dabbling in symbols. The very skin of Abramovic and the wielding, vibrating gullet of Galas are touching the membranes and nerves of

audience members. How else to explain the panic attacks caused by Galas' singing? Or the increased temperatures experienced by careful watchers of Abramovic's work? These membranes and nerves are also deeply social. How else to explain the astonishment of the Yugoslav government when Abramovic was chosen as its representative artist for the Venice Biennale in 1997? Or Galas' forcible arrest at St. Patrick's Cathedral just days before performing her "Plague Mass?" These performers strike a political nerve. Upon their bodies, so actively used in their performances, Abramovic and Galas create inextricable links between the audience and the performer and between the performer and prescient social events, a link that is felt in the rhythmically pumping blood of audience, performer and political machine alike.

More precisely, I will be arguing that the performer acts as a type of medium and consciously collapses physical boundaries with his or her body. These boundaries are broken between the audience member and the performer, as we can see in Abramovic's *Rhythm O*, a performance where audience members not only touch Abramovic's skin but can also, through cutting and piercing her, break through that skin. These boundaries also dissipate, though perhaps less clearly, between performers and the political events they are representing.[217] For example, Galas is dedicated to becoming the voice of the 'Plague,' the voice of AIDS. As a medium

[217] "I want the personalized self-body to become the metaphor for the big collective body." Halprin, "Planetary Dance, 67.

would, she channels the pain of AIDS victims and literally carries this pain and the disease that causes it through her voice. She does this so effectively that, as she states nonchalantly in the compendium *Angry Women*, many people already assume she is HIV positive. By simultaneously touching audience members and certain social experiences, performers act as a conduit between the audience and the social experience. If Galas' voice carries AIDS and the vibrations of that voice reverberate under the skin of audience members, then AIDS and the emotions felt by AIDS victims is *bodily* felt by the audience. There is an undeniable mysticism to this argument; 'medium', the word that I have used to describe Galas, Abramovic and Eltit (see Chapter 1) while they are performing, implies this. Galas, Abramovic and Eltit are no less aware of this mystical quality in their performances; Galas calls herself a 'witch,' Abramovic calls dubs herself a 'shaman', and Eltit thinks of herself as a 'witness.' All of these monikers imply the ability to navigate between various bodily and emotional states, even (as with 'witches' and 'shamans') between worlds.

While my argument is not strictly historical, as stated above, I will be using theorists like Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan and Rosa Lee Goldberg to historically situate the performance artists I am looking at within the framework of performance art practices. Theoreticians like Susan Sontag and Jacques Derrida will allow me to link these performers not only to the historical development of performance art but to what I will call a historical 'lineage' of bodies whose skin unfolds, stretches so completely that they are able to effectively embody the question posed by feminist

historian of science Donna Haraway in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*: "Why should our bodies end at the skin?"[218]

In her *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag discusses illnesses such as AIDS and cancer as harmfully over-metaphorized in the social imagination. Such metaphorization allows these diseases to be seen as not only illnesses of the body, but moral illnesses. Moreover, they are seen as moral illnesses that are easily contractible but not easily curable. Sontag's argument, though she gives the very particular examples of tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS to illustrate her point, is not meant to be a limited analysis of any one disease. She is saying that society uses a disease (and thus the people who have contracted that disease) as a metaphor or a symbol for the qualities it sees as 'undesirable' at a certain moment in its history. As Sontag writes of AIDS, "it seems societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil, and attaches blame to its victims."[219] If individuals with AIDS are presumed to be not only physically sick but morally corrupt, it follows that any physical contact, even any physical proximity to them, would place the 'healthy' individual in danger. Sontag's analysis examines the fear of disease and, as inevitably follows from mortal disease, death. At a deeper level, Sontag examines the fear of touch, the fear of breaking skin boundaries between individuals. This is an examination that Galas, her voice, the voice of the *Plague*,

[218] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 180.
[219] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 104.

Abramovic with her penetrable body and Eltit with her deliberate cutting of skin, render literal. With Sontag's work, I can show how the fear of skin-to-skin touch is related to a larger social discourse on purity and contamination, about who is allowed to be touched and who is dubbed untouchable.

Derrida's work, *Specters of Marx*, more subtly and with much playful word use (as is his wont) conjures a spectral body, a body which Derrida describes as "a body that is more abstract than ever."[220] With his skillful, malleable word maneuverings, Derrida never explicitly defines what a spectral body is merely that it is the 'becoming body' or the 'other at the edge of life.' As one clear example of this body, he discusses the spectral body of the King in *Hamlet.* He describes Hamlet, prince and heir of Denmark, as being haunted by the specter of his father. Hamlet does not precisely see the specter, but he feels him. He cannot precisely talk to the specter (he assigns the scholar, Horatio, to this difficult task), but he believes the specter is able to speak, has some mouth-like device and some communication that he needs to make to him, Hamlet. Despite the fact that the specter is a type of body in Derrida's account, the emphasis is on the words the specter needs to say (and that Hamlet cannot hear) and not on his visuality or tactility. Also, in Derrida's account the specter is seen as a type of symbolic haunting. It is undoubtedly real to Hamlet but is also conjured out of the responsibility he feels to his country, the role he needs to play in the wake of his father's death.

[220] Derrida, *Specters of Mar*x,126

This is no doubt a simplified summary of Derrida's historical theory of haunting, his rendering of the spectral body. Even so, it does have significant implications for the performers that I am looking at here. It implies that a formed or bodied historical presence could manifest to a living being. It implies that this presence could literally be bodily felt by that living being.[221] Moreover, through scholarly or artistic work—the figure and voice of Horatio in Derrida's "Hamlet," for example—that being can be heard and communicated with.

Using Derrida's theory of the spectral to look at Galas' *Plague Mass*, you might see that through her singing, her vocal memory and witch-like power, Galas conjures a specter of AIDS, a specter of the very body of the Plague. Through Galas' vocal conjuring of the specter, the audience then feels the specter and their responsibility to that historical specter. By applying Derrida's theory to the performance work of Galas and Abramovic the spectral— this vaporous, but encroaching historical body-- can be seen as part of the individual body. Derrida's theory sees the relationship between the historical and the individual body as a symbiotic one. The spectral body of history (AIDS, the Balkans and for Hamlet, his father and the responsibility his father symbolizes Denmark) cannot be touched unless it is remembered, as Galas and Abramovic choose to remember it in their

[221] This understanding of *Specters* is quite similar to the way in which Woodman's photographic body (Chapter 2) is infused with the specter of her own death

performances. The spectral body is always seeking to be remembered; it is a flesh memory, a presence in the skin.

I began this chapter with three detailed descriptions of Gala and Abramovic not only to situate them historically, but as an attempt to describe them in a way that is not just visual but multi-sensory. Undoubtedly these performers are visually striking, even appealing. Performing at St. John's, Galas is covered in a blood-like substance, her clothes are tattered and her black hair spikes out wildly. She looks—and I imagine this is intentional—like a modern day Fury. In *Rhythm O,* Abramovic's angular face, her stoic expression and the visual transformation that she goes through from fully clothed to naked, from unscarred to dripping with blood, is unignorable. Pictures of Eltit during her performance at the Chilean brothel show her serious, short-haired and robed prophet-like. Like Abramovic's, her face remains impassive as a knife bites through her skin. The visual aspect of these performances destabilizes the other senses as well, notably the sense of touch, but also the auditory and the olfactory. Galas' vocal screeches are in part why her visual appearance is so spell-binding and why the skin crawls and vibrates during her performances. You can only imagine that Abramovic's "Rhythm O" is similarly multisensory. You, the audience, watch her expression, touch her skin and hear her breathing and the breathing of the others who gaze at her. In order to describe the multi-sensory of impact of these performers and their performances on the body, I will be using the critical term "the haptic." Haptic perception relies on recognizing, perceiving objects

through the surface of the skin; it also emphasizes the way in which the optical and the manual, visuality and touch work in accordance with one another. 'Haptics' is most often used in conducting research on the use of technology and, perhaps obviously, 'virtual reality.' The finger on the mouse that evokes a tingle or a slap. That same finger filling the computer screen with unfiltered images.

The haptic has also become a theoretical term used to critically analyze aesthetics: the way in which painting, film, and, for my purposes, performance allow the viewer to touch and feel, listen and move.[222] Most famously and at greater length than other theorists or critics, Deleuze uses 'the haptic' in his *Logic of Sensation* to examine the textured 'meaty' paintings of Francis Bacon. It is natural but incorrect, he says, to think of the visual as the dominant sense, particularly when it comes to a seemingly apparent visual art: painting. "To characterize the connection of eye and hand, it is certainly not enough to say that the *eye* is infinitely richer, and passes through dynamic tensions, logical reversals, organic exchanges... we will speak of the haptic each time there is no longer a strict subordination in one direction or the other... *but when sight discovers in itself a function of touching that belongs to it alone* [emphasis mine]."[223] I think it is important to emphasize Deleuze's idea that sight has its own type of touch—a touch that does not necessarily have to do with only direct, skin-to-skin touch. It is a touch that relies on vision in the same way that

[222] Prof Tyrus Miller informed me that the haptic was originally used in the art historical theory of Alois Riegl, then in Walter Benjamin via Riegl. .
[223] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, 99.

vision relies on a certain type of touch. Without either touch or sight, the sensory experience of a looking at a Bacon painting or listening to a Galas concert would be incomplete. So the vibrations felt under the skin at a Galas concert are as important to seeing the blood on her skin, the throat rapidly moving, as seeing the rapidly moving throat is to feeling the vibration.

If the haptic has keen resonance with a type of full-bodied, textured painting, it has an even greater resonance with those art forms that manifest the body even more obviously. This is why the haptic has been used to discuss film, which, like performance, engages multiple senses in often unexpected ways. In a burst of lyricism, Laura U. Marks, the film critic who (arguably) most effectively discusses the phenomenological impact of a film on the viewer, writes "in a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface."[224] Here, Marks describes the almost magnetic pull that the haptic or the haptic relationship between audience and film has. From her words, it sounds as though the skin of the viewer becomes charged and through this charge, the viewer's skin is able to sympathetically reverberate with the bodies inside the film. This becomes a physical, non-verbal relationship, imitative of the sensation of 'love at first sight.' It is interesting then to think that this magnetism, this 'rushing up', can be experienced between a performer and an audience member. Again, I think of the rumors of fainting and vomiting at Galas' concerts or Abramovic's very real belief that her performances create physical

[224] Marks, *Sensuous Theory*, XVI.

energy with and through the audience.[225] To demonstrate the power of this energy, Abramovic once performed with a Tesla Coil onstage.[226]

Marks' conclusion about the haptic relationship between film and viewer, audience and performer is tamer than the 'rushing up' she describes in her initial analysis, but no less significant. In fact, its significance may be greater than Deleuze's use of the haptic, since Marks points to the ethics of the haptics. "Yet haptic visuality is not the same as actually touching, and the essay concludes by suggesting that a look that acknowledges both the physicality and unknowability of the other is an ethical look."[227] I don't agree with Marks when she says that haptic visuality is not the same as 'actual touching.' What does 'actual touching' mean in virtual reality? In a world filled with transitory spaces and objects? What would 'actual touch' mean when it comes to infection and sickness? There is much at stake in the definition of 'actual touch.' I think Galas and Abramovic are exploring and stretching this definition in their performances. But I do agree with and applaud Marks' inclusion of ethics in her discussion of film and the haptic. What would, as I asked at the beginning of this chapter, have been different about Abramovic's "Rhythm O" if all the audience members at her performance had seen her passive

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[225] See Appendix C, figure 24

[226] Abramovic used a version of the Tesla Coil in her 1994 performance *Count on Us*. This performance is sometimes considered part of a series of performances on the Balkans. It is important to note the importance of Tesla to Yugoslav culture. A famous and eccentric scientist, Tesla's interest in creating energy mirrors Abramovic's own interest in transmitting energy through her own body and the body of her audience. A museum dedicated to Tesla was established in Belgrade in 1952.

[227] Marks, *Sensuous Theory*, xviii.

body, not as an invitation to be freely touched, but as an impetus to look and touch—the two are virtually unlinkable in Abramovic's deliberately haptic performance—with, as Marks calls it an ethical look?

It is notable that the haptic is not often applied to the work of performance. I can only speculate that this is partly because the haptic is used mainly to describe virtual and filmic art works and thus the substantive presence of the performer seems to render the term 'haptic' implausible. The idea that touch and sight are both inextricable components in performance art might seem apparent, and thus other critics have not felt the need to characterize this 'inextricability' precisely. However, I think the haptic and particularly Marks' notion of a haptic ethics well describes the experience of an audience member in the particular performances I am discussing. Not only is the experience of the audience multiply 'sensed', but the performers themselves experience unexpected sensory arousals. Galas describes feeling 'possessed' by the voices of the dead as she sings and Abramovic has talked about seeing and touching sheer walls of saturated color and light during performances of her "Nightsea Crossing."

Hapticity embodies Derrida's specters. Without the multisensory experience of the enfleshed Hamlet, the specter could not be recognized. Hamlet feels the specter, a wind on the skin. He dimly pictures the specter's outline. Perhaps he even smells his father, the King's, old robes. It is Hamlet's bodily sensitivity that conjures the specter. The specter must be recognized in order to be embodied. So Galas must

recognize, feel the specters of those sick from the AIDS virus. Only then can the specter embody itself through her voice, her body and her belief. The mingling of the haptic and the spectral may simply be a more critically complicated way of explaining 'possession.

The word witness, is an associate of Marks' ethics. Abramovic and Galas seek to conjure a particular bodily experience, one that they can transmit to their audience; by conjuring, they also witness to this experience. Witness is a term that I have discussed at length in the first chapter of this dissertation. [228] While I won't repeat that discussion here in depth, I will summarize the main points. Testimony or *Testimonio* became a well-known critical term with the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. *Testimonio* describes a (usually) verbal accounting of trauma; this could be a trauma experienced by the individual 'testifying' or a trauma that was seen or 'witnessed.' Testimony was a personal accounting of suffering, often a suffering that was the result of a larger, historical event: genocide, rape or torture. A witness was often a survivor of such events, but this was not always the case. Writers, journalists and anthropologists can potentially be witnesses, documenting the as yet secret and violent histories of governments or institutional organizations in power. Naturally,

[228] See the first chapter of this dissertation for a more detailed accounting of witnessing studies.

discussions of witnessing and testimony have also become integral to holocaust studies and post-colonial studies.[229]

What is crucial to my argument in this chapter is that testimonio or witnessing became defined as verbal and visual. An individual 'witnessed' or 'saw' an event occur and thus could speak or write that event. Very little is written about the way in which the other bodily senses can and do contribute to witnessing: the sound of a gunshot, the taste of blood or sweat, or the damp feel of skin. My task here is to insert these senses, particularly the sense of touch, back into the experience of witnessing. Witnessing for an event of trauma is fully embodied; it is not a pair of eyes widening and blinking in the air, detached from ears, nose or limbs.

While the way in which Abramovic and Galas use the visual is potent, the way in which they witness is bodily and tactile. Galas for one is not subtle about this. During her *Plague Mass* she exhorts the audience, screaming "were you a witness/Were you a witness/And on that bloody day/were you a witness."[230] The scream is more reproach than encouragement. Galas goes on to describe what *she* is a witness to—a dying man on his bed, the words he speaks to her, the way he holds her hand. Her witnessing is one that not only sees the dying man but hears him and touches him. And, not typically for a witness but intuitively for a medium, she

[229] Discussions about whose testimony is "authentic" and who is "allowed" to witness rage on in most academic fields. Writers and academics can sometimes be thought to "talk for" the victim of trauma in an unethical or indirect way.
[230]Galas, *The Shit of God*, 41.

inhabits the body and voice of the dying man. In some sense, he bodily possesses her—his anger expressed through Galas' shaking. His sick body expressed through Galas' distorted face and flailing arms as she sings. In her performances, Galas urges her audience not to witness for her, the flailing woman on stage, but for the voice and body that sings through her. She does this through the words she sings, but, moreover, through the vocal vibrations that make the skin of her audience vibrate, crawl.

I believe that this type of embodied, tactile witnessing is the experience Galas, Abramovic and Eltit are hoping that their audience will have. It is difficult to say that performers who solicit so much interaction, bodily and emotional, from the people who come to their performances have an audience. An audience implies passivity—a generally still, attentive group of bodies. They wait and they watch the performer. Galas, Abramovic and Eltit practically forbid this kind of passivity. The audience is doing, acting, and feeling by the very virtue that they are present at these performances. When Galas rages "were you a witness?", when Abramovic lays out her table of objects and stands silent in a gallery, they are implicating the audience as participants, as responsible for what takes place during the performance. Kathy O'Dell talks about this as a "contract" between performer and audience member, an unstated contract of responsibility for the event.[231] It turns the audience-participants into compulsory witnesses. When violence was done to Abramovic's body in *Rhythm*

[231] I will discuss O'Dell's concept in more detail later in this chapter.

O, the audience was unmistakably participant and witness to that violence. When Galas' voice causes an audience member-participant to throw up or have a panic attack, their bodies are witnessing to Galas' performance and who Galas is singing for, the body ridden with AIDS.

The haptic, the spectral and the witness are terms that help us to understand how and why these performers are able to physically inhabit their performances so fully and why they are able to so intensely touch their audience-participants. While these concepts are not often mingled together in theoretical discourse, they strongly inform each other. For example, the haptic could explain why the King's specter is felt by Hamlet but not completely seen or visualized by him. Or the spectral and the 'call to responsibility' (as Derrida puts it) it incites in the individual could inform the way in which touch and physical presence contribute to witnessing. The haptic, the spectral and witnessing are all at play when Galas sings her *Plague Mass* or Abramovic stands silent and defenseless in a gallery. So, Galas witnesses for the dead by performing and singing; through her singing the dead are conjured by her—they 'haunt' her performance. And through this spectral haunting, the audience is able to experience Galas' performance as haptic; they are able to feel Galas' voice on and under their skin.

II. Galas

"An actor may simulate the desire emotive state/through a skilled manipulation of external object materials, or he/may use the raw/materials of his own soul in a process which is the/immediate DIRECT experience of the emotion itself. The second concern is felt by performers who,/not just professional/are Obsessional performers."[232]

Galas calls herself an obsessional performer. Obsessional, like the word possession, denotes the all-consuming energy and power that Galas feels during her performance, an inhabitation (might I say infestation) of the body. Such obsession, such complete involvement in her performance, reflects the idea that critic Amelia Jones has about performance art: that in performance the Cartesian subject is de-centered. The supposed split between mind and body no longer exists, or, at least, they are shaken out of their apparently fixed positions. In an obsessional performance, Galas is not manipulating her voice or putting on a type of performative mask. In her obsessional state, her performance possesses her: her limbs move and her voice emits in accordance to its wishes.

The word 'possession' evokes the gritty and bloody scenes from horror movies about exorcisms: a priest searing the forehead of a devilishly possessed young

[232] Galas, *The Shit of God*, 1

girl, limbs in impossible distortion, mouth foaming.[233] Galas thrives on such comparisons, calling herself a "witch" and the "devil's scourge." In describing herself thus she is saying that she and the people she is representing have been, as the devil was, "set apart." The devil was thrust out of the divine kingdom; witches were persecuted, hunted, and burned; their deaths were made an example to the rest of society, a warning about the consequences of departing from social norms. In essence, to be possessed or dubbed devilish was to be an outcast: sick or mentally ill or homosexual. When Galas and her fellow protesters were arrested at St. Paul's Cathedral for demonstrating against the Catholic Church's attitude toward sexuality, they were reenacting the devil's fall; they were 'cast out' from the gold and glittering and melody filled 'heaven' of St. Paul's. Galas tries, tries 'obsessionally,' to voice for these 'devils', these outcasts.

What's interesting about the expunging of these activists, including Galas, from St. Paul's is that the demonstration was not, as some demonstrations are, noise-filled. There were no chants and no refrains, no rousing songs. The activists came into St. Paul's during a service and laid their bodies down on the aisles and pews of the Church; such a silent protest was often called a 'die-in,' meant to represent the

[233] "Is not to possess a specter to be posses by it, possessed period?" writes Derrida in his *Specters*, 210. I believe that Galas is possessed more generally by the specter of the AIDS virus and more particularly by her brother Dmitry Galas. It would be interesting to compare Galas' relationship to her brother to the relationship of brother and sister in Sarah Kane's play, "Crave." See Chapter 4 for more information on Kane.

many individuals who have died of AIDS. [234] It was not their words, then, that were deemed disruptive or problematic by St. Paul's, it was their flesh, their bodies. The supposition that I come to from this is that the obedient and 'healthy' bodies in the church could not and should not be disturbed or defiled by the activist bodies. Indeed, the very presence of such bodies was thought to be contaminating. Mary Douglas, author of *Purity and Danger*, sums up this fear of potentially contaminating bodies when she writes, "thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbors or children."[235] Here, the touch or glance of the activists was thought to be a moral illness: disobedience to the laws of the Church. Sontag, discussing the social attitude towards AIDS, writes that "every feared epidemic, but especially those associated with sexual license, generates a preoccupying distinction between the disease's putative carriers…and those defined—health professional and other bureaucrats do the defining-as 'the general population."[236] St. Paul's literalized this distinction when it removed the bodies of AIDS activists, including Galas. No matter that many of the activists did not, in fact, have AIDS; their very association with individuals who were carriers of the disease implicated and infected them. Moreover, as Sontag and Douglas point out, the 'moral

[234] Simply put, 'die in' participants simulated being dead, lying on the ground or covering themselves with clothing or signs.
[235] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 3.
[236] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*,115.

disease' that was thought to infect those with AIDS reinforced their diseased state. They polluted the healthy society around them, not only with their contaminated blood, but also with their corrupt ideas on sexuality and morality.

Unsurprisingly, Galas' reaction to the defining intervention at St. Paul was not acquiescence but defiance. The intervention was defining in that it clearly delineated which bodies were acceptable to the Church and which were unsalvageable and unsaveable and also defining in that it was a seminal moment in Galas' career--—as her brother's death from AIDS in 1989 had been— an example of her commitment to using her voice in the cause of the voiceless, the unheard and the dead or non-embodied. The next performance of her "Plague Mass," her AIDS mass, was in St. John's Cathedral. Subsequently, she has performed at Anglican Churches in England, progressive churches in Italy and amidst the crumbling, historic ruins of Greece. By performing at these places—places of primarily Christian worship—she is allowing those bodies that were forcibly rejected from St. Paul to inhabit and, yes, infect these places of traditional divinity. She is forcing, as the St. Paul guards forced her body out of a religious space, the bodies of healthy, moral worshipers to come into contact with her body, a body that is presumed to be morally and physically diseased.

Galas does not end her quest to mingle the 'pure' and the 'impure' (as Mary Douglas categorizes them) and to make them touch intimately and uncomfortably. She performs her "Mass" in Churches, but she also uses the very words of the Bible to speak for the victim of AIDS, the very same words that are used to reject and judge

those victims. Most notably, she uses the words of Leviticus. Leviticus is the biblical book of laws; the passage that Galas uses for her "Plague Mass" describes in all the poetic detail and weighty judgment that you would expect, the laws of cleanliness and uncleanliness. I will quote them for you, so that you can hear their strength. Imagine that they are being sung rhythmically and slowly. Imagine the voice that speaks them is deep and hollow. "When any man hath issue out of his flesh/Because of his issue he is unclean. And whosever toucheth his bed shall be unclean, And hath siteth whereon he sat shall be unclean, And he that siteth whereon he sat shall be unclean.../And the woman with whom this man shall lie/shall be unclean/And whosever toucheth her will be unclean/And the priest shall shut up he that hath the plague./He shall carry them forth to a place unclean./He shall separate them in their uncleaness."[237]

These are not compassionate words. The priest does not comfort the plague-ridden or unclean; he shuts him up, he discards him. The priest punishes the sick not only for his physical sickness, a hectic red flush, sweaty skin, but for the way in which he became sick, the way in which he freely and sexually touched others. Individuals who become sick through physical contact with the unclean are also implicated. They are punished for their carelessness ("And he that siteth whereon he sat shall be unclean") or their desire ("And the woman with whom this man shall lie…"). This Levitican law may seem archaic or purely applicable to believing

[237] *Leviticus 15*.

Christians, but as Sontag reminds us, public service announcements during the late 80s and 90s were clouded with a similarly dire message.[238] They reminded you that when you had sexual contact with an individual, you were not only touching the individual, but all of those individuals they had intimate contact with in the past. One sexual act could in fact put you in intimate contact with an unknown amount of bodies and thus an unknown amount of disease. No longer is there a fear of touching one individual, one potential carrier of a disease, but there is a fear of touching anyone, because anyone who has had or may have had intimate physical contact is potentially dangerous, potentially unclean. This type of "public service warning," like the more ancient and more culturally imbedded warning of Leviticus, powerfully restricts the way in which bodies are allowed to touch. By using the words of Leviticus in her *Mass,* a Mass meant specifically for the 'unclean' that Leviticus condemns, Galas interrogates the way in which social norms and religious rules categorize bodies and regulate their interaction and intimacy with each other. However, Galas does not disapprove of punishment in general—in fact, her sense of punishment is quite as acute as the words of Leviticus. She disapproved of stigmatization, a lack of self knowledge; perhaps, most poignantly, Galas disapproved of what she deems cowardice.

Galas' use of Leviticus also, inevitably, leads listeners of her music to question what the real plague is: AIDS or the judgment and cruelty inflicted on those

[238] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 116.

with AIDS. As Galas related to Andrea Juno in an interview "you know there's nothing more sickening than a funeral service in which the minister basically accuses the dead man of being a victim of 'divine punishment…' when I do *Plague Mass* it's done for people in the AIDS community by someone in the AIDS community."[239] Uncharacteristically, Galas is minimizing the breadth of her intention and impact. Certainly, *Plague Mass* was done for the AIDS community and for Dimitry Galas, Diamanda's brother, but the mass, like Galas' voice, has deeper resonances. Listening to Galas' furiously female voice intone Leviticus and listening to that same voice wail in sympathy with the suffering of a sick and broken body, you feel connected to those suffering bodies, connected to the physical turmoil wrought by the *Plague*. When Galas shouts "Were you a witness," it is not a shout to those already in the AIDS community, those who are clearly already witnesses, but to those she is soliciting to be witnesses, to be a part of that community. Galas' mass is connective; through the force of her voice, it not only connects those who are clearly in the AIDS community but those who could be in it. It joins bodies, whereas the police action taken at St. Patrick's or the words of Leviticus ("separate them in their uncleaness") rent them apart.

> "I called what I did "intravenal" singing. Others called it "speaking in tongues." [240]

[239] Juno. *Angry Women* , 11
[240] Juno, *Angry Women*, 9.

Galas' 'obsessional' performance speaks the voice of the Plague, but, even more powerfully, her voice inhabits the body. It is, as she says, "intravenal," a needle in the blood. Such transgressive penetration flouts the laws of Leviticus, flouts the messages of the public service announcement warning of the peril of touching other bodies. It even flouts the protective barriers—condoms, dental damns, metal and latex—that prevent direct skin-to-skin or blood-to-blood contact. There is something medical about the term intravenal (and it might amuse readers to know that Galas once studied chemistry in college), something that evokes a doctor forcibly puncturing the skin of a patient, evokes the fear of 'HIV' particles coursing through transfused blood. After all, the hospital or the clinic are the places where the 'unclean' are set apart. It is a wonder that Galas did not perform in these types of medical institutions. Perhaps the disruption caused by her voice would drive the fear of patients, the fear of mortal disease, deeper; her words would be too insistently infectious, too warming to the blood, too close to the bone. 'Intravenal' presumes that Galas has direct access to the bodies of her audience-participants— that it is her voice that makes their veins pumps and their hearts expand. It presumes that neither their skin nor all the clothes they use to dress that skin are a protectant against Galas' sharply penetrating voice.

A similarly penetrative experience is felt when watching performance artists like Ron Athey, who also performed at a time when the AIDS crisis was raging and,

like Galas, also experimented with the shifting boundaries (or lack thereof) of the body. Athey uses more overt masochistic practices in his performance than Galas does; piercing, cutting and scarring of the skin are habitual tropes in his work; he is also more engaged with the representations of homosexuality—and the censorship of any type of sexuality or sexual practice that is dubbed 'non-normative' in mainstream American society.

In his *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, Athey, who was raised by Christian fundamentalists, uses the religious iconography of martyrdom: scarification, intense lashings to the back and, even more directly, a crown made of thorns affixed to Athey's head and hooks hung from his skin.[241] Through such overt masochism, Athey's body, inevitably, becomes Christ-like. His tortured and leaky skin explicitly symbolizes the pain of being homosexual and sick—for Athey is HIV positive—in the United States. "Maybe the performance of pain in the live arts reflects the AIDS pandemic. Images of the suffering, mortal body relate to a fearful awareness of contamination through viral infection—what food, let alone sex, is safe?"[242] Athey's body already 'contaminated', uses self inflicted pain, a pain that unlike the erratic pain of HIV and its attendant diseases he has control over, to expatiate his fear of sickness and, ultimately, death. He uses what is probably the most well-known image of suffering in the world, the crucifixion, to not only dramatize his pain, but to

[241] Athey was involved in a NEA controversy in 1994 for his *Scenes*. *Scenes* was indirectly funded by the NEA and some politicians objected to the explicit gay and AIDS related material in Athey's work.
[242] Campbell and Spackman, "With/out an A-Aesthetic: The Terrible Beauty of Franko B," 56-74.

subvert its traditional use. Like Galas, who also posed Christ-like for a photograph taken by Annie Leibovitz, Athey transforms the martyred Christ into a fully embodied, sexual being. Using the most iconic of Christian images, an image that is associated with purity and sacrifice, Athey situates himself, a 'contaminated' gay man, defiantly on the cross. It is an act that, like Galas' insistence that she perform her "Mass" in a cathedral, fights for the inclusion of all suffering bodies in the ethos of Christian spirituality and, more broadly, in American society.

But Athey's penetrative lacerations pierce more than his own, individual skin. His lacerations, like the countless vibrations emitting from Galas' throat, pierce the skin of his audience as well. A piercing that may be less direct than a meat hook dipped deep into the flesh, but no less painful. As part of his performance in *Scenes*, Athey not only smears the stage with his own bodily fluids but with the secretions of his partner in the performance. At one point in the show Athey carved deeply into his partner's back and then proceeded to make blood prints from the etchings he had carved into his partner's skin. The etchings, fresh and not yet dry, were hung randomly above audience members. The audience, not sure whether the blood was HIV positive, not sure whether it could by dripping on their clothes or hair or mouths penetrate their skin, were, no doubt, beyond tense, beyond terrified. Athey is, in some sense, forcibly penetrating the audience (remember though that audience members watched Athey voluntarily and likely even paid to see his performance). But, in his force, he allows the audience to experience the horror of intimacy and the

fear of death that such intimacy can bring. "Athey takes the boundary, the skin, which is meant to separate us from death, us from him and makes that the site of his activity."[243] Such 'in the skin' fear was felt by John McGrath (author of the above quote) when he describes fainting not once but twice at an Athey performance.[244] Athey's performances, unlike some of Galas' performances, are not held in large cathedral-like spaces, but in crowded clubs or on small stages, yet McGrath says his fainting was not caused by nausea or heat but by something akin to religious possession. It is almost as though the skin that Athey opens up through his cutting and burning of it during a performance encompasses the skin of McGrath and other audience members. Such engulfment by Athey's wounded skin allows the audience-participants of his performances to feel the pain, fear and sheer pounding blood beat that Athey's own skin experiences.

In her *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura Marks writes that haptic art "appeals to a viewer who perceives with all the senses. It involves thinking with your skin, or giving as much significance to the physical presence of another as to the mental operations of symbolization."[245] When McGrath faints at an Athey performance or audience members have panic attacks at a Galas concert they are 'thinking with their skin.' The physicality of the performer (Athey/Galas) and what that physicality emotes is as deeply embedded in the skin of the audience as

[243] McGrath, "Trusting in Rubber, 21-38.
[244] McGrath, "Trusting in Rubber," 21-38.
[245] Marks, *Sensuous Theory*.., 18

seeing the performer or hearing the exact words a performer says during a performance. I think that the performances of Galas and Athey go even further than Marks' proposed haptic sensation, feeling on and through the skin; they go under and inside the skin. They are, as I've said before, "penetrative," with all the sexuality, intimacy and potential violence that implies.

Vena Cava

"Sometimes my performances feel to me like a ripping of the flesh, like a bloodletting."[246]

In Galas' album/performance *Vena Cava*, Galas' voice is penetrative in another sense. It is not booming and purposeful as in "Plague Mass;" it doesn't have the hard edge and glint of a knife. Perhaps that is why it is all the more fearful and affecting. Like the King's spectral presence around Hamlet in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Galas' voice is eerily penetrative; it shivers the skin. In a gross understatement, Robert Conroy writes that in "Vena Cava" you see "more inward Galas than in "Plague Mass."[247] Conward's analysis is accurate, but the word "inward" is imprecise—monkish and withdrawn in a way that Galas' music can never be. I have spoken before of Galas' use of the word 'intraveinal' to describe her

[246] Juno, *Angry Women*, 20.
[247] Galas, liner notes, *Vena Cava*.

singing; it is a singing that literally resides in the veins. "Plague Mass" infused the listener by shocking the vein, quickly stirring the blood into a furious boil. In "Vena Cava" Galas' voice is insidious, snake-like. It's like you can feel her tongue in your bones; her voice is a slow poison that increases incrementally in the body, a poison that cannot be stopped from accumulating because its origin is unknown. "Vena Cava," the title of Galas' performance, is, after all, a reference to the main artery that returns blood to the heart. Without it, the heart would turn cold, lava transformed into a chalky dull coal. It "metastasizes," infects the whole of you. "In "Vena Cava", when Galas' voice enters you through this indispensable artery, she enters into the heart of you, a complete and powerful possession.

Vena Cava begins with Galas' quavering voice, breaking and unsure, uttering the words "What time is it?"[248] This question is asked repeatedly at different volumes and with varying emphasis on each word. The repetition of the question and the various tone in which it is asked convey the extreme disorientation that the voice is experiencing. The voice seems not only disorientated in terms of its ability to tell the time or date, but disorientated, untethered in space. It emerges from air seemingly without context—for there are few acoustics beneath Galas' voice and there are large blanks of silence between the repeating questions, "What time is it?" (This recalls *Alice in Wonderland*'s white rabbit, his pocket watch dangling from his pocket, always in a rush, but never on time). I imagine that this untethered, undefined voice

[248] Galas, *Vena Cava*.

is that of a deliriously sick individual who occasionally, waking from a feverish sleep, asks the time, as if knowing the time, this apparent constant, will usher her back into clarity and health.

My image is no coincidence. "Vena Cava," like "Plague Mass," is about sickness. "Plague Mass" is a type of pageant. It gives voice to all the players in the AIDS epidemic, the sick and the dead, the judged and the judging; Galas' voice becomes the entire cast of characters in a Greek-like tragedy. Since it is a more "inward" performance, "Vena Cava" is about the pageant of the mind, the chaos that rattles in the skull during sickness. Galas has described this album as an attempt to inhabit the minds of those who are mentally ill or have AIDS-related dementia; she does this, as mentioned, by using lyric repetition and silence. The format of Galas' album is also jarringly ordered; the sequence of "tracks" (the album is meant to be listened to all at once and at the highest possible volume, so the words 'tracks' is not strictly applicable) or, let's say, articulated vocal noise, is purposefully chaotic, deliberately jagged. In one minute of *Vena Cava*, Galas may be singing "Amazing Grace," in a high piercing spiral; the singing may then be intruded upon by her voice in speaking rather than singing mode; the speaking voice may sound disgruntled, cackly, and shouts "Get out, Get out."[249] The shouting is punctuated by rumbles about eating and doctors and dogs—what sounds like a 'word salad.' And who is the song directed to? Or the words "get out?" Are they speaking inwards, to the multiple

[249] Galas, "Vena Cava."

voices that run through the mind or outward at nurses, doctors, visitors and relatives? The confusion, I would venture, well illustrates the difficulty of dementia or progressive mental illness: as the structure of the brain slowly atrophies, the differentiation between "inner" and "outer" voices collapses. It is an easy collapse; the membrane between them is, even before sickness, so inevitably thin.

Susan Sontag described cancer, or rather what cancer has come to symbolize, as "non-intelligent, ('primitive,' 'embryonic,' 'atavistic') cells are multiplying and you are being replaced by the non-you."[250] Sontag's quote could equally apply to mental illness or dementia. The "disease" (we must find a replacement for this word! Alien invader? Latent organism?) eats you, replacing you with its own stubborn identity, reforming your organs, reorganizing brain cells and leaving blank spots, filling other cells with old, half-remembered memories. Your own blood leaks out and you are filled with an unknown fluid; some of the fluid comes through a doctor's needle or a saline solution or morphine pumped at regular, soothing intervals. To give an example of this disorientation of mind that Galas creates through her voice, I want to look at a two of "Vena Cava's" passages side by side.

In the first passage, Galas sings "I dreamed I was lying in the green grass/and the wind was blowing softly/and the blue was everywhere/and I saw heads popping out/through the green grass/and it seemed as if they knew me."[251] These words are

[250] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 67.
[251] Galas, "Vena Cava."

both calming and subtly horrifying. A zombie movie, with its flesh eaten faces breaking through cemetery ground, intrudes on an idyllic landscape. But the general tone and phrasing of the overall phrase is fluid, even poetic.

In the second passage, Galas shouts "Kill that cracker! Beat her to death! And shut up. Mister!"[252] I hear nothing lyric in this passage. The phrases are short and staccato. They beat rather than flow. The words are less imagistic, both racist and violent. These two passages, so closely juxtaposed in "Vena Cava," don't seem to belong to each other.

Looking at the x-rays of those with brain erosion or dementia, you can see why Galas chose to format "Vena Cava" as fragmentary; her voice rapidly changing in tone, her words seemingly arbitrary. These x-rays show a seepage of dark blue gaps or cavities into healthy red brain matter. Memory gaps, language gaps; these gaps in the brain are even more diffuse than the lobotomies described in Frame's *Faces in the Water.*

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Inhabiting the Death Space

"I walk without thee/in the shadow of the dead man/whose blackness conquers." [253]

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[252]Galas, "Vena Cava."
[253]Galas, *The Shit of God*, 121

"Plague Mass" was defiant, an angrier and less starry version of Dylan Thomas' "rage, rage against the dying of the light." But the voice in *Vena Cava* asks for death, craves it. Galas' voice and the vibrations and breakages in her voice are the very embodiment of a "liminal state;" they represent not just the liminality between the pulsing bodies of audience and performer (as in the Athey performance), but between life and death itself. The liminal vibrations of Galas' voice in "Vena Cava" remind me of the musical group Antony and the Johnstons. Something about the tremulousness of the vibrato. Its skillfully imperceptible leap between silence and sound. Perhaps this is apt. Antony's voice is not traditionally gendered and many of his songs are about the "liminality" of the body: the commingling of seemingly disparate flesh. In "Vena Cava" Galas' voice occupies a space that is both "sane" and "insane," both of the dead and of the living—and those who seemingly occupy both the space of death and life, the terminally sick. Think of Francesca Woodman's photographs; in many of her images her flesh is half dissolved, half specter and half mortal body.[254] Galas' voice in "Vena Cava" has this spectral quality.

Though "Vena Cava is in no way" "traditional," Galas' performance does conform to one aspect of more conventional opera—the ubiquitous presence of death. In a scathing critique of the misogyny in opera Catherine Clément writes of the opera diva/heroine "You are there to enact only one thing: to die on stage, to die of fear, to

[254] See Chapter 2 of this Dissertation

pretend you do."[255] Like Galas, the dying diva of the opera—think Carmen or Butterfly—is a multi-octave soprano. Her death aria is filled with melancholy swoops and the trademark high peal of simultaneous longing and resignation; each swoop and each peal almost inevitably contains the well-controlled vibrato, the voice signifying its transition from silent pause to sustained noise, death and ceaseless hum of life.

DEDICATION: "I think of you always. I think of Mother and Papa and Gordon, is he ok?...I live in dreams now and trying to remember each detail of the past...I am trying to make a perfect memory of everything that has gone before now...hold me ghosts of love...can you hear me? I am far away, but not too far for dreams."[256]

As in Galas' "Plague Mass," it is hard to deny the influence of Dmitry Galas in "Vena Cava." These performances are an ode to him and a continuation of his voice.[257] By slipping into Dmitry's AIDS-ravaged body, Galas finds a way to conjure him from the dead, AIDS having eaten both muscle and brain. Galas' conjuring, like any conjuring, is dangerous and painful, cracks and sputters of Dimitry's voice in

[255] Clement, *Opera*, 11.
[256] Galas, liner notes, *Vena Cava*.
[257] Dmitry Galas was an experimental playwright and had a few short works published before his death. Galas' channeling of voice is two-fold: a channeling of his voice as brother and his voice as an emerging writer.

Galas' throat—hinges of the throat quaking after long disuse. It must be a torment fueled by the strongest desire to hold the voice of a dead loved one in your body, so that he will have a more prolonged presence and a greater remembrance in the living world.

As in much of "Vena Cava," the directionality of the voice is confusing: from whom is it coming and who is it directed towards? The voice of the dedication is just as "untethered" as the body of the performance. Is this Galas' plea to her brother or her brother's imagined plea to Galas? Or are their voices mingled together in a simultaneous plea for a meeting in dreams and ghosts?

Sometimes I think Galas is being unnecessarily romantic in her portrayals of the sick and tortured, that her affinity with these experiences of suffering is of a somewhat vampiric desire rather than empathy. I could almost believe this if it were not for the spectral presence of her brother and the fact that "Vena Cava" is in fact, at many times, unbearable in its banality. Let me explain. In "Vena Cava", the words Galas sings are in no way romantic; there are no surreal images, no genius-like flights of fancy. The voice of "Vena Cava" drifts between memories of the past, irreplaceable and irrational anger, and commonplace meandering about grilled cheese or the trash. Much of the thinking is cyclical, "obsessional," a loop of continuously confused images, a voice whose mind has lost the elasticity of its connections. More often than not, when I listen to the often over-drugged, muddled and unhappy voices of the chronically lonely or mentally ill on the phone, what I hear is a confusing and

torturously cycle. Yes, a record that plays the same tune over and over, but a tune whose words are constantly being forgotten. Janet Frame gives a similar voice to a woman with dementia in her *Scented Gardens for the Blind*.[258] The protagonist in the novel, Vera, has been in the hospital for over twenty years; she has not spoken for those twenty years. One day, hear throat opens, dryly like a fissure in the earth. Doctors crowd around to hear the first word this silent oracle will speak**.** And the woman speaks, or rather croaks, "Urggg."

III. Abramovic

"I'm serving a purpose which means transmitting..I'm channeling ideas of art, actually. When I think about myself as an artist, I immediately associate with the image of a bridge. If I see the bridge, I know that transmission can take place."[259]
"All my work, right from the start, has been centered on the idea of crossing borders in a physical and metaphorical sense..I hope to be able to reunite the human body with the 'planetary' body."[260]

[258] See Chapter 1 of this Dissertation for more information on Frame.
[259] Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 409.
[260] Abramovic, *Performing Body*, 19.

Intro: Comparison between Galas and Abramovic: Magical Creatures: Witch vs. Shaman

"Your brain stores all the sensory impressions it receives, but your conscious mind doesn't have the key to the storehouse. All I want you to do is open yourself up to me so that I can open the door to your mind's storehouse." [261]

Galas's performances are like a Bacchanalian rite, a frenzy of catharsis; Abramovic's are stiller, quieter, though no less intense. Remember that Abramovic and Galas both think of themselves as shamans—conduits. Galas speaks of her shamanism as a 'possession' a possession by a feeling, by the dead—by something very specific, concentrated and inhabited by emotion. Abramovic sees the energy she creates as encompassing, ego-less, not part of herself; she does not inhabit any one space or being. In fact, Abramovic's "goal" is to be a shaft of light, pure energy that transmits to the audience. I am thinking here of her performance, "Luminescence" where a naked Abramovic was lifted high above the floor, illuminated by lights.[262]

Like a shaman, Abramovic believes that her performances have healing powers. And, like a shaman, Abramovic has also become a teacher, something of a guru. She leads workshops for young, aspiring performance artists. These workshops sound

[261] Madeline L'engle. *A Wrinkle in Time*, 96
[262] See Appendix C, Figure 26

very much like spiritual retreats; Abramovic requires participants to fast, to remain naked and to take a vow of silence.

As Abramovic's performance work has progressed, I feel like it constantly tries to touch more, further expanding the scope of her physical energy. In the first part of her career, Abramovic tries to connect to one person ("Role Exchange"); she, then attempts to connect to groups of people/audience ("Rhythm O", "Night Sea Crossing") . Then, even more ambitiously, she has sought to create a bridge between her own body and that of the historical body ("Balkan Baroque"). As a performer/shaman her performances have indicated that she believes her powers of penetration and mediumship are growing.

These potentially 'growing powers' to transmit energy from herself to her audience have also led to a tactile 'evolution' in her work. Galas does not touch her audience members 'directly,' skin to skin; it is those uncanny vibrations of her voice that infuse the body. But Abramovic's early performances ("Rhythm O" for example) brought her own flesh in intimate contact with the palpable (and palpating) bodies of audience members. In her 1977 performance with Ulay, "Imponderabalia," Abramovic and Ulay acted as the human doors of a gallery. As they entered the gallery, individuals had to make a choice about how they positioned their bodies against the bodies of Ulay and Abramovic. Similar to Ron Athey's "Four Scenes in a Harsh Life" (though, undoubtedly, less bloody!), "Imponderabilia" compelled gallery goers to physically engage with Abramovic and Ulay; indeed, the fact that they had to

engage as they were entering the gallery and before they viewed any other art, implies that Abramovic and Ulay's performance stressed the necessity for the audience/viewer to be "haptically" involved—an involvement that was often emotionally disruptive or uncomfortable and that engaged multiple senses—with the art they were viewing.[263]

As you will see in the next section of my chapter, Abramovic's direct engagement with the body has steadily decreased over time. She rarely touches audience members skin to skin; rather, by emitting spiritual energy from her body, Abramovic's physical self (in the form of physical energy) can actually touch a greater number of people simultaneously. Abramovic's work seems to have shifted its focus from the individual body and her relationship and responsibility to one other body to the potential impact an individual body can have on the larger, collective body. Abramovic's "energy body," like Galas' "voice vibrations," is not *the* body,

[263] An interesting addendum to this.. "Imponderabilia" was re-created for Abramovic's retrospective at the MOMA in 2010. However, museum goers could use an alternative entrance (so they did not have to participate in the performance) and doors of the "Imponderabilia" entrance were widened, so, again, museum goers did not have to actually touch performers. In 1977, the police stopped Abramovic/Ulay's performance after an hour or two. The 2010 performance went on for the length of Abramovic's retrospective and a few patrons were removed for 'inappropriate' groping/touching of the performers. The way in which touch is viewed and the way in which these performances are officially intervened seem to say something about the historical time period in which they occur. The 1977 performance was something of a 'guerilla' action, an action that was stopped once the law intervened. Despite its brevity, the 1977 performance provided a more intense tactile experience, giving those who entered the gallery no other choice than to touch Abramovic/Ulay. The 2010 was much lengthier and was far from being a 'guerilla' performance; it was sanctioned by one of the largest and most influential museums in the world. The performers and their bodies were also protected in a way that Ulay and Abramovic's had not been and their was a distinct line between what was deemed "acceptable" or "appropriate" touch during the performance and what was "unacceptable." These divisions between acceptable/not acceptable touch set up a de facto guideline for the 2010 performance.

but is rather composed of emanations from the body; it merges the haptic with the spectral. Emanations are "specter-like,", not directly flesh, but evoking some of the same sensation as direct flesh on flesh touch. And because "energy bodies" are more diffuse than direct flesh on flesh touch, they can (theoretically) affect each of the senses simultaneously, creating an immediate 'haptic' response in the sensorium of the audience.

Role Exchange: Subsuming the Ego, 1975

"By placing herself at risk she becomes a potential source of pollution, situating her work at the margins of what is culturally acceptable."[264]

It is interesting that both Galas and Abramovic (in *Role Exchange*) were temporarily prostitutes. In neither case did they need to do so for economic reasons; rather, it seems that becoming a sex worker was part of their artistic practice. Abramovic took it on as a humbling experience, a way to subsume the ego and 'trade energies' with another human being. For Galas, it seemed a way to identity with those who were victimized by society and remake this female role (often associated with ultimate abjection/persecution) into one of empowerment. Galas also actively

[264] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*,8.

lived with prostitutes in Oakland, California and walked the streets with them. Like so many of her vocal performances, Galas' prostitution was "obsessional;" for her being a prostitute was not a "role" she took on but what she was, a complete immersion. She deliberately, as Richards points out, "placed herself at the margins of what is culturally acceptable" in order to destabilize the 'margin' and question the meaning of what was (or was not) "culturally acceptable."[265]

Abramovic's work as a prostitute was much briefer but no less complex. As its title suggests, in "Role Exchange" Abramovic was keenly aware that her performance was a type of make believe, like pretending you are a princess for a day or playing "school." But Abramovic manifested her "make believe" into physical reality. Imagine flying to England and asking (politely, of course), the Princess of Wales to exchange places with you for a day. She will write a paper in the suburbs while you wear high heels and cut ribbons at grand openings.

For "Role Exchange" Abramovic talked with a prostitute, "SJ", who agreed to exchange roles with Abramovic for four hours. Giving her typical importance to numbers, colors and symbols, Abramovic specifically chose SJ because SJ had worked as a prostitute for ten years and Abramovic had been a "working artist" for

[265] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*,8.

ten years.[266] For her part of the performance, SJ was required to attend the opening of Abramovic's video installation at De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam. Meanwhile, Abramovic took SJ's place in a red light district display window. In pictures of the performance, SJ looks shy and awkward, laughing uncertainly; she has fine blonde hair and stands in front of Abramovic's video installation with head bent, fidgeting hands and a perpetual, if charming, smile.[267] By contrast, in her cheaply decorated display window, Abramovic is assured, sophisticated. Lounging, a cigarette in her hand, she looks like a billboard ad.[268]

There is a none too subtle alliance between prostituting your body and prostituting your art. In their roles as prostitute and artist, SJ and Abramovic perform a kind of seduction. SJ must make herself desirable by coloring her hair, painting her face, staring out of the window in a way that conveys interest without desperation. When a man walks into her room, she must make her bodily gestures attentive: lean forward, touch him, and allow a piece of clothing to slip from her shoulders. Abramovic must make her body intriguing. In order to seduce the art world, her performance experiments must be both sensational and meaningful; they must test the capacity of her body: how many times can she cut herself? How much time can it take

[266] Later in her career, Abramovic became fascinated by numerology and the healing power of crystals. She and her romantic and performance partner, Ulay, partly became involved because their birthdays were on the same day.
[267] See Appendix C, Figure 27
[268] As an interesting side note, at the end of the four hours, three clients walked into Abramovic's door, but none were enticed enough to pay her; SJ laughingly told Abramovic that if she were relying on prostitution to make a living, it was likely that she would soon starve.

it her to go breathless? For how long can she lay naked on a bed of ice? Abramovic's performance must inspire the manic lift and heightened perception of suspense; audience member's bodies must be tested at the same time as Abramovic's body is being tested, enduring the agony of her pain; enduring the length and silence of her performance, they must grow sweaty and anxious with worry for her; their blood curdles; their legs twitch. SJ and Abramovic become not merely seductive to their client/audience, they also allow their bodies to become receptive, open to the audience/clients particular desires and energies. The audience sees Abramovic naked, bloody leaking from her skin; SJ, too, must often be naked, her body made vulnerable for her customers sexual satisfaction. By performing "Role Exchange," Abramovic makes a direct parallel between the body of the prostitute and that of the artist. Artist and prostitute are (often) bodies on the margins of society; their skin unfurls from the same cloth; their bodies are potential "pollutants" to those individuals they come in contact with.[269] "Role Exchange" also contains one of the primary markers of Abramovic's work: her desire to subsume the individual ego into a collective energy. The word "ego" is used by Abramovic to describe her individual self, as well as her conception of a kind of communal soul or spirit—she calls this the collective ego. Her use of "ego" is not, I believe, meant to be used in the psychoanalytic sense, but rather in the "spiritual sense." Since Abramovic is influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism,

[269] Certainly, Abramovic cannot be said to be "on the margins" any longer. Her body and her "body of work" are generally welcomed, even applauded, each time she performs.

Christian Orthodoxy and Maori practices (amongst many others), the definition of "spiritual" and "ego" are vague. In an interview, Abramovic noted: "I really think that, again, going to the narrative, going to the non-personal space where the ego is depersonalized, is really important. The ego has to be removed from the work, otherwise it doesn't communicate."[270] This depersonalization means that Abramovic endeavors to engage with other bodies in a spirit of complete receptivity; she is willing to absorb their energy and equally as willing to transmit her energy towards them. It is the opposite of making the body opaque; it is deliberate and studied porousness.

"Role Exchange" is a quite literal engagement with porousness. Along with her role as an artist, Abramovic sloughs of her skin and SJ's skin; she positions herself in SJ's window; simply by inhabiting SJ's space, the space where SJ sits, works and seduces, Abramovic absorbs SJ's energy. She also takes on SJ's bodily habits: her poses, her way of dressing and her interactions with clients. In one photo still taken of "Role Exchange," Abramovic looks longingly out of the window. Perhaps she longs for a client or, perhaps, her look is a look of fatigue, a longing to leave the display window and SJ's "borrowed skin." By placing her body in SJ's space, imitating SJ's gestures and looking out of SJ's window for clients, Abramovic

[270] Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 51.

subsumes her own bodily ego into that of SJ's bodily ego.[271] Abramovic is very deliberately "possessed" by SJ.

In "Role Exchange" Abramovic subsumes her ego in order to receive the energy of one individual, SJ. But in other performances, the porousness of Abramovic's skin increases. I think of the scales on a fish; each scale is a delicate but necessary breath. For "Role Exchange" the scales breathed together, but their breath was shallow. "Rhythm O," Abramovic's "most dangerous" performance, involves a greater 'porousness.' a deeper receptivity then "Role Exchange." In it, she purposefully asks multiple gallery goers to touch her, even wound her. Her "body ego" is literally in the hands of her audience.

III. Rhythm O (again): Unspoken Contracts (Skin against Skin) tiny eyes opening on the surface of the skin[272]

[271] In Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin,* she mentions Didier Anzieu's concept of the "skin ego." Anzieu describes the skin ego as a "boundary or a medium for sending messages." O'Dell claims that Anzieu is not speaking of the literal properties of the skin, but is rather describing their metaphoric properties. When I speak of Abramovic inhabiting SJ's "bodily ego," I am speaking of something very similar to Anzieu's "skin ego." However, I forbear to say that this ego is purely metaphoric. The skin is a literal boundary, a literal medium for sending messages, as well as a metaphoric boundary and a metaphoric medium. 21

[272] Please see the beginning of this chapter for a basic description/analysis of Abramovic's "Rhythm O."

"I was always thinking that art was a kind of question between life and death, and some of my performances really included the possibility of dying, you know, during the piece; it could happen."[273]

I have said that Diamanda Galas' performances touch by an often forceful penetration. The hiss and sting of a snake tongue, the edge of a newly-sharpened knife. Her voice reflects this sting and this edge, crackling and swooping unexpectedly, piercing the very fabric of the air. For Abramovic, though, I use the word 'porous'. To be porous is to be both penetrable and absorbent: to soak up, rather than lash out. In no other performance is Abramovic's body quite so 'porous' as in "Rhythm O," the last performance in her "Rhythm Series."

Earlier in my chapter, I described "Rhythm O." Its seventy two objects spread out on the table like some macabre picnic. Abramovic standing in the middle of an Italian gallery, waiting, allowing herself to be touched by these objects. I described the import of this self-abnegating, even masochistic performance: the forming of a contract between Abramovic and her audience, the responsibility that the audience must take (or choose not to take) for Abramovic's mute, passive body. I want to say more about this "contract" or, as I prefer, this faith between audience and Abramovic; I also want to understand the "contract" that Abramovic makes with herself in "Rhythm O," a performance where Abramovic acknowledges (rather dramatically) that she very well could have died. And died in multiple ways: through the sudden

[273] Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 15.

start of the gun, the slow pull of leather strings, the stab and bleed of a knife or scissors, the gradual sadism of a saw or the old-fashioned blade of the axe.

As I mention in Chapter Four's discussion of "self-harm," the wound is an opening into the body, but it is also an opening into the space beyond the body. When I look at the small stab marks made by thorns or scissors on Abramovic's body, I think, again, of the skin as a porous substance, tiny eyes opening on its surface. By creating lacerations and fissures in the skin as Abramovic does in "Rhythm O" and "Thomas Lips", Rhythm 10 (amongst many other performances), she creates a bond between the audience and the performer. The wound becomes an energy "gateway" allowing Abramovic to absorb the emotional responses of her audience**;** in turn, Abramovic's "wound" lets the audience enter into her body visually and, in many instances, tactically. The audience can 'get under Abramovic's skin'; by doing this, the audience's skin (as they touch her, they undoubtedly become participants) and Abramovic's skin become part of the same skin. "It is not surprising then that performance art frequently contains echoes, if not overt similarities to, sacrificial rituals."[274]

While Abramovic's "Rhythm O" is significant in that she gives up complete control of her body, allowing any individual who walked into the gallery to manipulate her as they wished, this type of masochistic performance art was not an uncommon phenomena in the 1970's. Kathy O'Dell explains why this type of

[274] Milia, *Self-Mutilation and Art Therapy*, 32.

performance flourished, writing "masochistic performance artists of the 1970's took suffering upon themselves in order to point to trouble in two interconnected social institutions: the law and the home. Quiet specifically, these artists directed their attention to the mechanism upon which both of these institutions were founded."[275] O'Dell's mechanism is the "contract." Government has a particular contract with its people, just as family members have unspoken contracts between themselves. Because of the shifting political and cultural climate in the 1970s, these contracts were changing rapidly; governments, in particular, broke contracts with their citizens by deliberately lying to them and placing them in harmful situations. By deliberately harming themselves or (as in "Rhythm O") allowing themselves to be harmed, artists like Abramovic, Bob Flanagan and Gina Pane mirrored the violence that was being inflicted on citizens by their governments; these masochistic performances of certain also sought to reinstate an unspoken contract between individual bodies. As individual bodies within a "national body," each individual must take a certain responsibility towards other individual bodies and the pain/harm that they experience. Describing French artist Gina Pane's performances, Amelia Jones writes that they **"**actively produce abjection, thrusting and suffering and leakage (blood, piss, mucus) into social visibility. These leaky bodies violently recorporealize the subjects of culture who spew, shit, piss and vomit their woundedness (as female, gay, sick)."[276]

[275] O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 12.
[276] Jones, *Artist's Body*, 42.

Like Galas' insistence on speaking to the bodily and mental sickness that comes with AIDS, like Athey's sublimely fluid leaking performances, artists like Abramovic and Pane deliberately abjected the body. In "Rhythm O," Abramovic's unspoken "contract" goes a step further by placing the responsibility for her woundedness not on herself but wholly on her audience. [277]

Think about Abramovic's instructions for Rhythm O: "I am the object." By making herself an object, she is giving gallery-goers the permission to treat her without responsibility, as a non-sentient body. The difficulty of "Rhythm O" is that, despite the artist's own instructions, audience members must see her body with "empathetic non understanding."[278] They must care for her body in a way that Abramovic refuses to. In many ways, it is an unfair task. I feel a bit like Abramovic is goading audience members into hurting her.

In order to transcend Abramovic's instructions and comply with O'Dell's definition of a masochistic "contract," audience members touch Abramovic's skin, their skin melds into her skin. They must have the "feeling the skin is shared."[279] This "shared skin" should emphasize the dependence that audience members and Abramovic have on each other, the responsibility that they have for each other's physical well-being. Since Abramovic is performing 'the abject body' –-a silent and

[277] It is important to note that Pane's masochistic performances were less well known than many artists of the time. However, Abramovic was a great admirer of what little she knew about Pane and recreated Pane's "The Conditioning."
[278] Marks, *Sensuous Theory*, 39.
[279] O'Dell. *Contract*, 21.

powerless body—any empathy that Abramovic's body extracts from the audience is an empathy that the audience must feel in their bodies, in their skin, an acknowledgment that Abramovic and each of the participants/audience members are responsible for each other's woundedness. A particularly 'touching' photograph of "Rhythm O" captures this empathy; despite her determination to be 'an object,' at some point during the performance Abramovic begins to cry. As the tears well up, a young woman advances towards Abramovic and gently wipes Abramovic's tears with a handkerchief.

O'Dell's rigorous analysis of the "contract" in masochistic performance art is thoughtful and makes a very clear connection between the bodies of performers and the political climate that inspired their performances, though I must admit that as I look at the pictures of Abramovic's slashed, bloodied body or the bite marks imbedded in Vito Acconci's skin or Gina Pane's calm face as she deliberately takes a razor to her cheek the word "contract" sounds too cold, too official in the presence of all this pulsing, frayed flesh. Unspoken contracts between a performer and her/his audience are also 'contracts of faith.' I note this particularly about Abramovic, since her interest in various religious practices and belief systems informed much of her performance work. For me, Abramovic's "Rhythm O" recalls Caravaggio's picture of a resurrected Jesus. Surrounded by his awed disciples, he lets the skeptical Paul tentatively finger the ragged flaps of his skin and the round patches of dried blood beneath the flaps. In Caravaggio's picture ("The Incredulity of Saint Thomas"), Jesus

looks almost as curious about his own body as his disciples do; he seems scared of his resurrected body. Thomas is crouching and his finger is firmly inserted into Jesus' skin, his curiosity much more visible than his awe. The finger is penetrating, almost indecent in its intimacy. Abramovic's performance is an experiment in exploring the body and having faith in the "other." Pictures of "Rhythm O" show an exhausted Abramovic covered with rose petals, baptized in water and laid out underneath a white shroud. With her naked upper body, her pained face and her stillness, Abramovic looks rather like a modern day martyr, albeit a willing (if not eager) martyr. [280]

Jesus' curiosity about his own body mirrors Abramovic's relationship to her performances.[281] "Rhythm O" tests the body's capacity for humiliation and pain and the fear of death. Through her performances, Abramovic is seeking to expand her relationship with her body and increase her self knowledge; although she needs the audience and their energy to perform, her performance is not wholly about touching the audience or exposing them to unexpected and often uncomfortable sensations.[282] "While the audience was clearly important to her on one level, she was so absorbed in

[280] Note that the language of the contract comes from Deleuze's text *Masochism*
[281] Related to Abramovic's interest in her own body is Lea Vergine's essay on Narcissism. In the essay, Vergine depicts the positive aspects of Narcissism that emerge in Performance Art. *Jones, Performing the Subject*, 47
[282] "it isn't entirely enclosed, because that energy only happens if I am relating to the public it doesn't happen if I am alone in my studio." Richards, *Marina Abramovic*. 30

her own experimentation that in most ways the audience was never the central factor or driving force for her."[283]

But there is also a tension between using audiences and performance venues to achieve a personal spiritual experience and allowing yourself to become entirely receptive, a hollow of flesh that absorbs the emotions and energy of audience members

Night Sea Crossing :Endurance (Touch through Energy)

"She is certainly an advocate of non-verbal, non-physical exchange and the sort of discriminating receptivity designed to heighten the connection between people and the world around them."[284]

With the conception of "Night Sea Crossing," I believe that Abramovic transitioned into a very different form of performance making. Her first years in Belgrade and then in Amsterdam with Ulay were full of real physical danger, a voluntary masochism, and a mutually agreed upon sadism. However, in "Night Sea Crossing," the imminent bodily danger is less (if it exists at all) and the body as a fleshy, obtrusive object ceases to thrust its self-inscribed hurts onto the audience. Abramovic claimed that she no longer needed intermediary objects like the objects

[283] Richards, *Marina Abramovic*,72.
[284] Richards, *Marina Abramovic*, 73.

used in "Rhythm O" to contact with her audience.[285] Furthermore, direct skin-to-skin contact was also less necessary, since energy could be passed from individual to individual directly. In a sense, the body becomes bodiless. Mary Richards speaks about Abramovic's creation of a "sacred space" during her performances; this can be seen in Abramovic's "Night Sea Crossing" as well as her more recent performance "The Artist is Present."[286] Abramovic's creation of a sacred space during her performances is similar to the actions of choreographer/dancer Anna Halprin. This is particularly true of Halprin's "Circle the Earth." "Circle the Earth" challenged individuals across the globe to dance simultaneously on an agreed upon day and time; Halprin believed that the energy caused by this collective dance would create a healing energy designed to combat the corrosive energy of the AIDS epidemic.[287]

"Night Sea Crossing" is one of Abramovic's most performed pieces;[288] Abramovic and Ulay performed "Night Sea Crossing" over ten times between the years of 1981-1987. The repetition and the duration that this performance required were not directly masochistic. Rather, it took many of the meditative practices that

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[285] --"And the structure of performance now has to happen in performing itself, without having any object in between. That's the big difference. Because in all of my early pieces, I needed the knife, I needed the star, I needed the gun, I needed the whip. And I think another area is coming now where I will not have objects of any kind.' 21 (*Artist Body*)

[286] Richards, *Marina Abramovic*, 67.

[287] Halprin, "Planetary Dance," 65.

[288] "When I was in Tibet, or when I lived among the Aborigines in Australia, or when I learnt some of the Sufi rites, I understood that these cultures have a long tradition of techniques of meditation which lead the body to a borderline state that allows us to make a mental leap to enter different dimensions of existence and to eliminate the fear of pain, death, or the limitations of the body." Abramovic, *Performing Body*, 18.

Abramovic and Ulay explored together and transplanted these practices into a public space. Pictures of these performances are far less dramatic than those of Abramovic's "Rhythm O" or "Role Play." In each performance, Abramovic and Ulay wore a particular color, based on the Vedic Square. They sat across from each other at a wide table and neither moved nor spoke nor ate. Their concentration was fixed entirely on each other and the stillness of their own bodies. "As in Hamlet, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of the specter. More precisely by WAITING for this apparition."[289] The silence and attention necessary to Abramovic and Ulay's performance create a space—a waiting space-- where the specter can be conjured**.** These performances lasted from one museum day (10-5) to sixteen museum days; for the duration of the performance, Ulay and Abramovic fasted; you can see the lack of food and rest on Ulay's face (Abramovic seems to withstand the physical deprivation better); his already thin limbs become gaunt and the skin on his face becomes turn paler, drooping in leathery patches. [290]

During some performances of "Night Sea Crossing," however, Ulay and Abramovic would use objects to help them conjure and concentrate their meditative energy.[291] These were no longer 'arbitrary objects,' a knife or an air machine (as in Abramovic's "Rhythm series"), but objects that Abramovic believed were more

[289] Derrida, *Specters*, 2.
[290] Appendix C, Figure 28

universally significant; these objects were spiritual talismans, sacred relics: an Aboriginal Boomerang, a python, a pair of Chinese scissors (Abramovic uses bones as sacred relics in her prizing winning "Balkan Baroque" as well; bones she claimed were valued in "eastern religions"). At one particularly memorable "Night Sea" performance, Ulay and Abramovic sat with a Buddhist monk and a shaman, hoping that these religious guides would heighten the energy and effect of their performance. Abramovic claimed that in long hours of meditative sitting she would see colors, walls of sheer light; she had the conviction that she was entering into a state in which the light/energy produced by the performances' concentrated energy (I see it as a beam held taught between Abramovic's direct gaze and Ulay's more avoidant one) could be seen

"Night Sea" is, in the history of performance, an "endurance piece." Abramovic and Ulay do not cut themselves, slap each other or put themselves in any direct physical danger, but their many hours of fasting and stillness seem almost more painful. Endurance performances work on the principles of duration and repetition. The repetition of the performance can become like a prayer: the Hindu *sloka* or the turning of rosary beads. Galas' performances are said to give audience members panic attacks; Abramovic's performances, though less explosive, are thought to evoke a similar, powerful energy. "That's what time really is. I think that's what people encounter during one of your long duration performances. You open up those holes

for people and they can really experience the depth of time."[292] The "holes" that are opened up are different than the literal holes Abramovic bored into her body during her "Rhythm" performances. They are, according to Abramovic, more cosmic in nature and vaguely spiritual.

These "openings of time" remind me of black holes that burst from within and dying suns, glowering with suppressed heat. Perhaps I am a bit skeptical of Abramovic's grandiose ideas. Abramovic idealizes the East in a way that I find slightly jarring. Yet the endurance that Abramovic is capable of is phenomenal, a testament to her will and her belief in the efficacy of practices such as meditation and fasting. More tellingly, there is, for all of (or, perhaps, because of) Abramovic's haphazard ideas about religion, a power to her presence.[293] It is quite possible to believe that, as Abramovic relates, during her performances "the public become like an electric field around me. And then the communication is possible because they can project on me like a mirror, I hope."[294] When I observed Abramovic in her recent "The Artist is Present," I saw a few museum-goers sit still and cross legged, their eyes fixed on Abramovic; they seemed to be entering the similar quiet, contemplative state that Abramovic was in during her performance. I wondered if they felt they were "channeling" or communicating with Abramovic as they watched her. Or, more poignantly, that during this "channeling" of energy between Abramovic and

[292] Abramovic, *7 Easy Pieces*, 27.
[293] Abramovic easily equates Hinduism, Buddhism, Maori practices and Sufism.
[294] Richards, *Marina Abramovic*, 30.

themselves there was a symbiosis or mutuality of skin between them. If Abramovic sees herself as a shaman, she could, with her powers of concentrated spirituality, 'travel' to a different dimension where her own energy and that of the audience's energy merged. This merging would not be directly physical (skin to skin touch), but it would be an energy produced by the discipline and focus that Abramovic used in her performance.

As I look at each picture of "Night Sea Crossing" I can't help feeling that the performance is as much about the personal energies between Ulay and Abramovic as it is about the energy between them and the audience. "Night Sea Crossing" becomes as much of an endurance performance as it is a way of enduring a relationship. There is something so romantic about the title "Night Sea Crossing". A night voyage; two lone boats, both a bit leaky, made out of a hand-sewn plywood. Without a compass or a sail or any kind of light, the two boats must scent/sense each other across an infinity of sea. Perhaps the image this title evokes--two lovers trying to find each other across a blind gulf--is why Ulay and Abramovic repeated this performance so many times during their partnership. At the beginning, the performance stood as a testament to the strength and concentrated energy that their bond produced; later, as the relationship quickly unraveled, it became a commentary on their endurance and their belief that the creation of art transcended the vagaries of infidelity and the

painful deterioration of a union—a union once so close that Abramovic believed she and Ulay communicated telepathically.[295]

Looking at pictures of "Night Sea Crossing" crossing chronologically, I can read the progressive weariness through Ulay and Abramovic's bodies; the straight posture becomes slightly bent; the smooth face becomes slightly creased; skin begins to bead with sweat; the mouth becomes less determined; the expression more haggard. Seeing the pictures of these performances juxtaposed, I can see the 'energy' that Abramovic and Ulay created during this performance and the way this energy changed from performance to performance; first, coiled like tightly braided and slicked hair, then becoming looser, less elastic, a matted dread with strands hanging at odd angles. [296]

Balkan Baroque (Body of Myself/Body of History)

Abramovic's performance at the 1997 Venice Biennial, "Balkan Baroque," is the most tactically and historically expansive of her career. It combines the most effective and startling practices: the direct, flesh-on-flesh tactility of "Rhythm O," the

[295] Abramovic and Ulay were artistic partners and lovers; their relationship dissolved during the years they performed "Night Sea Crossing."

[296] Since I am transitioning from Abramovic's "Night Sea Crossing," a performance in which Abramovic creates energy, to her "Balkan Baroque," I feel like it is necessary to mention Yugolsavian scientist Nikolas Tesla again. Tesla and his work provide a relevant connection between Abramovic's fascination with creating an experimental, spontaneous energy and her deepening interest in representing the Balkans through performance.

endurance and emotionality of "Night Sea Crossing," and the social significance of "Role Switch." Like Galas' "Plague Mass," Abramovic's body inhabits and is inhabited by "historical bodies". In "Plague Mass" these historical bodies were AIDS patients, sick and suffering not only from their illness, but from the taboos society placed on their bodies. Abramovic's "Balkan Baroque" is almost more ambitious. Wrought from the violence and suffering of the Balkan wars, Abramovic's performance connects her own body with the bodies of her family and the larger body of her birth country and its history.

For Derrida, the specter is also inheritance. He writes, "there is no inheritance without a call to responsibility."[297] "Balkan Baroque" is a performance that traces what the inheritance of a spectral responsibility can look like. Abramovic's project reveals how a living body—one not shaded by light or shadowed invisible—is always spectral. Abramovic's "Balkan Baroque" is staged like a modern triptych. On one side of the triptych is a close-up of Abramovic's father in suit and tie, his hands gesturing forcefully, and, on the other side, Abramovic's mother: there is the same close-up, the same hands, though her expression is softer, more pleading than the father's. Between them, in the unfolding of the triptych, Abramovic stands: progeny and spiritual inheritor of both parents. In the middle of these three images sits the present Abramovic clothed in voluminous Mary-like robes: she seriously and fastidiously cleans 1500 bloodied cow bones. The triptych-like set up of the

[297] Derrida, 91

performance also refers to the religious history (and likely the religious conflict) of the Balkans. "In the Orthodox spiritual context, which proffers only two-dimensional images and avoids sculpture, the third dimension is considered as the dimension of Matter, of body."[298] The Orthodox implication of the triptych supports my idea that, in her performance, Abramovic becomes the matter, the manifestation of her parents and her birth country's history.

"Balkan Baroque" was four days long and is clearly a reference to the long and divisive war in the Balkans—it is a shamanistic ritual of healing. By cleaning the bones, Abramovic is cleaning them of the death they represent to her, her parents and the history of her country. Of course, Abramovic's task is futile. There is no possible cleansing of history. Like other Shakespearean characters, the hand wringing of Lady Macbeth, the handless Lavinia, the blood will not be washed off—and, as in "Hamlet," the tremors of history and the misdeeds of the family will not be shrugged off.

Abramovic's video image is connected to the limbs of her parent's images as Hamlet is to his father's body, and her attachment signifies her responsibility to history and her responsibility to her own death. In the middle of the stage, in the middle of these video specters, Abramovic cleans the bones of the dead—the specters of herself that her father, her mother have called her to literally, carry the weight of her history, clean the bones of the kingdom, speak to the dead: the dead who do not

[298] Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 36.

breathe into invisibility, but become embodiments of a different kind: relics, bones and blood, ourselves. Abramovic's fastidious, almost obsessive cleaning of the bones and her repetition of Balkan folk songs as she cleans[299], is part of the way she 'carries the weight of history' and speaks to the dead.[300] What we can clearly see in "Balkan Baroque" is Abramovic's belief that repetition and ritual help a culture to have an "embodied connection"[301] to her ancestors.[302]

"For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant."[303] But, as I indicated when I joined the concept of the haptic with the spectral, I believe the spectral apparition can be 'held,' if not with the eyes than in the skin. I think of a story written by Agatha Christie; it is not so much a detective story as uncanny, an Edgar Allen Poe-like exposition. The protagonist of the story is a genuine if overworked medium. One of her clients is a woman who has lost her child. The woman repeatedly asks the medium to communicate with the child, even though it saps the medium of the small physical energy she still has. On one

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[299] The sources I used did not specify the type of Balkan folk singing that Abramovic used during this performance; however a *narikaca* (see next footnote) is a Serbian singer. Abramovic does not seem overly anxious to specify the time of Balkan culture she is referring to in her performances. She has a whole series of performances on "the Balkans" and does no necessarily specify which tradition she is drawing from.

[300] --"narikaca: professional singer hired to sing in the name of the mourning family, at funerals." 37 Artist Body (compare to Galas' "Plague Mass" and maniot singing)

[301] Richards, *Marina Abramovic*, 46.

[302] --"Each day one song was chosen and she would repeat it again and again throughout the six hours until the song became more like a prayer." (Richards, 105)

[303] Derrida, *Specters*, 5.

occasion, the medium tells the eager client that this session will be the client's last—communicating with the child has become too difficult. The client agrees. During the session, the medium concentrates her full energy on communicating with the child; she concentrates so fully that the child emerges completely formed from the medium's body. The desire of the medium and the vivid memories of her client transform the spectral child into flesh. The client grabs her ghost child—now manifest through the life energy of the psychic—and runs out of the psychic's house.

Though I don't imagine Abramovic's skills as a medium have progressed quiet as far as those of Christie's medium, I believe that in "Balkan Baroque" she is trying to "hold" the spectral body of her parents and the bodies of those individuals who died during the Balkan conflict, in her body; she is manifesting the spectral.[304]

Conclusion, Repetition and Preservation: Safety and Isolation replace Danger and Intimacy?

"To say we've lost touch with our bodies these days is not to say we've lost sight of them. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse ratio between seeing our bodies and feeling them: the more aware we are of ourselves as the "cultural artifacts," "symbolic fragments" and "made things" that are images, the less we seem to sense

[304] See Appendix C, Figure 29

the intentional complexity and richness of the corporeal existence that substantiates them."[305]

Abramovic seems intent on preserving her legacy and the legacy of performance art; Abramovic is no longer an outlier and experimentalist in the art world, as she may have been in the 1960s and 70s when performance artists were developing their craft. To that end, she holds teaching workshops, has made commissioned films of her work (the ill-conceived recreation of her performance with Ulay, "The Lovers," and the more recent "Biography") and has reenacted and taught others to reenact her work. Abramovic's attitude towards the reenactment of her own performances seems to have undergone a significant change over the years. Earlier in her career, she claims that **"**when I do a new piece, the freshness is important: first time for me and first time for the audience. And with this comes unpredictability: anything can happen."[306] However, later she relates that **"**the only real way to document a performance art piece is to re-perform the piece itself." It seems that Abramovic is admitting that a performance loses its immediacy and its intensity when it is re-performed. Because much performance art was conceived as an immediate response to political events, I wonder if Abramovic's reenactments will change parts of the performance in order to keep it relevant and effective. Regarding the subject matter of this chapter—the way in which touch between artist, audience and social

[305]Jones, *Artist's Body*, 41.
[306] Abramovic. *7 Easy Pieces*, 17.

event is enacted during a performance— my general feeling about Abramovic's reenactments is that they are far less relevant and involve far less impulsive interaction between audience and performer.

In "Seven Easy Pieces," performed at the Guggenheim in 2004, Abramovic recreated the performances of Valerie Export, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci , Joseph Beuys and two of her own performances. Abramovic acted responsibly, even graciously towards those artists whose work she was recreating. She asked for permission to recreate their work and promised that she would not benefit from any monetary proceeds.[307]

The recreated pieces do not compare to the power of the originals. The way in which Abramovic transformed these pieces seemed to de-emphasize touch and the creation of a communal energy. As in many of her recent performances, museum guards were placed in front of Abramovic's cordoned-off performance space; this is quite a contrast to Abramovic's original performance of "Rhythm O," where touch between Abramovic and gallery-goers was encouraged and, in fact necessary to the performance. Abramovic's early performance were often in a public space ("Rhythm O," "The Lovers") and no artificial separation was created between her performing body and the body of the public that surrounded her. Abramovic's reworking of Valerie Export's provocative "Action Pants: Genital Panic (1969) illustrates the stillness and isolation infused into performances that were once immediate and

[307] See Appendix C, Figure 30

wholly interactive. In the original performance of "Genital Panic," Export went unannounced into an art theater in Munich wearing crotchless pants. The audience was largely made up of men; Export's action forced the men to confront the real female body, rather than passively watch it on screen. Export walked around the theater, mingling with the aghast bodies of the men, until many of them had left in horror. Export's action was a courageous and blandly amusing performance that confronted the hypocritical attitude that society often takes towards female bodies. As Export, tight pants and gun in hand, marched into the theater, theater-goers were taken entirely unaware, their physical reactions to Export (sweating, leaving, touching) completely impulsive.

By contrast, during her recreation of Export's performance, Abramovic is surrounded by a cordon of guards and sits still, holding a gun in the middle of the performance space. The space is, of course, a regulated museum rather than a theater; the risk involved to Abramovic's body or the body of the spectators is little, if present at all. Though Abramovic wore the prescribed crotchless pants and leather jacket, her re-performance has much more in common with the art house film that Export interrupted than Export's actual performances. Abramovic does not walk around the Guggenheim; museum-goers are free to gape at her as they would a movie or a

photograph; her body poses no threat to their own bodies; her body is less vulnerable flesh than distinguished statue. [308]

I went to the performance, "The Artist is Present," that Abramovic did at the New York MOMA two years ago and had a complicated reaction to it. Abramovic sat at a table in a large room. She was cordoned off in the middle of the room and guests/participants were taken into the cordoned space and allowed to sit across from her one at a time. They could sit for as long or as short a time as they needed. I can't deny that, despite the fact that it was not wholly original, there was a power to it. Abramovic's focus in the midst of the New York crowd and the fascination and physical awkwardness of the individual who was facing her did create a meditative space in the museum. The reenactments done by her trained artist-apprentices were not as successful. In fact, the juxtaposed video recordings of Abramovic's original performance were much more powerful than the re-enacted 'live' performances. There was little improvisation, movement, new interpretation to the 're-enacted' pieces; it made the pieces stiff; they were trying to cement an art form that, by definition, is in constant flux. The young artists performing in the show looked scared and had none of the imperious conviction of either Abramovic or Ulay—nor should

[308] To be fair to Abramovic, she wanted to recreate "Rhythm O" for "Seven Easy Pieces" but was denied permission by the museum; to have a gun publicly displayed and potentially used was too much of a liability. I am not sure if Abramovic's ready agreement to cut "Rhythm O" from her schedule showed her flexibility and humility or if they revealed that she has become more conservative, more liable to compromise with powerful institutions in order to cement her formidable artistic legacy.

they have. To recreate the type of energy that Ulay and Abramovic produced between them, an energy they then directed at the audience of their performances, is impossible. Security? Fear and resistance to unwanted bodily interaction? I think one of the very basic reasons for the evolution of performance art was to break those superficial/exterior boundaries.[309]

Imbedded Legacy?

But, interestingly, Abramovic's "legacy" and the broader acceptance and understanding of performance art as a significant artistic movement in cultural history may not be through deliberate reenactment or the deliberate recording of performances. James Wescott points out that there was little publicity behind Ulay/Abramovic's "The Lovers," the singular performance Abramovic/Ulay enacted to officially end their romantic and creative partnership. During "The Lovers" Abramovic and Ulay walked the Great Wall of China from opposite ends of the wall. When they came to a meeting place on the wall, their performance and their relationship was declared over. Despite the lack of publicity, Abramovic and Ulay's performance was referred to in the Don DeLillo novel, *Mao II*, which gave it more cultural import.[310] Similarly, Abramovic's "House with an Ocean View" was recreated on the widely watched sitcom "Sex and the City." As Westcott points out,

[309] See Appendix C, Figure 31
[310] Westcott, 212.

Abramovic's performances, though not always well publicized, have become a type of legend. To be imbedded in the mythology of a culture seems infinitely more significant than actively, rather desperately trying to document your artistic creations by repeating them in a more diluted form (thus rendering them less historically significant). To become a "legend" or a "myth" is to be "embodied in the culture."

Chapter 4

Witnessing the Self, Wounding the Skin: A Reading/Meditation on Private Self-harm Practices

I. EPIDERMIS: It is the first, the thinnest layer of the skin. The epidermis begins with the delicate basel layer. The basel layer is a dust of dead skin cells that flake from your body like powder. Your first contact with others is through these dead cells. The body is so cautious; you must first touch without the possibility of pain, for there are no nerve endings in basel cells.

Beneath these dead cells, the epidermis, thin as it is, protects you from invaders, scurrilous microorganisms in search of a home. And it stains you: brown, rose white, mottled.

The epidermis is the skin's communicator; it shows a good face, but it feels very little. Besides the dead cells of the basel layer, the cells of the epidermis are very lightly nerved; touch melts here.

The surface of the skin and the surface of papers are about presentation, basic contact and protection. The paper's surface consists of arguments and a sturdy guard of experts fighting for the argument. You want these surfaces to look presentable, even attractive. You want them to fight with honor. It is the first

thing you see; so being first, to you, it will always be important: a first introduction, a first impression. The surface does its duty; it bathes and polishes itself. It carefully checks its sources. [311]

The Argument in Short.

Black Swan: An allegory of the seven year skin: the shedding does not take place peacefully

Look at Natalie Portman's skin in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*.[312] Ignore the over--dramatized simplicity of Aronofsky's retelling of Swan Lake. An allegory as psychological thriller. Portman as ballet dancer gone mad with purging and perfection.

Look at Portman's skin. Not at its varnished bone-jutted elegance. Its studied paleness. The eyes always somewhat startled, as though a fright looks out of the ever-present mirror.

You see the thatch of scars on her back. A thatch that reopens as she picks it, scratches it. Portman is startled too by this thatch; she doesn't remember making it;

[311] See Appendix D, Figure 32
[312] *Black Swan*

perhaps it is her double, the ghostly reflection in the mirror, shedding any small weight of flesh that remains on her body.

There are other ways Portman molds her flesh: she throws up, starves herself. She lives her life on tiptoe. But none of these matter. These are required hurts, the consequence of being half air and image, so light that your leaping looks like flying: a ballet dancer.

It is the nail peeling, the skin tearing, the cross-hatch of scratches opened and reopened that you should notice. This creature of Aronofsky's has so fragile a skin, I wonder that with one scratch the skin does not fall from her entirely.

One day, fairy tale like, it does. Not Disney fairy tales. Grimm's fairy tales. Where part of magic will always contain terror. Portman's skin falls from her and she grows a new skin. The new skin grows out of her thatch of self-inflicted wounds. Spikes stick out of them like the fronds of a dried xmas tree. This is a less pale, less fragile skin. One with wings. Sharp as shale and black.

But, in the end, like Andersen's mermaid with her longing for legs and a land-walking prince, her new skin comes with a death.

Let's not rest on the ending, which can be changed (Disney-like or Angela Carter-like). Let's at least make it a less conventional death. The death of Portman, bleeding from her side, garbed in fairy white is anticlimactic. Aronofsky's eye seems attuned to the coupling of destructiveness and perfection, beauty and death that are contained in Portman's 'transformation.' Aronofsky's profound adage: There is nothing that does not die at the moment of its perfection.

This bores me.

The thrill of the movie; the thrill of Portman's skin, Portman's aching stretching body is the thrill of discovery, not the thrill of perfection. The discovery of her own skin; her newly sprung feather as it pricks her finger, her snapping red eyes and dervish twirling wings. She has painfully, searchingly—the scratching finger picking through skin and muscle, hitting bone—borne a new self. [313]

Perhaps I should stop here? Stop on the image of red eyes, black wings and the snarl of a mouth as it becomes a beak. It is a beautiful image. One version of what a reading of the skin would look like.

No? Not acceptable. Well then let's move on to the long version: a sprinkle of academic language, pillowed by stories and arguments and copiously footnoted by an

[313] See Appendix D, Figure 33

annoying mosquito of a voice. But brace yourself for something less beautiful than the mythic black swan. The combination of necessary languages in the long version does not beauty make.[314]

And in Long…

Violence against the Self

In this chapter, I ask : How can you refigure and reclaim violent touch towards yourself and others? The greater part of this chapter will be about my effort (and I use the word effort with all its implications of uncertainty and failure) to take the words, images and stories of those who self-harm that while self-harm rents the skin, "opens the envelope of the self,"[315] and turns the flesh of the body inside out, self-harming may be a necessary step in allowing an individual to experience cohesion between their inner and outer selves, a past violence and their present actions, persistent experience of suffering and the ability to continue living in the material world. Blood, writer Caroline Kettlewell writes, knows all the news of the body.[316] It connects where no apparent connection can be seen. The young Kettlewell cuts into her skin to rediscover these connections. Unharmed our skin may seem too uniform, each patch of skin similar in texture and look to the one next to it.

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[314] See: Tower of Babble
[315] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*,4
[316] Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, ?

Moreover, the skin is rather obscured; it's sealed like a closed eyelid. But if you probe underneath the skin, as Kettlewell does or Vanessa Vega or Louise Pembroke or Esther or Erika—any of the subjects I examine in this chapter—the body becomes less uniform and its noises become clearer. Ligament attaches to bone and vein to muscle; connections that are invisible when the skin is sealed become evident. **"**Is there nothing more fascinating than our own blood? The scarlet beauty of it. The pulsing immediacy. The way it courses through its endless circuit of comings and going, slipping and rushing and seeping down to the cells of us, *the intimate insider who knows all the news*, that has been down to the mailroom and up to the board room."[317]

My theory, as far as theories for such a personal amorphous topic can be made, is that self-harm is a form of self-touch and the perceived violence of its touch is often necessary for the self-harmer to see themselves as whole; this type of self-touch allows the self-harmer to understand the continuity of their experience and witness for this continuity of experience. "Parveen Adams reminds us that although a scar may be healed it nevertheless opens you up continuously to the previous time of the open wound."[318] A wound, then, is a kind of endless time loop or memory tunnel.

I would like let "real bodies," bodies which Louise Pembroke, self-harm survivor and editor of the anthology *Self-harm: Perspectives from Personal*

[317] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 3-4.
[318] Ahmed, *Thinking through the Skin*, 112.

Experience says "tear themselves apart and appear incomprehensible and revolting" theorize about their own bodies.[319] This is an intensely visual study. It has to be, composed as it is of images depicting self-harm and the self-harmers who courageously, tentatively describe their own wounds or graciously allow others to tell their story. Their own making and unmaking.[320] Or, as one self-harming individual vividly puts it, their own necessary "unzipping of the skin."[321] I want, like writer and performance critic Peggy Phelan, "to hear the body (of the self-harmer) and its symptomatic utterance, that which always remains its most intimate echo even while admitting that my hearing is pre-determined by the interpretive frame that limits any encounters with bodies."[322]

I must first narrow the field of self-harm, so that I am not responsible for the all of it: the banging, the purging, the bleaching, the tattooing, the surgery stitching, and the extreme sporting.[323] Anything that stresses, fractures, causes pain, causes relief, allows the body to flinch, start, and shock and at best fall into a new sensation of itself—I am not proposing to write a history of self-harm, nor am I offering a

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[319] Pembroke, *Self-harm: Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 1.
[320] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, full title.
[321] Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, 135.
[322] Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 17.
[323] I admit that I am being a bit flippant here, as I am at intervals through out this chapter. The flippancy should, I hope, not be confused with a lack of sensitivity, but simply a lack of shock or the lack of 'pathology' that I associate with these behaviors. In short paper on self-harm given at the "Bodies" conference at Santa Cruz in 2005, Gabriela Sandoval mentioned that whenever she gave a paper on the topic of self-harm, many members of the audience (most of which consisted of experienced and knowing academics, therapists and artists) cringed and shrunk. So, let's try and minimize the cringing as best as possible; more shame does not necessarily need to be added to the long list of hurts that self-harmers experience.. But then, if you disagree with this approach or feel it is moralizing, please speak up; perhaps a little violent dueling is necessary.

solution to the "problem" of cutting into the self. How to stop it. Which drugs to take? Which talk therapy is most effective? The necessity of behavior modifications. Perhaps I don't think self-harm is a problem.[324] Given the argument of this chapter, I clearly see violence as a legitimate form of emotive expression. Cutting the skin or violence to the self is similar (though in no way identical) to tattooing the skin or imbibing too much alcohol. An obvious undercurrent of this chapter and each of the previous chapters has been the attempt to "normalize" or depathalogize certain behaviors: suicide, bloodletting, screeching and visions. This undercurrent that is most apparent in this chapter If I pare my preaching down to a concise statement, it is 'empathy as argument.' Is this not what the new scholarship on "affect" is all about, negotiating the line between empathy and argument?[325]

While I will be using some critical theory to support my statements: Jane Kilby and Marilee Strong and the ever flexible Deleuze and Guattari, I will mostly be using primary sources. The films *The Piano Teacher* and *In My Skin* (could there be a more apt title?) and writing by Louise Pembroke, Caroline Kettelwell and Vanessa Vega will be at the forefront of my chapter. Reworked stories (stitched together if

[324] Even though I think self-harm may not be "pathological" and that it may be necessary, this does not mean that I believe that self-harmers should not receive mental and physical treatment for their wounds. Nor do I believe that the "need" to cut might as some point be subsumed by an overwhelming desire to stop cutting. Louise Pembroke relates that, at one point, she attempted suicide because she did not know how to resist cutting herself in increasingly more damaging ways. Like that of many of the theorists I am using (and this includes Favazza despite his pathologizing of self-harm), my desire is to understand and seek how best to help the self-harmer through understanding. Admittedly, I have less 'responsibility' than Favazza or Milia, who are actually treating patients.

[325] See Intro

you like) and reworked metaphors will be use copiously. This chapter is about deliberately fragmenting the skin in around to explore the body; the skin is fragmented, but then re-created. So, think of this chapter as my own paper bodied skin. Fragmented, then put together again. The seams where it has been stitched and re-stitched may be visible, but each stitch has been deliberate.

First, I have given you my theory and my approach to self-harm; I will then, with whatever care I can, examine the particular words, those bolded key critical terms that library search engines use. Then (so many thens), so that you know I have done my research, I will talk about the experts and the difference of my theory compared to their own erudite ones. And finally, like the old man in the sea, like some aged writer who, at the hour of his death, shakily sits down to write his memoirs, I will present my ideas.

Defining the Terms or Tying a Corset around all the Wobbly Bits

The Self of Self-Harm

First, I would like to define the self; the self which I claim that those who self-harm seek, the self that must appear continuous and somewhat coherent. What is the self?[326] In psychoanalysis? An always hungry thing, livid and fish-like with eyes almost constantly closed. In Hinduism? Ever multiple and ever transitory, a prism that refracts on itself. But what is the self here (you will tap with a finger and a

[326] See: Transcendental meditation

firmly upraised eyebrow)? I am claiming that self-harm—the actual, cutting, and piercing and dividing of the skin—allows the self-harmer to see themselves as whole and become a witness for their own experience. (Oh, dear, you rub your head and cover your eyes. Have you learned nothing from psychoanalytic or postmodern criticism? There is no whole, no one, unified self.) Indeed.

"I cut and was made paradoxically whole."[327] I am not saying that the self is a unified entity, gathered under the sun of an immoveable and unchangeable core. I am saying that the self lies in the ability to see a connection between its many experiences and memories. In order to have coherence, the individual must be able to hold those experiences together; this togetherness need not be completely understood or linear; it will inevitably waver. Here is a story: A prisoner can remember nothing of his past life; he sees the past as a kaleidoscope or the blurred image of a waking dream. Then he realizes he has a chart on his arm; it is a chart of constellations. Each star, a tiny pinprick or a long flash of white, is an event, an upheaval in his life. Marilee Strong recounts that this chart, embedded in the prisoner's arm, is a series of scars and burns that act as 'flesh memories' for the prisoner.[328] I do not know why the prisoner's memory is so blurred that he can only recall his childhood by tracing his finger on a thin scar at the base of his wrist or by glimpsing a deep red burn on his palm. It is quite possible that the prisoner himself does not know the reason behind

[327] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 63.
[328] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 35.

his obscured memory. In an unnervingly literal way, the prisoner's self-harm gives him a way—indeed the only way—of constructing a connected set of memories and experiences.

Demographics: or which box is checked on the census?

"It seems as though you have only two choices: either lash out at the world and label yourself as interminably hysterical, shrilly unstable, and otherwise flayed or lash out at yourself," Marya Hornbacher writes in her memoir about anorexia, bulimia and the occasional cutting of her skin.[329]

Louse Pembroke writes that "socially acceptable forms of self-harm include: excessive smoking, drinking and exercise, liposuction, bikini-line waxing, high heels and body piercing…This form of self-harm is encouraged by cultural and gender expectations."[330] I don't want to repeat what is already well-known, so scoured by feminist studies that it has become a bit of a scholarly cliché. There is an obvious contradiction between approving of the constant pain of breast implants and disapproving of self-harm as temporarily painful as nicking the skin. An obvious contradiction between the praise Hornbacher received for starving herself into a slender body and the shame she was made to feel when she cut one of her arms.

[329] Hornbacher, *Wasted*, 282.
[330] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 2.

Pembroke talks about why certain self-harm practices (the above quoted: tattooing, plastic surgery) are acceptable, but self-harm in its private form is not, particularly in a woman. Self-harm defies the social desire for woman to be flawless. A scarred body is not an acceptable body or, in any case, it is not beautiful; it is, perhaps, pitiable. Self-harm which can leave raised scars, holes or bruising on the skin is much less acceptable than breast augmentation, which, by shoving a silicon bag underneath the fat and muscle of the breast (usually by the hand of a wealthy male surgeon) stretches, hardens and bruises the skin. The implant also leaves the patient with many months of constant pain and causes destructive leaking in the body.[331]

Perhaps, because there is a need to, as Hornbacher puts it, 'lash out at the self' or at society, much of the literature on self-harm is by or directed at white women. "Mental health professionals have constructed self-cutting as a problem affecting privileged, educated, young middle class white women […] Portrayals of self-injury in the popular media have also served to embed this version of the stereotypical 'cutter'…"[332] I can't deny that the majority of the individuals I am looking at in this chapter are female and white, though not necessarily young or privileged. I scoured self-harm memoirs and articles and I asked colleagues for potential primary sources

[331] See Appendix D, Figure 36
[332] Moglen and Chen, *Bodies in the Making*, 85.

written by men or women of color or older women who self-harm, but none could direct me to these apparently nonexistent sources.

But women of color also self-harm. In her brief, non-conclusive essay Gabriela Sandoval describes her experience as an RA (Resident Advisor) in a dorm populated by young, educated women of color. Early on in her capacity of RA, Sandoval becomes aware that more than one of the women on her floor is self-harming. Her attempt to help these women lead her to this observation: **"**women of color use self injury as a way to reconcile class disjunctures or disjunctures between their own racial identities and those of their parents."[333] Extrapolating, extending on this observation, I can see that Sandoval's ideas are not dissimilar to my own. Women of color, it seems, self-harm so that they can create a coherent understanding of their own life experience and the life experience of their parents; the self-harming also creates continuity between an identity that is double: immigrant and American; traditional daughter and independent student.

And men self-harm too. Strong tells us that the bruises and cuts on male self-harmers are often seen as the result of sports or boyish 'roughhousing.' Men, in fact, harm themselves more severely and with graver results than their female-identified counterparts.[334] Like Jacob wrestling the shadow of himself in the darkness (but we will come to the metaphor of darkness again.)

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[333] Moglen and Chen, *Bodies in the Making*, 88
[334] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, xiii.

And many bodies kept under strict supervision, the eagle eye of society self-harm.[335] Think of the prisoner who could only remember the past events of his life by looking at his scars. The most frequent space in which self-harm occurs is a closed and well-guarded institution: prisons, hospitals and mental health facilities. The enclosed space of the institution drives individuals to seek windows and doors in their own bodies.[336]

Trauma and Suffering: Why harm this self?

"It is interesting to note that "trauma" derives from a Greek word meaning to wound in the sense of cutting or piercing."[337] Trauma is born, lodged and comes out of the body. Any cut or wound to the skin is a trauma, a piercing in the very fabric of the self. Strong cites a research study done on the biological impact of childhood abuse on girls. The study, conducted by psychiatrists Frank Putnam and Penelope Trickett of the National Institute for Mental Health found that girls who were abused suffered long-term somatic effects: headaches, stomachaches, nausea and unexplained pain. Despite getting treatment and support from social workers, doctors and therapists, the girls in the study had a much weaker immune system and produced levels of autoantibody seen in autoimmune disorders like lupus. Putnam and Tricket also found that the young women they studied produced incredibly high levels of

[335] See: Foucault "Panopticon"
[336] Moglen and Chen, *Bodies in the Making*, 89-102.
[337] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 88.

stress hormones like epinephrine and dopamine; their levels were often equivalent to those seen in veterans of the Vietnam War who suffered from extreme cases of PTSD. In essence, "trauma" and its repercussions are rooted very literally in the basic biological fabric of the body[338].

This will be how I consider the term "trauma" as an immediate bodily trauma. I am all too aware that I am not a psychologist or sociologist and that directly relating a past event to a very present bodily occurrence is difficult. However, there are other, more ambitious literary scholars who have tried. Cathy Caruth and Shoshanna Felman are two of the most prominent thinkers on trauma. What I like about Caruth and Felman is the compassion that breathes through their books and their insistence on acknowledging the presence of suffering in (what I find) is the pointed and distancing language of critical theory.

And, yet, as Professor Tyrus Miller pointed out, with the proliferation of "trauma theory" the word trauma has become inexact.[339] Trauma can refer to the experience a Holocaust survivor has gone through: rape, the witnessing of violence, divorce and surgery. It can also refer to "second-hand" trauma, for example the 'trauma' the grandchild of a Holocaust survivor might feel. I am absolutely not going to categorize what does or does not constitute trauma here. It is a futile and, I would venture, a cruel endeavor. Perhaps because I am prone to using language more

[338] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 80-83.
[339] A comment recalled from a discussion I had with Professor Miller in the spring of 2011.

closely allied to religious psychology, I would prefer the word suffering to trauma. "Suffering" sounds ongoing, a continuous experience. To me, "trauma" sounds like one moment, one event or one disruption of the emotional fabric of the individual's psyche. In looking at these stories, I am not looking for the "event" that instigated violence to the self. I am looking at self-harm as an ongoing way of manifesting suffering through the body.[340] "Words are not enough; my early world was synesthic and I am haunted by the ghosts of my own sense impressions."[341]

The films and, surprisingly, many of the accounts of self-harm I am using do not discuss prior trauma. As such, they allow the viewer or reader to examine the self-harm of Esther in *In My Skin* and Erika in *The Piano Teacher* and Louise Pembroke in her writing etc. in the same way that doctors or acquaintances might. That is, the first reaction to the self-harm is the acknowledgment of scars or burns on the body; the scaring or burning is not inevitably thought to be the symptom of a past event. Nor do Esther and Erika talk in detail about their self-harm. Their past is a blank, relieved and seen through secret markings on the skin. The point is not the past—the point is that the past is infused in their present skin.

Masochism vs. Self-harm?

[340] For a more analysis of trauma, please see my first chapter on Janet Frame.
[341] Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*, 18.

For the sake of academic form, I will indulge in a little semantic definition for you. What is the difference between masochism and self-harm, particularly when it comes to the type of sensual pleasure achieved through masochism vs. self-harm? I think the difference may indeed simply be one of semantics. "Self-harm" (as I have impressed upon you so many times that you likely have a large indent in your arm) includes the word "self." It is about the communion with the self. Masochism does not have the same immediate connotation. Gilles Delueze writes that "waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience."[342] He goes on to say that "the masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his ability to persuade, and his pedagogical and judicial efforts to train his torturer."[343] Deleuze's definition makes two things about masochism clear: it works only through the careful control of time ("suspense") and an implicit agreement with the other ("the torturer").[344] Neither of which is involved in Caroline Kettlelwell's description of cutting in *Skin Games*, nor the frenzied scene of exploration in Marina de Van's *In My Skin.* Kettlewell uses the words "frantic spill" to display the intense desire to cut. As these words imply, a certain lack of control is part of the attraction (and hence danger) of self-harm. And, again, there is no contract with a "torturer" or other—if there is a contract, the contract is entirely with the self.

[342] Deleuze, *Masochism*, 70.
[343] Deleuze, *Masochism* ,55.
[344] Kathy O'Dell also emphasizes the implicit contract" that it is necessary to have between a performer and his/her audience in certain types of performance art. For example, Marina Abramovic's "Rhythm O" or Gina Pane's "The Condition" (which, incidentally, Abramovic recreated twenty years after Pane's original performance of it).

Dana Milia, an art therapist and scholar, uses the terms 'self-harm' and masochism interchangeably. Rather than theorize about the intangible components necessary for the arousal that a masochist needs ("suspension", "contract"), she includes sexual stimulation in the multiple and sometimes contradictory reasons that individuals self-harm. The self-harmer may need a control over his or her body as you have seen with Esther, who prefers touching her own body to allowing her boyfriend to touch it. However, when she does touch herself she seems to have little control, taking pleasure in the surprising openings and spills of her body. These contradictions are partly why Jane Kilby expresses such frustration at how to treat, sympathize with or witness for the self-harmer. As an art therapist, Dana Milia seems more at ease with such contradictions. She understands that the act of self-harm is not always about sexuality, but that it can and often is a component of self-harm. Milia writes "The pain involved in the cutting may serve as a substitute gratification of sexual aims. It may also serve as a sharp punishment intended to put a stop to unwelcome feelings of sexual arousal."[345]

Expert: The Safety in Sanction: Cultural vs. Pathological?

I will give you the "experts'" definitions of self-harm, shall I? It will make you feel a little bit more at ease; they will try and narrow down 'self' and 'harm' into

[345] Milia, *Self-mutilation and Art Therapy*, 55.

a digestible bite (though it may still churn uncomfortably in the stomach). Then I will agree or disagree and weave out my own definitions and narrowings (inevitably not as digestible as the expert's definitions, less clean, sticky on the fingers).

Armando Favazza, of Johns Hopkins University, psychologist and theorist, was one of the first academics to devote an entire book to categorizing, discussing and suggesting particular methods of treating self-harm. His *Bodies Under Siege*, really a quiet lucid and thorough cultural study, has been referenced by those few scholars (Milia's *Self Mutilation and Art*) (Strong's journalistic *A Bright Red Scream*) who have, pen in hand, sympathy on sleeve, plunged into the poorly lighted depths of self-harm practitioners and practices.

I like Favazza. I admire his book, which is thorough and not clinically cold. As a writer, he is not white-coated and beady-eyed. He does not place his subjects of study in windowless rooms and make them wear sterilized paper nightgowns. In his book Favazza first begins with instances of 'cultural self-harm.' "Concluding that the kind of cutting we see today serves many of the same functions as more culturally sanctioned forms of self-harm—from shamanic healing ceremonies to adolescent initiation rites to religious mortification…Bleeding has always signified healing."[346] There is a cultural sanction around these practices of self-harm because of their very publicness. Rituals that bind a community and instate/reinstate certain historical

[346] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 34.

practices are acceptable. So a young boy's skin is scarred or a woman has large rings placed around her neck, elongating the neck and straightening the posture.

Part of what sanctifies such 'harm' is the very ritual that accompanies the harm: the pomp and ceremony, as it were. The fire, the priests, the elders, the baptismal watering, the family pride, etc—the community that supports and aids in the ritual of harm. Rituals that involve a painful reshaping of the body are not only contained amidst the colorful pages of National Geographic. Note a more banal 'self-harm' ritual, one with less brimstone and magic, but one that has its own guidelines: the bachelor party. This ritual takes quite often in the U.S.. It involves the high American tradition of binge drinking (harming the liver) and embarrassing oneself purposefully; stumbling, throwing up and becoming inarticulate (harm to social reputation and brain cells among other possibilities) are expected and encouraged for the one night of the party. A cadre of male friends surrounds the soon to be married, plying him with drink and laughing as he damages the stomach and sears the throat by vomiting.

There are "social rituals" that bind, but the self-rituals that many cutters create around their cutting are also rituals that bind. Think of these rituals as an attempt to bind the self to the self. The ritual is, like tattooing or searing the liver, a necessary scarring so that the self can transmute without falling apart. So the bachelor is bound to his new understanding of himself as a 'married' man by the 'self-harm' of the bachelor party. His actions at the bachelor party bond him to his 'single' and

'married' selves, allowing him to see a continuity between the and yet allowing him to accept his transformation into responsible marriagehood. (I am not a social psychologist and I flail. Back to the visual and our examples of self-harm).

The pathologized self-harmer may be "deviant" (Favazza's word) in that her self-harm is not public and, therefore, does not contribute to reinforcing social bonds. It cannot; it has no direct audience; there are no elders, no parents, and no gang of friends; there is no secondary social representative to approve of and help with the rituals because of harm. They are rituals that bind the cutter to themselves and their identity. Some cutters, says Strong, label themselves as "cutters" making their cutting an essential part of their identity.[347] You might say "I am a cutter" as readily as saying "I am a panther", "I am an alcoholic," "I am a narcissist." There is simplicity to this identification—it pares down all the contradictions of the self and puts it under one, definite label. Of one young woman Strong interviewed, she writes "Cutting had by now become her identity inseparable from herself."[348] The rituals that often attend self-harm are part of identifying the self and giving that identity a certain continuity

A small quirky movie that had a great deal of success in the US, called *Secretary*, showed the importance of ritual to 'Superficial' self-harmers. Lee Holloway, the heroine of *Secretary*, takes out a small pouch that looks like a first aid

[347] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, xii.
[348] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 23.

kit and proceeds to cut herself at work. There doesn't seem to be any frenzy to her act; it is unnervingly methodical. However, her need to cut and cut immediately is noticeable.[349] First the razor is sterilized; the skin is pinned down by one hand, while the clean blade held in the other arm cuts the thigh. Then the wound is cleaned (cotton swabbed) and disinfected. Over it, a thin bandage is placed. The blade is put away, laid neatly in its kit. And back to work Lee goes; she is a consummate self-surgeon.

"Pathology"

The division between cultural self-harm from pathological self-harm, as I have already implied, is the obvious—the self. "Self-mutilation," writes art therapist Diana Milia, "is generally considered pathological when it becomes highly individualized."[350]

Favazza divides the act of "pathological" self-harm, as opposed to culturally sanctioned self-harm into three broad categories : Major, Stereotypic and Superficial/Moderate. Major self-harm refers to the limb amputation or castration or eye enuculation; Favazza claims that most Major self-harm occurs during psychosis or if a patient is highly intoxicated. Stereotypic self-mutilation is a repetitive

[349] I feel the need to point out the immediacy of Lee's cutting, because, despite the fact that she has a ritual for her cutting, the ritual is not a planned event that she can wait for. Although Favazza does not make this argument, I think that the planning of the social ritual vs. the immediate necessity of cutting is partly what separates self-harm and social 'harm' rituals---not the fact that social 'harm' has ritual and self-harm does not.

[350] Milia, *Self-mutilation and Art Therapy*, 43.

behavior such as biting or head-banging. The underlying reasons for this type of harm are difficult to understand; Favazza believes that stereotypic harm most often occurs in those who are developmentally disabled. The final and most common category of self-harm is superficial or moderate self-harm. I am, as might be apparent at this point, discussing "superficial" self-harm in this chapter. Superficial self-harm includes cutting and burning (the most common types). Keep in mind that Favazza is a psychiatrist and it follows that his vocabulary is that of a psychiatrist. 'Superficial' and 'Moderate' evoke a grazing of skin, a moderate bump, an accidental slip of the razor. This is not the case. 'Moderate' self-harm can appear to be 'just a bump.' 'Moderate' self-harm can also describe an injury that cuts almost to the bone or the ligament, an almost distention of limb, an almost "Major" self-harm. Favazza writes "I have come to regard these behaviors as morbid forms of self because they provide rapid but temporary relief from distressing symptoms such as mounting anxiety, depersonalization, racing thoughts, and rapidly fluctuating emotions."[351]

Even Favazza, confidant expert though he is, admits that his categorization of self-harm is simplistic. However, he considers this necessary for patient diagnosis. There is a psychology, no doubt, to the severity of the wounds inflicted on the skin. Vanessa Vegas' psychologist acknowledges the difficulty with an escalation in the seriousness of inflicted wounds on Vanessa's skin; from cutting, she moves to hammering with the intention to break bone. Does the severity of the wound mirror

[351] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, xii.

the intensifying frustration and lack of cohesion that the self-harmer feels? Deeper digging and uncovering is needed for the more tangled connections to be sorted through.

Rebellion through the Skin: Private vs. Public

"I mold myself to the shape that suits the situation."[352]

There is an obvious contradiction between approving of the constant pain of breast implants and disapproving of self-harm as temporarily painful as nicking the skin. Here is my contribution: I think that this contradiction is more complicated than the usual blabbety blab about the patriarchy-enforced social standards of beauty. I agree with the blabetty blab. But there is more.

Because self-harm is so private, so enclosed an act, "society" feels rebuffed, affronted. The self-harmer is the keeper of a secret body, a body that "society" has no access to. In the film *In My Skin*, Esther's friend discovers that Esther is deliberately self-harming; instead of reacting with concern or, even, curiosity, the friend tells her that other people might think her habits are "weird."[353] Later in the film, Esther and her friend are at a poolside gathering. Esther is not swimming and wears long pants and a long shirt to cover the wounds on her arms and legs. Again, the friend's reaction to Esther's "secret" self-harm is aggressive. She convinces a man at the

[352] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 116.
[353] *Dans ma peau* (French), *In My Skin* (English)

party to throw Esther into the pool or coerce her into taking off her body-obscuring clothes. Taunting looks (the friend) and looks of reproach (Esther) pass between Esther and her friend. The friend is merciless, though; she would forcibly rip off Esther's garments, point out the liberty Esther has taken with her skin; it's clear that she wants Esther to be ostracized. I contend that private self-harm is 'disapproved' of less because it damages the skin in ways that are unbeautiful, but because it is private, hidden—the overall society has no part in the self-harmer's activity. So exchanging clichés (as I am apt to do in this chapter), I switch the standard "patriarchal standards of beauty" for the kindergarten lesson "nobody likes to be excluded."

The privacy of self-harm is partly what allows the self-harmer to create a sense of physical identity that is separate from the social body, but it is also what, according to Favazza, makes self-harm pathological. It makes sense, then, that self-harm (and its characteristic privacy) can become a way of escaping social norms/expectations. The wounding is an attempt a unique form of expression, a type of artistic rebellion; Self-harm becomes a way to change "molding oneself to the situation", doing the socially acceptable thing. Esther in the film *In My Skin* dutifully obeys her boss and gets a promotion. Vanessa Vega and Caroline Kettlewell both relate that they played a numbers game with their grades; they required academic perfection from themselves, seeking to achieve and surmount the expectations of success that were placed on them. They played a similar game with their bodies. They attempted to mold their "outer bodies"—the skin that other people saw—to

social expectations of beauty. Self-harm rebels against this conformity. It allows them to create a new language, what I call "writing in the dark."[354] It allows them to create a kind of language out of their own body.

This the other similarity between Erika of *The Piano Teacher* and Esther of *In My Skin*—besides their nervous, blank faces and their need for the creation of physical openings on their skin, they often cut when they are in overly controlled environments. "Self-harm thrives in an environment where people are stripped of freedom and control over their lives and yet are expected to behave in a controlled manner."[355] Erika works in the disciplined environment of a conservatory, Esther in the formal environment of an office. Erika lives under the strict rule of her mother, Esther with the probing questions of her boyfriend. Their formal, controlled personas do not cohere with their inner, psychological experience. In order to meld, not only their physical selves with their psychological selves but their selves as office worker, pianist, daughter and girlfriend, they create a flow—a blood flow between these roles, these selves. Looking down at their wounds in either public or private places, Erika and Esther assure themselves that they are a unified self; the gateway of their wounds allows for this unification.

II. Dermis: Papillary Dermis

[354] See the next section of this chapter for elaboration.
[355] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 1.

The Dermis is our deeper skin. Its first layer is the papal layer. The papal layer contains the capillaries (baby veins) and elastin (rubber band of the skin) and very loose, connective tissue (jowly candle drippings). Here, you see the first flow of blood: the playful worminess of the capillaries; you see the simultaneous softness and resiliency of the skin; and you begin to get a dim understanding of the fact that our bodies are not so easily breakable. We cannot twist the flesh on our stomach or thigh and rip it; even if it rips, the papillary dermis will hang on like tattered old curtains in a burned house.

Witnessing for self-harm/Witnessing through self-harm**:** contradiction, quandary

Sometime in the spring of 2006, I attended a small exhibit of photography at University of California Santa Cruz. The exhibit was partially sponsored by the Feminist Studies department; it showcased the work of a photographer who captures women of all ages, barely born and near death, naked. The photographer is not a good photographer—maybe an unfair and pat judgment, but there it stands. There is something prying and peeing and ultimately bland about his pictures. If the women in his photographs have not given him a statement to accompany their image, he writes a statement for them. Slyly, his language makes judgments on their bodies: a little girl's scar means that she has been abused, a woman is 'clearly beautiful' despite her stretch marks. Truth be told, I rather despise him. So I am pleased when I see this picture. In the picture is a girl with her long, long thick fall of hair; the hair is

so long and thick that it hides her body almost entirely. I am pleased because she has tricked the photographers, tricked us, the viewers. She has promised nudity, the grand reveal of the burlesque act, sequined undergarments dropped from flesh, but we see nothing. An inch of an inkle, the darkening of an eye, a white arm. Her accompanying statement participates in this 'trick'; it both promises to and refuses to reveal. In her statement, she tells viewers that she cuts her skin and she feels no remorse about cutting. She will cut, she says, until she no longer needs it. She tells us this private, this revealing thing, but refuses to explain it or accept sympathy with it. She doesn't need us. Undoubtedly, we peer closely at the photograph to see if we can locate a scratch, a scar, a drip. We can't, though we might imagine we can. Why would this girl pose for a nude art show and not show her nudity, tell us something private about her body and her emotions and not invite us to participate in her experience? As Kilby puts it "there is something about [self-harm] that deifies witnessing even as it insistently demands it."[356]

"It is the attempt to author the self without relation."[357]

Back to the term of Witnessing, this constant throughout my dissertation. [358] To discuss witnessing in the context of self-harm, let's take up Jane Kilby, our lone

[356] Ahmed, *Thinking Through the Skin*,124.
[357] Ahmed, *Thinking Through the Skin*, 135.
[358] So goes the way of academic writing: explain and explain again. The argument and the terms must be clear. Everything in its place—boots before the fire, coat on the coat rack.

scholar, the only other academic to have joined witnessing to harming one's own skin. Kilby's essay "Bearing Witness to Self-Harm" is one of frustrated empathy. Kilby wants to witness for self-harm, but does not know how to do this effectively. She writes, " It would seem that the act of harming one's own skin by cutting it up and tearing it apart speaks with a voice so sheer that it is virtually impossible to bear witness to it."[359] I sympathize with Kilby's confusion. The skin of the self-harmer, raw with constant violence, is liable to dissolve, hide itself under scrutiny. Even Louise Pembroke, advocate for self-harm support groups in the UK, acknowledges quite simply that "responding to people who self-harm is not easy." [360]

There are parts of Esther's self-harm rituals in *In My Skin* that feel gothically decadent; perhaps some of the two films I am using can be excessive; this excess can distance the viewer. But the narratives I am using feel more layered, the proverbial rabbit hole. Reading them, there is no vague shudder of romantic horror. There may be a numbness that overtakes the reader, horror compounding upon horror, wound compounding wound, and the kind of numbness some self-harmers experience before the act of self-harm. How much of the self-harmer's pain leaches into our own skin as we read.

[359] Ahmed, *Thinking through the Skin*,125.
[360] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 1.

I can smell these women. Their bodies, though only vaguely described on the page, are strangely palpable. I feel a responsibility to them as they emerge fully-formed and demanding from these briefly sketched narratives.

I want to do a few things in this section of my chapter: I want to look at the self-harmer's simultaneous desire and reluctance to be witnessed; I want to look at the metaphors we use to describe self-harm. For example, Jane Kilby uses the word "voice" to describe the act of self-harm; it is an often used image. The image depicts self-harm as a type of bloody cry, a physical language that substitutes for experiences that are too difficult to articulate through spoken language. I will be changing that metaphor to one of my own, 'writing in the dark,' by using the story of a graffiti artist. I want to see how changing these metaphors will help the understanding of self-harm and how self-harm might be witnessed in alternative ways. I will also extend my primary argument: that self-harm is essentially about self-witnessing, self-knowing rather than being witnessed by others. Self-harmers primarily "witness" through their own bodies: the touch of metal or nails on their skin and the picture puzzle of blood covering blue veins and lumpen fat.

At the beginning of French director Marina de Van's small, almost claustrophobic movie, *In My Skin*, the protagonist, Esther, accidentally injures her leg on a piece of sharp metal while walking across a parking lot. It is important to point out that before the discovery of her wound, Esther was at a party—an informal party, no doubt, but a public gathering, the type that imposes thousands of imperceptible but

strictly imprinted societal behaviors upon the individual. Moving through the party, Esther occasionally laughs and uncomfortably swivels her body, but she is never at ease amongst the crowd of party goers At the party, Esther dances, talks with her friends and drinks wine without noticing that her leg is bruised and bleeding until she takes a trip to the bathroom and sees the imprints of blood on the white carpet where she has just walked.

It is only when she discovers her trace—the bloody marks and her skin's creation—the mottled wound, "does her spirit fly into her."[361] Ironically, it is when her flesh has been shattered that Esther—blank white face, staring at blank white flesh-- seems most honest, most unified.

The exploration that Esther takes with and on her body after the discovery of her first wounding is a literalization of French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's famous theory of "becoming." "Becoming," they say, "produces nothing other than itself."[362] "Becoming," like so many of Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical terms, is playful and unpinnable. "Becoming" is not to imitate or to parody, nor is it to sympathize or feel understanding with. "Becoming" is akin to the sense of touch. By touching another body, your skin merges with but does not become inseparable from another person's skin; you feel the possibility of the other within you, but you are not entirely the other. The sense of unity that Esther gets from her wound incites her

[361] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 37.
[362] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*,238.

repeatedly harm herself. I believe that in self-harming, Esther is able to touch, to "become" herself; she is able to feel the possibility of herself by tracing her wounds with her fingertips, by, in some instances, drinking her own blood—a self-given Eucharist. [363]

Increasingly painful to Esther are the moments when she is not allowed to "become" herself: social situations, work situations, even scenes with her unsuspecting and largely ignored boyfriend. In one scene, at a formal dinner with co-workers, after Esther has been promoted, the strain of the situation: the stiltedness of the conversation, the control of the body that must be exacted in the upscale restaurant, is too much—Esther and Esther's body "unbecome."[364] Esther's hand detaches from her arm and from the rest of her body and it evades Esther's attempts to stop its flopping, independent movement. Esther's body is "unbecoming" piece by piece—she is losing access to herself and to coherence within herself.[365] In clinical terms Esther is "disassociating," unable to experience her body as part of herself. "Most people experience brief episodes of disassociation during their lives […] [W]hat makes cutters different is that they are people who feel like they are falling apart, shattering into bits and pieces […] When cutters sense that they are shattering they turn to the most effective thing to […] pull the pieces together. [Lines] believes

[363] See Appendix D, Image 34
[364] Please see the concept of Becoming in Chapter 2
[365] See Appendix D, Figure 35

cutting is as much about binding as it is about rending."[366] In order to re-attach herself again, she must open the skin to gain entrance to her blood, veins, organs, her experience and her ability to "become."

While reading Vanessa Vega's tediously written memoir—a memoir that primarily consists of her word for word documentation of individual and group therapy session—I was struck by how many times her therapist repeated her name. The repetition of her name became so frequent, it was almost like a thud in the ear, a heartbeat, a mantra singing in the skin. I think this constant naming by Vanessa's therapist was a way for her to "center" Vanessa. By naming 'Vanessa,' she is emphasizing the connection between Vanessa's many experiences and many layered selves. By naming, she hopes Vanessa will "become."[367]

"My own spirit left my body with increasing frequency. She would not return to my body until she had evidence that I was alive and human. The only proof I could give her was to cut into my body. She has to see inside my body in order to return. All the time she is out of my body, I can hear her scream." [368]

Scarring—self given tattoos

Think back to the popular movie, *The Secretary* and the main character's ritual around wounding. Part of this ritual is in imprinting the self; in essence,

[366] Strong, *Bight Red Scream*, 37.
[367] See more on Naming in Chapter 1
[368] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*,

carving into the self is a type of brand; it claims you for yourself; it marks you as your own territory. The ritual is also one of creation. Instead of paint and brushes, there are knives and emergency swabs.

After the accidental wounding at the party, Esther begins to cut herself frequently. In a visit that Esther makes to the doctor after her leg injury, the doctor probes her about the wound: he asks her why she did not come to see him sooner. Did she feel the pain? Esther answers blankly and noncommittally until he asks her if she would like to have surgery on the leg. Because of the severity of her injuries, if Esther does not have surgery, she will be badly scarred, even disfigured. After glancing down at her leg and running her hand in between the round pits, the thin rivulets her wounding has made, she answers the doctor decisively "I would rather not." Her answer gives further credence to the idea that the scar and its very 'deformity' is like a more intense, more private tattoo, a way in which Esther can see and mark her individuality. As Pembroke says "feelings about scars can vary, not everyone despises their scars. Some individuals may really need them as it may feel like the only tangible testimony of their pain and may not want to conceal them."

Mixing Metaphors: The Wound is not a Mouth—

Often the wounds inflicted by self-harm---wet, red, with two parted pieces of skin-- are compared to a mouth or to a scream, the red wetness of the wound exactly mirroring the shiny, bumped gullet of the throat. The metaphor of wound to mouth, pain to scream, implies that if the individual could talk, could scream, they would not cut into the skin or self-harm. While elements of this metaphor are no doubt true—as Pembroke says "I could not express my pain and anger to the people who were controlling every aspect of my life. I had to learn to scream silently"—it is too easy, too simple a metaphor; it does not, literally, probe deep enough.[369]

I have flippantly condemned the wound-as-mouth metaphor, dismissing it as too easy. Comparing the wound to the mouth makes the careless assumption that if the self-harmer were taught to use language to express their pain, they would have no wound, only a relentlessly jabbering mouth. It is as if any other expression *but* language is only a substitute *for* language. "Use your words," we tell children when they sniffle and grunt. Though the catharsis of the sniffle and the guttural rumble of the grunt are just as expressive (if not more so) than the inexact language for expressing discomfort, fatigue, hunger—the emotion or bodily need that prompted the rumble or grunt.

If a self-inflicted wound is not a mouth, if it is not, as Strong's title puts it, "a blood red scream," than what is it?[370] Is there never a newer or more precise

[369] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 30.
[370] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, title.

metaphor I can come up with? Surely I have already used myriad clichés about skin, wounding and bodily explorations of the piercing, stapling and slicing sort—no doubt I will continue to use more. Perhaps if I sing you a story (another story, you groan, and the chapter is barely begun). What if I turn the metaphor of wound as mouth just slightly to the left, angle it slightly? What if the language of self-harm is like writing in the dark or screaming in a language nobody knows, the kind of language you invent when you are a child and use to communicate with your best friend or sibling or cat or imaginary playmate? It is a language of symbols, bodily configurations and 'created words.' The secret language, the writing in the dark, can never be precisely what it was originally if it is revealed to light or translated into well used words. Elaine Scarry writes: "First, the difficulty of expressing pain; second, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty…the nature of verbal express ability or, more simply the nature of human creation."[371] Scarry's writing is beautiful and convincing. However, there is a hierarchy to the way she thinks about language. The groan, 'physical language,' she seems to imply is a reduced form of expression. Worded language is grandiosely described as "the nature of human creation."[372] I agree that worded language is a creation, a world of itself. But physical language is, in its own way, no less of a world.[373] Think again about the

[371] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 3.
[372] Scarry, *Body in Pain*,?
[373] The context of Scarry's discussion of pain and language is quiet different and much broader than my own; much of her argument centers around Amnesty International accounts of the torture

child's grunt. Though he might be coaxed into saying "I am hungry," the words do not capture what the grunt expresses. A grunt is bodily, echoing in the chamber of stomach and throat. The child feels the grunt in his stomach in a similar way in which he feels the hunger. No word would give the same effect. Like music, a groan or a touch or the constant scratching of the skin is a language transmitted through the fingers, breath or vocal chords of the human body "rendering the site of pain, a language in itself."[374]

Now the promised story, I hope more interesting than the grunting child . Some lore of New York… Rev was a New York Graffiti artist; every graffiti artist has their own signature, their own style of writing. Sometimes they go out to the well-plowed and dazzling Fifth Avenue and in straight, structured letters write a political treatise. Sometimes they draw impossibly colorful cartoons on highway overpasses. Almost all serious graffiti artists get caught by law enforcement multiple times. The punishment is not severe--probation, a fine, community service. Policeman would sometimes spend years deciphering the language of certain artists. Some would even become fans of the artists, fugitive decorators in the midst of a grey, peeling city. One artist, Rev, was a mystery. He was rarely caught. Rev

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undergone by political prisoners. Her understanding of language is extremely apt given the text she is analyzing, but it is not applicable to all the many ways in which pain and language interact (which I do think she tends to imply in the book).

[374] Ahmed, *Thinking through the Skin*, 125.

painted in the darkness. He painted in the tunnel between subway stops. First, he painted a tunnel wall completely white (bald eye of the white page) and then he wrote one page of his autobiography in black letters. He numbered each page. I wonder if this is the biggest (not longest) book written. Probably not. Rev wrote over two hundred pages of his autobiography before he was caught. Who knows if there are yet undiscovered pages of the autobiography in some tunnel between two unused subway stops? New York has many subway stops. Rev was clever. He had disguised himself as a New York City transportation worker. When he went into tunnels, people thought he was doing some repair work. Rev was unusual because he was so clever, but more unusual because he wrote in the dark where only he could see his words (unless policemen were trolling tunnels or authentic repairmen were cleaning and fixing the often broken down subway railways.). When he was caught, Rev said that he had no wish for anyone to read his writing and never cared if anybody did. It is possible that he could barely see what he wrote in the dusty tunnels. [375]

At the end of her memoir, *Comes the Darkness, Comes the Light*, Vanessa Vega tells the reader that after years of intense private therapy with a counselor, after hours of group therapy, after successful attempts at increasing both the verbal and written communication with those who have hurt or angered her and even after writing a memoir about her self-harming, she still cuts herself. [376] She cuts less. Far

[375] Glass, "Cat and Mouse"
[376] Vega, *Comes the Darkness, Comes the Light*, ?

less than she used to. And her self-harm is a self-harm that never escalates into danger: the beating of her skin with a hammer or driving a blade down to her very bone. But, every so often, the writing and the communicating and the therapy are not enough; she needs the cutting, the slow seepage of its blood. She needs the cutting because it is the one act by which she is able to converse completely with her own skin. Louise Pembroke tells the reader the same thing. After starting a self-harm organization, after writing and drawing about self-harm and the experiences that caused her self-harm, she still cuts.[377] . Language of the body is too nuanced. The language of self-harm is too intimate, too unique to each individual who uses it to ever be completely substituted by a common, verbal language, a public language.

Therefore, my dismissal of one cliché: the wound as mouth, the "bloody scream," and my acceptance of another cliché: "writing in the dark." Language which no one but the writer can read. Unless they choose to translate it. Always inexactly. What is written in private, in the dark, will always lose some of its shape (though it will gain a new kind of shape) when lit up or made public.

My discussion of culturally acceptable self-harm vs. unacceptable self-harm and my creation of an alternate metaphor for describing self-harm have made one point clear: self-harm is private, self-enclosed, a language unto itself. The enclosure of self-harm is why I am highlighting the importance of self-witnessing, self-knowing for (appropriately designated) *self*-harmers. It is my main disagreement with Kilby's

[377] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 30-50.

otherwise insightful, interesting essay. Writing of the self-harmers she has met, she states: " the traumatized carry a traumatized history they cannot see (they are constitutionally blind to it), thus they require another to see it for them."[378] But the 'traumatized' do see it—they "see" it through their bodily sensations. Kilby goes on to say that witnessing for self-harm is "virtually impossible." A double bind, where self-harmers are both ignorant and are unable to be guided out of this ignorance. They are "blind." There is a contradiction in Kilby's thinking here. If self-harmers "see" through their body, how can they be constitutionally blind? "Seeing through the body, by which I assume Kilby means, by violent touch, through the skin, is, like the unique "language" of self-harm, a different kind of seeing.

Cutting as Creation

"production of a wound is an act of creation"[379]

"blurring of the line between self expression and pathology**."**[380]

Don't performance artists Abramovic and Athey harm in ways that are not "sanctioned?" What is the difference between their performative self-harm and private self-harm? After all, Athey WAS sanctioned by society and by the

[378] Ahmed, *Thinking through the Skin*, 129.
[379] Favazza, *Bodies under Siege*, 198.
[380] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 138.

government no less. [381] Bloody performances may not be 'sanctioned' or approved, but they are not restricted or enclosed. On the contrary, performance invites participation. In some cases, as we have seen with the vibratory force of Galas' voice or Athey dripping bodily fluids dangerously close to audience members, such participation is not even a matter of audience choice. The act of writing about self-harm (as in Pembroke's compilation or Caroline Kettlewell and Vanessa Vega's memoirs) is closer to performative masochism than private self-harm. In writing, the private self-harmer has opened themselves to interaction that is not exclusively about the self.

Most of the self-harming individuals I am discussing here have absolutely no desire to bring their self-harming rituals into the public sphere (the self-harmers in the books by Favazza, Strong or Milia; the 'fictional' self-harming individuals in *The Piano Teacher* and *In My Skin*) Again, there is the containment of self-harm; It is a containment that emphasize the self-making and self witnessing of harming the skin: the lack of dependence on society. The containment of self-harm also reflects a desire to not have the private cutting on the body 'contaminated' by an outside body's touch or appraising language. Individuals who self-harm may have expressions they are willing to give to the world: performances, pieces of writing or art.[382] But the

[381] I am referring to Athey's performance piece "Four Scenes in a Harsh Life." I discussed this performance piece in detail in the third chapter of this dissertation.
[382] To note the other instances of creativity in the subjects I am discussing: Erika of Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* is, of course, a musician. Louise Pembroke cartoons and writes. Though both Erika

cutting is for them alone.; a diary of poetry tucked under piles of paper in a locked drawer. Access is to the self-harmer alone, which, again makes the possibility of secondary witnessing even more difficult.

As I have related before, more than relaying on shock or horror, Esther seems fascinated by the deep, red prints she has made—perhaps it is the colors red on white, which captivate her with their visual appeal. But, more likely, she sees the prints as a distinguishing scent, a trace of herself, proof that she, Esther, has walked on a carpet, that she, Esther, has a body that can bleed, that can create unique patterns on the floor's surface. I believe that Esther sees "the production of her wound as an act of creation." It allows her to witness for her own body. The bloody prints that Esther leaves on the carpet floor during her first cutting episode remind me of the 'breast prints' that Performance artist Annie Sprinkle makes. Sprinkle sells her prints as a way of allowing the public to have access to her body and its potential creativity. Erika stares at the prints as though they are magic; it is as though she has discovered a fascinating power (like Midas' ability to transform all objects into gold). I believe that private self-harm seeks the whole—the continuity of self through the skin; public self-harm demonstrates the fracture—the divisions that rend the social body apart. [383]

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and Pembroke have public outlets for their creativity, they continue to privately self-harm. Art therapist Diana Milia notes that , even though she encourages her self-harming clients to create expressive art work, this does not necessarily stop them from privately self-harming—though it may decrease the incidence of self-harm.

[383] See Chapter 3

III. Dermis: Reticular

The second layer of the dermis, the reticular dermis is a deep thing; its roots go deep (red thickness of vein), the land is rich (the connective tissue in the reticular layer hardens like resin, thickens like dough). Most brilliant of all, its 'foliage': the febrile beauty of the nerve endings. Seeing them, you realize the surrealists were not 'surreal' at all. Their paintings were literal. Your body is filled with neon branches that pulse with a delicate disco light.

The Reticular layer must be one of the most painful sites of wounding—unless the nerves have been burned out, the blackened tips of branches. It contains the potential waterfalls of our body; hitting vein, blood bursts through the body unimpeded.

Tactile Witnessing: The Skin Underneath the Skin:

Notes on multiplying the skin

In my analysis, I have only 'touched' upon the surface of the skin. I have discussed blood prints and the physical language that the skin speaks. I have discussed Kilby's frustrated attempt at 'witnessing' these bodies. And I have shown you my attempted analysis of self-harming individuals. We (without her permission, I include Kilby in this we) strain our eyes to see these bodies, but we do not necessarily get inside them. I think getting inside them is the only way to understand how and

why these men and women self-harm. Yet "getting inside" also feels like a violation of these bodies. As though I stood before the naked girl in the photography exhibit and forcefully cut her long thick hair so that I could ogle at her scars. To simultaneously understand and preserve the integrity of my subjects is, as Kilby discovered, a monumental task. So I will probe, but probe cautiously. In this section, I will not coolly document the importance of piercing the flesh. I will describe—or rather feel my way through-- the probing, searing and remaking of the self-harmer's flesh. Already, I feel suffocated by skin.

Have you seen the Van Hagen bodies' exhibit?[384] There is one plastinated body that, unclothed of its own skin, holds it up like a towel; a towel of papery, preserved flesh. It is the skin examining itself, curiously staring at its own stitching. I imagine that this body works as tailor, needle in one hand, scissors in the other.[385]

In one of their songs, the punk rock group the Gits sing "I need a second skin, something to hold me close." In another song, their words ask for something quite different: "Cut my skin it makes me human/ When you are looking at pain, you are looking at truth."[386] The first song asks for a protective layer of skin, a blanket of flesh to encase the more vulnerable skin and organs in; the fat pouch of a hibernating bear, it gives warmth during the winter. The second lyric asks for a cutting-through

[384] FOR more on Von Hagen see: Von Hagen's and Whalley, *Anatomical Exhibition of Real Bodies*.
[385] Not a new idea this tailoring of skin. See: 19th century anatomy classes, "Silence of the Lambs," Lady Gaga "Meat Dress," Elective Surgery, Orlan: Performance Artist. And etc.
[386] Gits, "Frenching the Bully."

of the skin; it wants to reach blood and feel the sting and sear of pain. It's a simultaneous desire to be covered and to reveal; a desire that you have seen before in my description of a photograph. The photograph of a young woman who was photographed naked, but refused to reveal any of the scars she had imprinted in her own flesh.

Underneath your skin, there is another body, mottled and complex and entirely your own**.** The skin is stitched and re-stitched and perhaps it attains a Frankenstein like beauty or a Cyborgian completeness. Self-harming individuals often have the desire to both create and destroy the 'protective' skin—you could think of this protective skin as the epidermis, the cloth covering of our other layers of skin. Cutting into the protective skin, the self-harmer is able to get to his or her more vulnerable skin, the dermis and its many connective pipings and tubings. The skin beneath the skin, the vulnerable nerve endings, huddled together and dimly lighted. One skin keeps self-harmers safe, hidden; the piercing of the skin reveals the self-harmer. Milia tells the story of one of her patients, Katy.[387] She describes Katy as being enclosed in fat. Katy has an unusually symbiotic relationship with her mother; her mother wears Katy's clothes and sleeps with Katy's boyfriends. Katy is a young adult, but she is still attached to her mother's body. Milia's hypothesis is that by

[387] I realize that in relating my story of Katy and the story of Brenda, I am slightly veering away from my intention of not considering any of self-harming individual's past life or circumstances in my analysis. Kate and Brenda, however, have interesting stories and I've tried to stick to the way their bodies relate to people rather than past traumas or circumstances.

enclosing herself in a layer of fat, Katy has built a skin that will separate her from her mother and allow her to have a different 'skin identity.' In some way, the skin that Katy had as a child was given to her by her mother, at a birth—her genetic skin. But Katy's acquired layer of fat is a skin she has created for herself.

Katy also cuts into her skin; it is the reason she is Milia's patient.[388] Though her layer of fat or protective skin acts as a type of pliant armor, it also hides Katy from herself. When she pierces the protective layer, she is able to see the more delicate layers of her skin; Katy's cutting reminds her of her unique identity. In no other body does the blood flow in quite the same way or is the placement of bone at that particular angle. The "skin identity" Katy uncovers is a secret identity. Because she has developed a second skin, a "protective skin," even Katy's overbearing mother cannot touch her secret skin; it is Katy's alone. [389]

Katy's cutting is a memory device. Think of a person who is in a serious car accident. The individual has partial amnesia, gaps of black in the brain. Her friends and family show her pictures of the events in her life; they tell her to touch the clothes in her room; they make the foods she likes. Through vision, touch, smell and taste they will her body into remembrance. Katy's cutting acts as a similar type of physical remembrance.

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[388] Milia, *Self-Mutilation and Art Therapy*, (Katy's story)
[389] Psychoanalytical theorist Didier Azieu names the relationship between skin and identity the "skin ego."

In a group therapy session recounted in Vanessa Vega's memoir, Becca, a fellow patient says that there is a body within her a body.[390] I imagine that Becca's body is like a colorful, slightly chipped set of Russian stacking dolls. Hidden underneath the largest doll, there is another smaller doll and beneath the head of the smaller doll, an even smaller one. If you have ever played with one of these dolls as a child, displaced each doll with an ever smaller doll, it seems like the doll bodies continually multiply. It seems that soon the dolls will become so small that you will have to gingerly graze your hand over the carpet, trying to differentiate dust from doll. Becca's protective skin has been more purposefully constructed than Katy's; she claims that her inner skin was too vulnerable, too prone to damage and pain. Its very softness acted as a lure to violation. Becca is resentful that she was compelled to create and keep her second, more padded skin. But she is also grateful for it; it is a buffer; unlike other buffers (physical buffers like doors and human buffers like psychiatrists), she always carries it with her.

"It is the body inside my body" writes Hilary Mantel in a memoir about her illness, her failed pregnancy and the ghostly child within her.[391] Mantel's words are identical to Becca's. At an early age, Mantel was debilitated by endometriosis; the disease was left untreated for years; condescending doctors told her that her pain was caused by the stress of academic work or a distorted and disease-ridden mind. She

[390] Vega, *Comes the Darkness, Comes the Light*,
[391] Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost*,

was put on a mass of psychiatric drugs: antidepressants, antipsychotics and barbiturates. The pills only made her sleep; she would hang her head and grow bleary-eyed over her law books. And the cells in her uterine lining multiplied and multiplied again; they created scar tissue that made thick crystal patterns over Mantel's uterus and ovaries and bladder. It was as though her organs—mostly those associated with menstruation and fertility—were wrapped in a cocoon, painfully swaddled. By the time doctors treated Mantel for her endocrine condition, she was infertile and was forced to take steroids that swelled her face and limbs. Her treatment makes her unrecognizable to herself. Unlike Becca and Katy, her second, protective skin is thrust upon her. But she also has a third skin imbedded in her body, a skin of dead scars.

Scars like fat can become a second skin; they alter the appearance of the epidermis and are often unable to be altered back, smoothened. In an earlier section I wrote of the importance of scars, their potential to document life events on the body. Scars can be more than markers; they can, like the network of scars in Mantel's body, transform the body. Louise Pembroke documents scars on her breasts, face and arms; these scars act almost as an eraser, blurring her "original" skin. In certain cases, scars can permanently disfigure an individual. There are, understandably, few visual images of this disfigurement. I can only refer to the one broad, lacerating wound on Esther's leg. Some of the leg has healed—the outer edges; the inner core remains raw and messy. It is a great pit that she keeps digging into. Its color, the volcano-like

appearance of it, is completely different from the surrounding skin, which is smooth and white.

By remaking myself, I become the god of myself. Unstitching and restitching the temporarily bound seams of the cloth from which I am sewn. The wound I make is a bloody sun with its own sensation of burning. At first it is always unfamiliar, uncomfortable. Then, widening, settling, seeping, the remade skin torturously wrought, painful, becomes familiar. It becomes more familiar than the first skin which was stitched smoothly by another hand. The new skin is always your own. The old skin, the outer skin is always being sullied by a second person's glance, a second person's touch; it is the public skin.

Notes on "Erotics":

"To wound for the feverish beauty of the wound itself. I wanted blood—not the refined bubble of sundered capillaries, but a frantic spill."[392]

"I let the razor's edge kiss." [393]

Kettlewell's memoir *Skin Games*, about her experience with self-harm, was written years after her self-harm practices ended. Yet the words she uses to describe the act of cutting are not ones of loathing or regret or even detachment. They are words filled with a desire never quite gone, despite years of "recovery", for the bloom of her own blood; its vividness, stickiness and saltiness. Kettlewell's words display

[392] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 27.
[393] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 27.

an almost vampiric lust for the emotional and physical abandon that puncturing the thin container of her skin would bring.

I have stressed the containment by which self-harm defines itself. Self-harm is a ritual of witnessing, of 'speaking,' that requires little, if any, participation from another individual. The "You" is not needed. Kettlewell's excitement, her anticipation for the "climax" of her blood spilling involves no other stimulation than her own body. Sensual exploration is with the self. The potential erotic thrill, aesthetic enjoyment and creative impulse that self-harm potentially ignites could be one of primary attractions of self-harming. Indeed, why do we need the other to feel physical pain or pleasure? Note, again, the remarkable body on display at Von Hagen's "Body Works" exhibit. Stripped down to bone and holding his own skin, the exhibited body is transfixed, not by another body, but by his own. Looking at the skin, his expression of wonder is akin to the look you give a new love interest at the very beginning of a love affair: fascination mixed with appraisal.

In her language of liquid and flesh (a language too sloppy for many), French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray write of the multiple types of self-touch that individual bodies are capable of feeling. The body is constantly touching itself. Speaking of a woman's erogenous zones and, more specifically, her vaginal lips, Irigaray writes: "Thus within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other [...] They have returned within themselves, the interiority that you have, the one you perhaps suppose they have. Within themselves

means within the intimacy of that silent, multiple diffuse touch."[394] I realize that Irigaray is not speaking about self-harm here, nor does she directly allude to it in her book *This Sex Which is Not One*. Her scope is broader, fittingly more "diffuse." But Irigaray's words and the underlying theory speaks to the possibility—no, inevitability—that "multiple and diffuse" types of self touch are just as important to the body's sensory experience as sensation that comes from outside the self, through the involvement of a second person. Moreover self-touch and the multiple sensations it arouses is "silent," not necessarily communicable in verbal language. It is a language of bodily interiority.[395]

I like Irigaray's direct focus on the body. Her language is unabashedly, almost embarrassingly direct. She makes you squirm and this squirming and the plainness of her language allow you to proclaim her "unrigorous." 'Lips' are not rigorous. 'Sensorium' is. 'Spasms' are unrigorous. 'The body as text' is. So the academic with the language of theory distances himself or herself from the actual squirming sensations of the body; the body's lack of rigor; its refusal to be bound by the taut cover of its own skin and the formal language of critical theory. Rest assured,

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[394] Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*,

[395] An unignorable note on Irigaray's theoretical agenda and where it differs from my own. Irigiray has an unmistakable theoretical bent. The "You" she speaks to in the above quote is a "you" directed at men: male philosophers and academics. I see her words as a kind of taunt. Men, "You," do not understand and can not have access to all the multiple pleasure that the body of a woman ("they") is capable of. My disagreement with Irigray comes from her strict division between male and female bodies. I think she does both men and women a disservice (even if these men and woman define their bodies as normatively as she does). Biological men may not have genital lips, but certainly they are capable of multiple types of self touch, of bodily interiority and bodily self sufficiency

defensive reader, don't think I don't count myself guilty of such distancing. I squirm too. Let us squirm together as we watch Esther explore her own body: thoroughly, voraciously, and lovingly.

The violent erotic exploration that Esther conducts with herself is reminiscent of filmmaker Lars Von Trier's *Anti-Christ*. In Von Trier's movie, the protagonists, a husband and wife mourning the death of their young child, compulsively engage in sexual acts. In one memorable scene, blood rather than semen shoots out of the husband's penis. Of course, Von Trier's movie is about (among other things) two individuals trying to "unpeel" each other, violently exploring each other's physical interiorities. How then would the moviegoers who booed Von Trier's use of violence and bloody exploration say to *In My Skin*'s Esther, whose compulsive, violent erotic explorations are only of her own body; as Irigaray's words have pointed out: she is already two and has the 'means' for pleasure within the 'intimacy' of her own singular sensations. [396]

The least erotic scene in *In My Skin* is the scene where Esther has sex with her none too observant boyfriend. It's a short scene that occurs on the morning after Esther experiences her first episode of "cutting." Esther and her boyfriend are in her kitchen eating breakfast and the boyfriend engages Esther in a discussion about living together. Esther seems reluctant to live with her boyfriend; her verbal responses are

[396] Booing, jeering, laughter and little applause greeted Lars Von Trier's *Anti-Christ* at the 2009 Cannes festival.

quiet and noncommittal; her body language is avoidant, her face turned away from the boyfriend and the camera. But, drawn in by the enthusiasm of her boyfriend and because she cannot think of any good reason not to live together, Esther agrees to look for an apartment with him. The boyfriend is overjoyed and hoists Esther's completely clothed body onto the counter of the kitchen. They proceed to have sex. There is little sensual exploration of each other's bodies: hugging, kissing, caressing, undressing. It's important to note that this is not a scene of sexual violation; the boyfriend in no way forces Esther to have sex, but it is clear by her blank face and by her lack of sensory affect that she is indifferent to his desire.

In striking contrast is the scene where Esther disregards her date with the same boyfriend and passionately mingles with her own blood. As destructive as Esther's cutting of her body may seem, this scene, virtually the final scene of the movie, is a scene of self-love, even self-worship, a scene that documents the delights that Esther discovers (not necessarily conventional delights, but a type of delight nonetheless) in her own body. Like Rita, a young woman who self-harms, for Esther cutting becomes "a way to get in touch with my body… it wasn't to play out hatred, it was a way to counteract that." [397]

The final scene of *In My Skin*. At the end of the day, instead of going to her apartment and her boyfriend, Esther checks into a hotel and proceeds to wound almost every part of her body: her face, her breasts, her arms, her thighs. Rubbing

[397] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 144.

blood all over herself, we see Esther going through every possible emotion: fear, anger, fascination, desire, sadness, as though the cutting of arm, breast, thigh and face opened a fount of specific emotion for Esther to feel and explore. It is—and you can not avoid the similarities in the final scene—as though Esther is making love to herself. She explores her body as though she is touching another, desired body—every breath, every mound of skin, every bodily fluid must be explored in order to be known. After she is finished cutting for the evening, Esther takes a piece of her own dried skin and places it like a lover's rose underneath her bra, against her breast—a reminder of herself, a memory of her ability, albeit painfully, to "become.[398]"

Esther's bloody mingling with her own body may seem sensational in a similar way that Lars Von Trier's depictions of the body were thought unforgivably dramatic by disapproving film critics.[399] But Annie, a young woman Marilee Strong spoke to, has been cutting herself since she was 12 and has a story that mirrors the story imagined in *In my Skin*. Annie relates that she would often cut herself in the middle of parties and after social occasions because she felt no coherence between the social roles she was supposed to play and the inner life she felt. Cutting focuses her identity; it is "inseparable from herself."[400] Like Esther, Annie relates being unmoved during sexual relations with her boyfriend. "She could only feel sexual by

[398] See Appendix D, Figure 37
[399] Again, I am referring to Von Trier's film *Anti-Christ*.
[400] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 24.

imaging herself sliced open, laid out on the bed."[401] Sliced open like a filleted and washed fish on the butcher's counter or like a dead body on a pathologist's sterilized table. I use these images not to shock; when the anatomy of a dead animal or human is cut and examined, it is entirely open to the butcher or doctor who examines it. This is the very reason why autopsies are performed, to discover the body's secrets: its diseases, the cause of its death, perhaps the pleasures it indulged in. Annie's fantasy of being sliced entirely open is a fantasy about knowing herself entirely; seeing and feeling the way her body pumps its blood and grinds its food; the fully opened body will, in the most literal sense, reveal Annie to herself. For Annie who often feels that the social, sexual and contemplative part of her is disconnected from one another, it is the understanding of her physical connectivity that is arousing and exciting.

In *In My Skin*'s final scene, Esther cuts herself so much that she looks completely unrecognizable, ghoulish, her hair lank and smeared, the skin of her face and body uncovered and then recovered by think layers of blood. Watching her, you sometimes wish that suspense rather than frenzy played a part in her pleasure. That there was a limit (like the 'safe' words masochists have when they engage in sexual practices with a sadist counterpart) to the unzipping of the self.

I have mentioned the curious, even erotic way in which Esther caresses her skin. In Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*, the sensuality of self-harm or, as I would prefer to say, the sense-discovery of self-harm is methodically shown as a way

[401] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 24

to both explore and denigrate the body of the protagonist, Erika, --a process of which psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva writes "I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself."[402] Through each of the traditional senses, touch, taste, sound and smell, Erika purposefully "abjects" the pleasure that each of her bodily senses and openings (the hollow of the hand, the tunnel of the mouth, the slight caverns of ears and nose) give her.

We meet Haneke's protagonist coming home from her job at a music conservatory where she is, as the title implies, a piano teacher. She is fine-boned and taut and, it seems, entirely closed—each nerve, muscle and vein in her body unbearably tense. She has bought a silky designer dress; it is in her purse and she touches it secretly with her hand. At 40 years old, Erika lives with her mother—a housebound but controlling woman; she asks Erika to account for every penny that she has earned and every hour that she has spent outside of their apartment. Erika's mother finds the silky garment--soft to the eye, pleasing to the touch—and she destroys it. Erika's pleasure in the dress and the senses it arouses –touch and sight—is ruined. Later in the evening of the same day, Erika cuts herself in the bathroom, trickles of blood running onto the white porcelain. Deprived of the vivid sensory experience that her luxury dress evoked, I believe Erika tries to re-gain access to her senses by cutting herself. If she cannot have the silk and beauty of her dress, she will content herself with the sting and flow of wounding. Erika's cutting is also the way

[402] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*,

she punishes herself for the pleasure her senses give her; she feels guilt, no doubt compounded by her mother's haranguing, about the purchase of the dress; her cutting is a way to combat, "balance" as it were, the pleasure she gained from the dress with the pain of self-cutting.[403]

This pattern of anticipated sensory pleasure followed by the degradation of those pleasures is replayed throughout the film. In one scene, Erika goes into the back room of a video store to watch porn—curiously gazing and responding to the images of the screen, she takes tissues from the waste basket and smells those—tissues that are, presumably, stained with semen**.** In another scene, Erika watches a young couple having sex at a drive-in movie theater. Clearly touched, even turned on by the couple, she squats by their car and begins to urinate. While smelling tissues laden with semen or coupling urination with sex are not a direct laceration of the skin, I do think for Erika they are an act of self-harm; they are the only way in which she can access her desire to experience the (at most times) inaccessible capacities of her body. "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstand. My body extricates as being alive from that border," writes Kristeva.[404] Erika , like *In My Skin's* Esther, is uniquely alive when her body interacts with these fluids. They are a distinct trace of her body, a way for her to interact with and understand her sensory capacity.

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[403] See Appendix D, Figure 38
[404] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*,

Erika appears colder, tauter with anxiety than Esther or the non-fictional Caroline Kettlewell and Annie. [405] Her tautness is a protective skin shielding others (and her) from an unbelievable hunger: a hunger to be touched in a way that will fulfill her, a touch that will both pleasure her and be painful enough that its pain will dissolve the guilt from any pleasure she might experience. Unlike Esther, Erika tries (and fails) at getting the touch she needs from other people. Her first attempt is with her mother; it's inevitable. Her mother has bound Erika to her; Erika must call her while she is at her job, must live with her, must clothe herself the way her mother wants; they come from—and as yet are—of the same skin. They sleep together in the same bed. On the same night Erika deliberately cuts herself, she pounces upon her mother in bed, pressing her lips to her mother's lips. Also inevitably, she is rejected by her shocked mother. Erika then becomes involved with a young man, one of her piano students. He is a bad choice: he is popular, conventional, immature and twenty years her junior. William does not understand why Erika does not want to be touched and calls her any number of names: disgusting, foul, someone that should not be touched, when she tells him how she would like to be touched. After these two debacles, Erika doesn't see any other possibilities for the touch that she needs; besides Will and her mother, nobody has attempted to penetrate her protective skin.

[405] I often wonder if the coldness is not of Haneke's, rather than that of the character he depicts. Of course, he is the director and we are seeing his interpretation of the character; but this coldness is certainly more pronounced in the movie than the book ; it is a frost that seems to coat all of this movies.

In the last scene of Haneke's movie, Erika puts a knife in her bag, intending to use it on Will at a piano recital. At the recital, her hand on the handle of the knife, she stares glassily at Will. Then she turns from him, turns toward the camera and thrusts the knife into her shoulder blade. Without flinching, she walks out into the night. This is the final shot; Erika walking into darkness, away from the piano recital, away from the camera, away from us. She has made her choice. The touch she needs, the knife thrust in the skin, is not going to come from Will or her mother or anybody at her piano school; it can only come from herself. Her walk into night, the knife embedded in her shoulder is a certain kind of triumph. Erika will touch her skin, explore her body alone, in a space that nobody, not even the cold directorial eye of Haneke, can see.

.Brief Notes on "Self Care"

There is something soothing and necessary to seeing the skin break apart, reveal its trickles of blood, its finely knotted veins. Milia recalls the story of a woman who describes the blood that pours from her skin as she cuts as a "security blanket."[406] A kind of self-swaddling. The kind of swaddling you might have with sheets of blood or layers of scars. "I would constantly look at it in the mirror and

[406] Milia, *Self-mutilation and Art Therapy*, 61.

touch it (the wound) under my clothes for a few days."[407] The repetitive touch is reassuring, the automatic grasp of a baby as it curls around a caregiver's finger. To give another example of self-soothing that is more acceptable, that doesn't evoke horror or shame in the audience, that much of 'society' encourages and believes is necessary: Think about whiskey or scotch or rum, those heavy, medicinal intoxicants. You sip them (or more likely swig them) down your throat, your chest. Your stomach is for a minute 'on fire' (the burn and sting of the blade to the skin). A few minutes later, you are pleasantly warm. You don't feel the cold that ebbs in from the cracked door. Blood is warm too and viscous. And like alcohol it briefly changes the chemistry of the body. By cutting, the body releases endorphins, our little molecules of pleasure. It is remarkable that something as simple as cutting the skin can provide so much: creative satisfaction, sexual pleasure and temporary comfort.

There is something soothing in the way blood warms the skin. But there might be something equally as soothing in watching the broken skin comes back together, heal. Heal unevenly, perhaps, heal to make a jagged, asymmetrical white line, but heal nonetheless. The healing gives the self-harmer power or even agency. I am not sure that power or agency is the right word here**)** over the pain and the healing of their own body. Recall Esther and the wound on her leg. Esther goes to the doctor for the initial wounding, but she does not allow the doctor to stitch the wound or extensively care for it. As the leg begins to heal and Esther wounds it again, Esther

[407] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 127.

goes through the healing and wounding of her skin repeatedly. This process (interestingly) becomes a type of exercise in self care.[408] It tests the body and it triumphs in its strength and endurance. "Or it may allow the tortured individual to play out the roles of victim, perpetrator and finally loving care taker, soothing self inflicted wounds and watching them heal."[409] Vanessa Vega tells her therapist that the self-harm allowed her to "take care of myself and my needs in my own way."[410] When you play the role of both 'perpetrator' and the 'caretaker,' you do not have to explain what you want or need to other people and you do not have to be disappointed by their lack of care or understanding or their awkward fumbling as they try to satisfy your needs. You are entirely responsible for your own care: mother, doctor, lover; self sufficiency wrapped in a wounded skin.

I am not given to sports metaphors. Nonetheless, I am going to use one here. Since private self-harm is pathalogized and most exercise or sports activities are not, the sports metaphor will serve two purposes: to show the importance of the healing body to self-harm and to show how many 'acceptable' activities participate in the same cycle of pain and healing as self-harm. Here is the runner. He gets up at 5 in the morning. It is still dark and he is still tired. He has set his course—10 miles around a lake and through a mountainous patch. He aims to run it in less than two

[408] Basic therapeutic literature would give exercise, proper nutrition and doing something you enjoy, such as going to the movies, as example of 'self care.' It's interesting, then, that cutting—according to Favazza, an understandable, but 'pathological' behavior-- and then bandaging the skin could be thought of as a form of self care.
[409] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, xvii.
[410] Vega, *Comes the Darkness, Comes the Light*, 53.

hours. By the 8th mile, a grueling uphill sprint, his breath is ragged, his knees are weak and like he has blisters and cuts on his feet. But he doesn't feel them. As he approaches home, he glances at his watch: 6:47; he has achieved his goal. During the next couple of days, his muscles are sore and he wears bandages on his feet and around his ankles. In a few more days, the soreness goes away and the bandages are no longer necessary. The pain of the run and the subsequent healing of his body have given him a certain mastery of his body. He can give himself pain, but also relieve it, blister his skin but also soothe it. Similarly, the self-harmer cuts and heals, cuts and heals, kills the skin and resurrects it.

The importance of the healing process to self-harm is not only the ability to self-heal but the possibility of having others heal you. You come in wounded to a hospital or the wound is shown to a loved one. They may realize it is a self-inflicted wound and they may not. How obvious is it that the wound is not an accident? How many other scars do you have circling your arm, tattooing your thigh? How many times have you visited the same hospital with other injuries? But the wound is deep enough that you need stitches. The loved one hugs you, wraps your arm, and drives you to the hospital. The nurse gently takes your arm, so as not to quicken the blood flow. She cleans it gently with antiseptic, antibiotic. She may give you a painkiller, a glass of water. If you are lucky, you will be tucked into a relatively clean bed. The point is that your body will be tended, cared for. You will have evidence that somebody, even if an anonymous somebody, cares for you. It allows you to feel that

your body, which you despise and often don't recognize, is worth being sewn back together, worth being cared for.

Unfortunately, as Pembroke relates, medical staff can be unnecessarily cruel to patients with self-inflicted wounds. She writes that many medical staff see self-harming individuals as attention seeking wastes of time and will, in order to vent their frustration, stitch up self-harmers without any anesthetic or painkillers. "The hospital staff by their attitude of non-acceptance of my pain, reinforced these feelings (of negativity)."[411] In fact many people assume that self-harmers do not feel pain; they assume that they disassociate and so giving them more pain (suturing without an anesthetic for instance) does not matter.[412] But as Pembroke notes "I have yet to meet someone who does not feel the pain of suturing."[413] There is something very different about giving pain to yourself and receiving that same pain intentionally (and seemingly without compassion) from a body other than your own. And as authors like Marilee Strong and Diana Milia relate, many of the patients they interviewed have abusive or neglectful family members, or family members do not have the emotional resources self-harming individuals need. In the case of the ignorant nurse or doctor or the unsympathetic family member, the self-harmer is taught (or re-taught) that their

[411] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 7.
[412] See earlier definition of "disassociation." Disassociation can sometimes lead to the absence of bodily pain, since the self is not integrating the mind and the body, thoughts and sensations. While those who self-harm be more prone to "disassociation" than those who do not, most individuals do not live in a constantly dissassociative state. Consequently, even if the self-harmer were dissassociative during their episode of cutting, the likelihood that they would still be in such a state once they reached the hospital would be quite small.
[413] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 48.

wound, their pain doesn't matter to anybody but themselves. Further, they come to believe that nobody is capable of healing or touching them in a way that is kind, loving and even gentle. Like Vanessa Vega, self-harming individuals feel 'they can best take care of their own needs.'[414] They cannot seek physical comfort outside of themselves.

A clearing in the containment: Notes on the possibility for the "you" in self-harm

"it ...[the skin]... also serves as a kind of organ of communication through which we both experience and express tenderness and pleasure and, alternatively, hurtfulness and pain."[415]

Look again at Pembroke's simple statement "responding to people who self-harm is not easy."[416] Yet after this statement she doesn't go on to say that no response is needed—a kind of blank indifference or a looking away. Nor does she outline what an adequate response to self-harm would be. Within the context of her self-harm narrative, though, there is a potential answer. Because of the cruel treatment she received at the emergency room—lack of anesthetic, disgusted looks, ignorant psychiatric care—Pembroke stopped going to the ER. Instead, she carried a first aid kit with her. She also found a sympathetic nurse at the hospital. "She agreed

[414] Vega, *Comes the Darkness, Comes the Light*,
[415] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*, 17.
[416] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*,

to help me, and in a nonjudgmental atmosphere I first saw the practical care I really needed […] This was liberating and I harmed myself less." [417]

Pembroke's nurse friend would clean her wounds and bandage and stitch them as best as she could—without, I assume, the disgust of ER nurses. She paid attention to Pembroke's body. As I have argued ("argument is to the correct word, but it sounds too hard and too stubborn. Attention is so delicately formed like the soft, still breathing of sleep. It is hard to "argue for attention."), witnessing is a type of attention. An attention that requires the senses to act in concert with each other. [418]

In a passage that reminds me of Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water*, Pembroke writes "The night nurse lifted my head and rammed the medicine cup into my mouth. I wondered why they did this?..a hug would have been infinitely more beneficial.[419] Pembroke words describe one of the many damaging experiences she had as a patient in an English mental hospital; her words are also indicate her desire (like Istina's need in Frame's Faces) for a touch that acknowledges, rather than ignores her pain or makes that pain worse. The incident with the night nurse is one that happens after Pembroke, frustrated by her inability to self-harm in the hospital, throws objects at a wall to relieve her frustration. The reaction of the hospital staff is to hold her head

[417] Strong, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 36.
[418] For a more extensive explanation of witnessing and its relation to 'attention,' please see my first chapter on Janet Frame.
[419] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*, 39.

and give her a medicine that will put her into a deep sleep—make here completely unaware of her body and its inconvenient needs.

I always find it strange when I read the English playwright Sarah Kane's plays being referred to as violent or excessive when there is so much silence in them. Of one of Kane's plays, Jack Tinker of the Daily Mail wrote "this disgusting feast of filth."[420] Kane was a playwright associate with the New Brutalist school of theater that emerged in London in the l990's.[421] These playwrights, like many performance artist before them, tackled gritty, violent subjects unflinchingly ; they often staged their plays in small theaters, so that the audience would have no sense of physical or emotional distance from the actors. Mark Ravenhill, a well known New Brutalist staged his play Shopping and F***ing in 1996 at the Royal Court Theater; the Royal Court was also where Kane staged her plays.[422] Four short plays in total (and a radio play) before she died in 1999. Kane's final play *4:48 Psychosis* was staged after her death. Kane never claimed an association with the New Brutalists, this band of playwrights known for their 'shock and awe.' If anything I think it is the silence of Kane's plays, her deliberate withholding, that makes her so brutal.

Kane's *4:48* is such a small play. There is a tedious sadness to it, a sadness influenced by the author's own death and the characters' increasing despair. The play

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[420] Urban, "An Ethics of Catastrophe," 36.
[421] Just as a note, the moniker New Brutalism was also given to a British architectural style in the 1950's and 60's.
[422] For more information on the New Brutalists' refer to Aleks Sierz book, *In-Yer-Face Theater: British Drama Today*.

has three voices. In the plays' text , the voices are undifferentiated; the voices could be three different voices: a patient as she speaks in the day, a patient as she speaks in the night (the hour of 4am, dread toll) and the voice of a therapist. Or each voice could be a part of the same individual taking on different roles. I will not be doing justice to Kane's play, I know.[423] I think it is easily her most lovely play—recalling some of Beckett plays or his short trilogy of novels. In *4:48* each of Kane's line acts like an intake of breath; steady, poetic and painful. Her words with their repeating negatives: "I can't sleep. I can't eat" are like a dread toll signaling the end. Despair may occasionally have a romanticism to it, an ever-quickening blaze, but mostly, like Kane's minimal, repetitive lines, it is thudding, dull, wrapped in its own muffled and circular thoughts. It is a constant anti-climax.

Although the differentiation of voices in her play is ambiguous, I think there is a scene in *4:48* that clearly indicates that a patient is talking to a therapist. The patient is asked repeatedly why she has cut herself by the therapist; the act of cutting is gently censured. The voice of the patient has no wish to tell the psychiatrist why she has self-harmed. If she can't cut herself open physically, why should she cut herself open metaphorically at the psychiatrist's office? She may as well stay mute on both accounts. There is an obvious aggression to the patients' voice; her refusal to

[423] I will be writing a bit more extensively in the next section of this chapter about Kane's play, *Blasted*.

speak about the self-harm is hostile. The psychiatrist asks the voice if the patient will show her the scars she has made, but the patient, again, refuses.

But just a few lines later, the aggressive voice of the patient has changed. She does not agree to show the psychiatrist her wounds or tell the psychiatrist why she has cut. Contrast here with a phrase desperately whispered just a few pages afterwards to the same therapist: "Hold Me" she desperately whispers.[424] Like Pembroke, the voice of the patient in Kane's play does not want to be seen or even heard, but touched.

The touch that the patient desires never comes. Most therapy is not tactile.[425] The voice of the psychiatrist acknowledges that she can not allow herself to get so close to her patient. The patient gets no second skin, no nurturing hand, no blanket made of tissue and blood—at least not from the body of the psychiatrist. The touch, the request to "hold me" is always imagined and illusory, never actualizing in the Kane's play.[426]

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[424] Kane, "4:48,"
[425] A notable exception is Somatic Therapy that specifically uses touch/energy/awareness of the body to treat the patient. Somatic psychology was (unsurprisingly) popular in the 1960's-70's, but its practice has since decreased. The ethics around the physical contact between an often times fragile patient and therapist is murky and understandably avoided by many practicing therapists.
[426] Its hard for me to give such a short, fragmentary analysis of Kane's play. I hope at some point to write a lengthier article about the entire play. However, for the purposes of my discussion in this chapter, I wanted to , at the very least highlight this incident in the play—an incidence that supports my idea about the importance of tactility for those who self-harm.

Perhaps, it is easy to think of the interaction between the patient and her psychiatrist in "4:48" as a failure of witnessing. A failure, mostly, of the psychiatrist. But, though I have stressed its importance throughout this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I admit that tactile witnessing is a dangerous kind of empathy for both the witnessed and the witnessing. During the act of 'tactile witnessing' the boundaries of the body are made pliant, each skin could be subsumed, submerged by the others' skin. Kane's patient whispers "hold me." But if the therapists' skin is subsumed while touching the patient, he or she can not necessarily 'hold' the patient and all her fragmenting and fragmentary pieces together. As Kilby warns in her essay, in the attempt to witness self-harm, you could lose your own sense of self. But then empathy is always a kind of possession: you feel the other by being partially subsumed by her.[427]

This reminds me of a novel called *The Child Garden*. It is fantasy-like novel and it is charming: the love story between a polar bear woman and an actress. In the novel, people are given viruses—viruses of knowledge; the viruses are, in some way, created from the knowledge of other humans, dead humans. Of course, things go wrong. Viruses are not orderly creatures. One of the disordered virus' lives among a group called the 'bees.' In their system, the virus that gives them the capacity to read minds has malformed. Because of this malformation, they can not only read minds, but read emotions. Every emotion, of every creature around them; they are empaths;

[427] See Galas and possession in Chapter 3

they stay in groups to protect themselves from being engulfed by a mass intensity of feeling; they stay out of large public places and rarely touch 'non-bees', non-empaths. The impact would simply be too much.

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IV: BONE

When cleaned, it is smooth and cool and white. There is no stain of the dermal pigment; there are no baby veins, the capillaries of the papal layer squeaking and squiggling. There is no throb of the vein or the sizzle of the nerve. Bone is silent and stolid. In death, it will be the last trace of the body: its most colorless and necessary connector.

Silent Borderlands of the Skin

Louise Pembroke says, in a rare glimpse of self-harm humor, that self-harm is so difficult to talk about because the topic simply hits too close to the bone. , not only imply that we are vulnerable, a step away from the marginality of physical or mental illness, a shadow away from death, but that we are excruciatingly, painfully alive in the face of this sickness and death. Self-harm, with its deliberate wounding of our skin, our "envelope of the self, our protective barrier against the outside," magnifies this fear.[428]

[428] Strong, *Bright Red Scream*,

Pembroke's words speak to the uncomfortable elision between death and life that the wounds of self-harm often evoke. Like the jutting bones, the wide eyes and yellow skin of the eating disordered or the terminally ill, self-harmers bear the evidence of their anguish and their fractured selves on their surface, on the very place where bodies encounter other bodies—the skin. Milia describes self-harm as a kind of "focal suicide," a way by which the individual can kill a part of the self to substitute for the whole While most self-harmers are in no way attempting suicide—Pembroke states that she cut herself in order to keep herself alive--, to come face to face with self-harm is to be confronted by our skin's capacity for both pain and healing, life and death. "The wound can function as the site where medicine enters the body to restore life or as a site where death nearly realizes itself in an accident of self-harm." I think it is the complexity of the wound, its dual role as life-giver and death-bearer that makes it a site of potential transformation.

Let's try and hear the voices that have gone down to the bone in an attempt to transform the skin, and the resurrect the body into a more unified, more cohesive self. **I kept cutting because it worked. When I cut, I felt better for a while. When I cut my life no longer overwhelmed me. I felt too keenly the threat of chaos…**[429]

[429] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 176.

Doctor: "I don't care what you do to yourself, I just have to find out whether you are suicidal or not." V. I. P. (virtually invisible patient) : "Well, I wouldn't tell you."[430]

"I am looking for death in the short term."[431]

I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it--

……

And I a smiling woman/I am only thirty/And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three/What a trash /To annihilate each decade.....

Dying /Is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell/I do it so it feels real/I guess you could say I've a call. [432]

"I write for the dead/the unborn/After 4:48 I shall not speak again."[433]

V. SUBCUTANEOUS TISSUE

[430] Pembroke, *Perspectives from Personal Experience*,
[431] Kettlewell, *Skin Game*, 57.
[432] Plath, *Ariel*,
[433] Kane, "4:48," 213

Its eyes are always half closed. On the surface of a swamp, it bubbles. It protects the small town where it makes its watery home, but it is also warned against. 'Don't get too close to the swamp monster' parents warn. 'If you see one of its tentacles, run.' Swamp monster's tentacles are sticky like fly paper and they spread over you like honey.

Subcutaneous tissue is considered the last layer of our skin; it is made up of more connective tissue and fat. Like the swamp monster, you are warned against it. But without it, your organs would be punctured and you would be perpetually cold. One night, the swamp monster, tired of being feared, drifted out to sea. The next day, a neighboring town attacked the "swamp monster town." The swamp monster must be accepted, but not sought.

Violence against Others, a break in the continuum

Warning: Arguments may be cruder than they appear.

Blasted and Girl with Dragon Tattoo: It's either you or me: some unimpeachable facts about survival or Pacifism sustains a heavy blow

Here, I am going to create a junction in my chapter. You can call it the second half of my chapter if you wish. I think of it as my detour or an appendix of some sort. It's an important detour, but one that may not be fully paved. Stumbling

is inevitable. I must learn to fall and fall properly—hands stretched out, body leaning forwards. The spine and the back must be protected. Now, bracing, I prepare to fall; this is the nature of my juncture: Doing violence to another body, a body that you differentiate from your own body (however arbitrary that differentiation may be), can also be considered an act of self-witnessing.

Ok. I already see your mouth open in protest. You think I have fallen already, fallen and badly bruised my head. You ask, your mouth still dangling like a fish on a hook, a not unanticipated question. Even if violence is necessary, as in instances of self-defense or war, is it not always denigrating, a scald on the body and a scald on the society that allows the violence? I understand your question. But do me a favor. Readers are always asked favors, if not so directly, by authors. Let's leave aside the "moral binary" that the description of touch can provoke. Violence = bad; hugging = good. Touch is more complicated than that. Hugging can be just as much a violation as plunging a knife into the skin. You know this. I am not giving you enough credit. You remember such violations. As I conveyed in my discussion of self-harm, what is socially acceptable 'harm' and those types of harm that are defined as 'pathological' often reinforce already established social conventions surrounding touch and harm. As Milia points out about violence, "the splitting of violence into

sanctioned and unsanctioned types (is) for the purpose of maintaining order and meaning in society."[434]

Let's look at the possibility that certain types of violent touch to the self—and to others—can be connective rather than fragmenting.

I think Kane's complicated landscape of ethics may take me (and you, slack-jawed, skeptical reader) into a deeper understanding of this possibility. Describing what he calls Sarah Kane's "Ethics of Catastrophe," critic Ken Urban writes: "Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises or conversely flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics...Kane emerges from calamity with the possibility that ethics can exist between wounded bodies that after devastation, good becomes possible."[435] I would add that it is *only* after devastation that 'good'-- or, as I would say, connection-- becomes possible. Remember Kane's play "4:48?" The curtain opens , a connection between the voice on the stage and the audience members is only solicited after the fragmented character has cut herself, tried to overdose, cut off all her relationships and (this may be an assumption) kills herself.

[434] Milia, *Self-Mutilation and Art Therapy*,
[435] Urban, "The Ethics of Catastrophe,"

Kane's "Blasted," which Urban was considering when he theorized his "Ethics of Catastrophe," is Kane's first play.[436] I will outline it briefly, which means I will leave out certain elements of plot and style and my conclusions may be broad. In any case, I don't know that subtlety was Kane's overriding strength as a writer. In "Blasted," there are two people in a hotel room. The first is a young woman, about twenty, named Cate. The second is a middle aged man named Ian. The audience is led to believe that at some point the two have been lovers. Throughout much of this short play Ian makes generally racist remarks, and taunts Cate with insults and unwanted sexual advances. Ian is not sophisticated and his taunts are like cudgels. Ian is a man who says things like "I have shat in better places than this."[437] It's a banal line, I know. Ian is banal and he insults and curses in order to give himself some semblance of crude power. When Cate tells him about a job she has applied for, he reacts by saying: "Cate, you're stupid. You are never going to get a job."[438] Again, this is not a sophisticated insult, but it does its job; it demeans Cate. Ian is the insecure class bully. Cate is an easy target.[439]

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[436] *Blasted* is Kane's first play. It is also her most reproduced play and, amongst Kane's plays, the one on which the most criticism has been written. I would also venture to say that it is her simplest play (but by no means does this mean that it is easy to interpret).

[437] Kane, "Blasted,"

[438] Kane, "Blasted,"

[439] Its unfortunate to note that, as critic Kim Solga has pointed out, many critics have seconded Ian's opinion of Cate. Like Ian, they assume that her anxiety, her silence and her lack of education mean that she is 'slow.' How bitterly funny those critics of Kane's play reinforce Ian's condescending, misogynistic viewpoint. There is a similar type of misconception about the protagonist of *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (discussion in the next few pages). The genius computer hacker Lisbeth Salander is called a 'retard' by her guardian because she remains silent when asked intrusive, demeaning questions about her personal life.

Early on in the play, Ian takes off his pants and asks Cate to "put her mouth on him."[440] She doesn't. In fact, despite the fact that she is young and a bit afraid of the taunting Ian, she laughs. It is not the reaction Ian wants. Laughter implies ridicule, not respect or fear. Ian doesn't force her to touch him just yet, but as a substitute for forcing Cate to perform oral sex on him, he forces her to eat the room service food even though she repeatedly says she doesn't want to eat. Yes, feeding Cate seems a less violent act than forcing her to perform oral sex. Yet the underlining intention is the same: Cate is forced to consume. She is forced to take into her body what she does not desire at Ian's command. Ian's pathetic bullying and Cate's disgust and nervousness could not be clearer.

I expect that you anticipated this, but Ian's bullying grows worse. His inarticulate taunts are not enough and so he proceeds to use his body to assault Cate. He rapes her. Ian's other sexual violations are shown on the stage (Ian's undressing, the demand of oral sex, the force feeding) along with Cate's reactions to them (sometimes she gives in and sometimes she has a disassociative fits). This violation isn't shown. It's a silence. The rape can not be verbally or visually articulated. It rends a hole in the landscape of the play. It is this unseen act that allows for the larger-scale violence depicted in the play to take place. Soon after Cate's unspoken and unseen rape, a war breaks out in the city. Ian is raped by a soldier and his rape is shown on stage.

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[440] Kane, "Blasted,"

The hotel room Cate and Ian occupy is in the middle of an outbreak of war. The streets of London are being looted and destroyed. There is a direct comparison, I think, between Cate's raped and 'blasted' body and the 'blasted' hotel room and its surroundings. Its an ambitious claim, but its grandiosity is appealing. It confirms my understanding that tactility between individuals is reflected in the way in which touch functions in the larger society. Cate's individual body cannot be "blasted" without its reverberations echoing throughout the social body.

In the midst of "Blasted" and war-torn London, Ian is brutally raped (but what rape is not brutal?) by an enemy soldier. The rape is graphically depicted. The soldier closes his eyes and ruffles Ian's hair as he rocks on top of him; he imagines that Ian is his raped and dead girlfriend. Echoing the Greek tragedies, Ian is blinded by the soldier and left to die. His pain, unlike Cate's, is apparent; Ian cries and moans and lies limply on the floor. Kim Solga interprets the visual vividness of Ian's rape vs. the visual blank of Cate's rape by writing, "Ian's rape appears emphatically as both the memory of Cate's rape and yet not Cate's rape; in this hypoid form it becomes a challenge to spectators to witness *both* his suffering and *more than* his suffering, to see the missed moment it both embeds and covers up, perhaps, deliberately or perhaps inadvertently, with his own pain." Perhaps, Ian's rape is a

more bearable way for the audience to witness Cate's rape?[441] Let me explain. The audience is already aware that Ian has the capacity to blatantly violate other people and maybe his willingness to violate makes his own violation more bearable.

But I'm not sure. I think, as Solga points out, Kane is both forcing the audience to remember Cate's rape, while simultaneously covering it up with a more vivid image, a seemingly more ghastly atrocity. In so doing, Kane points out our too easy dismissal of a more common rape scenario: 'date rape' (as though putting the 'date' before the 'rape' softened the blow). Cate's silence, her discomfort with her own body and her strange fits and outbursts are hard. Hard to interpret, hard to sympathize with, hard to watch; her silent awkwardness is somehow embarrassing. We don't want to feel her violation in our own bodies. It would require an effort of physical empathy, a discomfort of the imagination. Ian's rape is 'easier,'—he cries, he screams, he bleeds; the pain of his body does not need to be physically imaged since it is visually apparent. The distinction between Ian's vivid, vocal rape and Cate's silent, uncomfortable rape is intentional. Kane writes that one of the reasons she created "Blasted" was "that the domestic mattered as much as the military..and she was deeply frustrated by how easily homegrown, peacetime violence could be elided in the press."[442]

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[441] By 'easier' I don't mean that it is easier to watch. Rather Ian's rape is easier to sympathize with because we (the audience or reader) experience it on multiple sensory levels: we see the rape and we hear Ian's cries. Cate's rape, by contrast, is unseen and unheard making it harder to empathize with.
[442] Solga, "Rape, Realism and the Threshold of the Visible,"

But I have made my point. After war breaks out, after Ian is raped, the audience sees Ian dying from the wounds the soldier inflicted on him; he is understandably delirious and bellowing. And where is Cate? She's slipped out again; she's a shade like the once full bodied and full throated nymph, Echo. Well, she has gone out into the war-torn space of London in order to get food and supplies. When she comes back to the hotel, she finds the wounded Ian. Cate is haggard; it is likely that she has had to barter her body for food. During the last pages of the play, Ian begs for the food Cate has acquired (remember how he forced Cate to eat?). He begs Cate to touch and comfort him before he dies (remember his many forced tactile interactions with her). Never do I sense in Ian's pitiable state or through his pitiable words that he has pity for anybody but himself. No doubt I am prejudiced in my opinions; he is 'blasted,' he is dying and to remember that Cate loathes his touch would be too great an act of memory; to acknowledge the similarity between his pain and Cate's pain would be too great an act of physical sympathy. Ian's violation has not necessarily gifted him with empathy, but let me be satisfied that he is no longer arrogant or lewd; he *asks* for the touch and the sustenance he once took—this is change enough.

It is at this point in the play—when Ian is bloody and broken and Cate is fading and affectless—that the one moment of tactile witnessing in the play occurs. Cate touches the begging, blind Ian. This touch is the gesture that ends the play; it is

a bodily gesture of acknowledgement, rather than erasure. As though he is a child, Cate gently tips Ian's head and pours food and gin into Ian's mouth.[443]

Keith Urban said "ethics can exist between wounded bodies" in Kane's plays.[444]And so it is that Kane's "Blasted" is a perfect, not too subtle example of this. These are the wounded bodies: Cate and Ian. These are the simple ethical gestures that evolve from the wounded bodies: Ian begins to worry about how Cate bartered for her food and Cate feeds Ian in a gesture of care. Perhaps bodies need to be wounded in order to touch each other with care because when the body is wounded, entirely blasted, it is no longer afraid. [445]

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[443] Just as a note, the play definitely veers off into the surreal in its final pages. Cate brings an abandoned baby into the hotel room. The baby dies and Ian eats it. Kane's stage directions also state that Ian 'dies with relief' just moments before he thanks Cate for feeding him. These last moments in the play are very brief (they make up, at most, a few pages); they are, no doubt, important and a more in-depth analysis of *Blasted* would likely consider these episodes. However, few of the critical essays on *Blasted* actually mention Ian's death and seeming resurrection. In my analysis of *Blasted* I have tried to give the play its due, but have also emphasized those parts of the play that seem most pertinent to my argument.

[444] Urban, "Ethics of Catastrophe,"

[445] Diamanda Galas, creator of her own extreme code of ethics, writes (imagine Galas' voice echoing and gong-like and the passage will sound infinitely more dramatic), "Listen ,man/It may soon be time/for you to Guard a Dying Man/Until the Angels come/Let's not chat about Despair/If you are a man (and not a coward)/You will grasp the hand of him denied by mercy/Until his breath becomes your own." Galas, *Shit of God*,

These lines particularly illuminate the characters interactions in "Blasted." The straightforward "Let's not chat about despair" reflects the minimal style on which Kane writes of rape, war and torture. Furthermore, the line reflects the difficulty of speaking about these occurrences (the vacuum where Cate's rape is sealed) and, perhaps, the ultimate futility of doing so. As I have previously argued, the language and experience of the body can not always be fully conveyed in speech or writing. I think this is why *Blasted* is equally as filled with stage direction as it is with dialogue. Cate's fainting spells and silence indicate her discomfort around Ian. Ian's tears as they fall from his blinded eyes convey the vulnerability of his tortured body more vividly than his pleas or cries. And Cate's final gesture in the play as she tips Ian's head to feed him more effectively speaks than any words of sympathy or reproach she could utter. It is the abjectness of Kane's plays that make some of her audience members and critics so uncomfortable. Kane herself once said that she thought of her plays as more kindred to performance art than traditional theater. The equal importance of the bodily

Cate's final gesture of the play is (pun intended) touching. Amidst all the torn bodies and violent gestures, it is the one moment in the play which makes me want to cry (Excuse my lack of sophistication. Let's try again. It is the one moment in the play that causes the viewer to have any substantial sympathetic affect. Let us examine why. Better?). It is also a moment that is almost ridiculously romantic. I am not speaking of "romantic" as in the "Romantic era," or "romance novels," but the kind of dramatic romance that causes Heathcliff to request to be buried in the same grave as Catherine; it is the romance of opera—grandiose, ridiculous, but moving all the same. Absurd like the final scene in *Grapes of Wrath*. I wonder if Kane knew this scene. It is the final scene of Steinbeck's novel and two dusty, starved bodies, the result of the financial depression, are fed on the breast milk of a new mother. This act, like Cate's final actions toward Ian, is a gesture of forced intimacy *and* compassion.

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gesture and the verbal dialogue in her plays as well as the often ambiguous stage directions in her plays give evidence of this.**)**

Now, I will take this last line of Galas' writing: "Until his breath becomes your own." The three characters in *Blasted*-- Cate, Ian and the unnamed soldier, each of whom have experienced being 'blasted' in their own way-- are forced to mingle, forced to touch; the play traps them in a raw intimacy which none of them has sought. Cate is forced to take in the breath and fluid of Ian, as Ian is forced to take in the breath and fluid of the soldier. The soldier is made sticky with Ian's blood as he gouges Ian's eyes out. In the last two pages of the play, the seepage of bodies becomes even more entangled. Ian's porous, fluids from his dying body fluid mixes with the blood trickling from between Cate's legs. His blasted body commingles with Cate's in an unwanted, but nevertheless very real communion. Is Kane saying what I think she is saying with these images? (What do you think, reader, of the unconscious seepage?) Is she saying that often forced bodily intimacy is the only way in which individuals can have *any* kind of real intimacy? Must people blast each other apart, wringing each organ dry of blood and puss before any meaningful physical interaction can be had? (Bronte's Heathcliff would undoubtedly agree).

For an author accused of brutality and pessimism, the ending of Kane's plays often acknowledge the possibility of love. "Each play," writes David Grieg in an introduction to Kane's collected plays, "was a new step on an artistic journey in which Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving landscapes: landscapes of loneliness, of power, of mental collapse and, most consistently, the landscape of love."[446] I would extend upon Grieg's statement by saying that each of Kane's plays maps these landscapes—violation, power, mental collapse and love—simultaneously. Like colored transparencies layered on top of one another, blue ink blending into black, black into red and so forth, the difference between each of these landscapes blurs. The bodily violence in Kane's plays is necessary in order for love—and the physical touch that might spring from it—to occur. The extreme, abject violence that the characters in "Blasted" are subjected to forces them to open to each other physically and emotionally. It is only when this opening—I would say wounding—has taken place that bodies can show pity and tenderness and a blurry, complicated painful kind of love.

Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: violence to others/violation to the self

"I will argue that rage is a political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, in narrative, in popular film, of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men. The relationship between imaginary

[446] Kane and Grieg, *Collected Plays*,

violence and "real" violence is unclear, contested, negotiable , unstable and radically predictable." [447]

Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is the first in a three book series written by the Swedish writer Stieg Larsson. The second book is titled *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* and the third book is *The Girl who Played with Fire.* When it was published (Sweden 2005; USA 2008) it was one of those pop culture sensations (you know, NY times Bestseller, beach book, book clubs etc.) in Sweden and America. The book was quickly made into a faithful movie rendition in Sweden by the director Niels Arden Oplev. *GWTDT* (abbreviated for convenience) is no ponderous minimal Kane play. It has action heroes, corrupt policemen, government cover-ups and sting operations. In short, it is fun. Think of *GWTDT* as a *Create Your Own Adventure* book with darker undertones. Much darker undertones. Off we go.

Before you start your own adventure, you must pick what kind of hero or heroine you want to be; there is no adventure without donning the proper persona. *Create Your Own Adventure* books are rather dated nowadays, but video games and computer avatars have continued where the books have left off. I know a middle-aged white woman whose heroic computer avatar is a young, handsome, gay black man; incidentally, the man is dreadlocked. The creator of this avatar claims that the avatar allows her the liberty of being who she imagines herself to be without the

[447] Halberstam, "Imagined Violence," 190.

physical pain and the economic cost of plastic surgery. Hold on to the word "imagine." I will come back to it later in this section. Pretend you are John Lennon.

With computer-generated avatars, you have a multitude of choices. The *Adventure* books are more limited and, perhaps, a bit more conventional. I will set out the choices for you. Your first choice is a Batman-like everyman who works at a corrupt corporation by day; his special power is his magically mutating hands. With these hands, he restores crumbling buildings by night. Your second choice is a self professed 'cat lady' who wears long, flowing skirt with holes and mumbles to herself in the company of other humans. When emotionally struck, she takes the two sides over her skirt, ties them above her head like a parachute and flies about town rescuing cats, rags, dogs and lizards and gives them to individuals living on the street. Your third and final choice is a leather-clad young woman who seems a trifle dull and a trifle mute, but is equipped with a photographic memory and a supercomputer that can discover any well kept secret. I'm rather partial to the "cat lady," but I am choosing for both of us (me and you, sad reader), so let's go with choice number 3, the punk computer geek. There is not too much surprise in this choice. Business suits and tattered skirts are not particularly fashionable. Leather is by far the coolest look for a hero. Consider the choice I made for you as lucky and start lacing up your combat boots. Her name is Lisbeth Salander and she is Swedish.

Lisbeth is a comic-like heroine. No less magical and no less of a caricature (the leather-clad costume has echoes of the big breasted, gun-toting *Tomb Raider*

video game heroine Lara Croft) than the spinning Spiderman or the muscled superman. Her superpower is her perfect visual recall, her unparalleled research skills and her quick, connective mind. Incidentally, she is also well studied in the art of boxing. Lisbeth is the über researcher, the undiscovered technological genius and her weapon of choice is, of course, the computer. She is a thoroughly modern (or postmodern if you prefer) heroine. It is far more powerful to be able to scale figurative walls of secret information hidden in the internet then to scale the literal walls of buildings.

It's the second scene of *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the scene when we are introduced to our leather clad heroine, Lisbeth Salander. You only see her back; her frame is narrow; she is hooded and wears boots and a studded coat. It's a clever shot. Her facelessness makes her mysterious, as most adventures are. And her layers of clothing and hasty retreat from the camera/audience in the shot indicate her extreme reserve and her extreme distrust of other people. When you do see a frontal shot of Lisbeth, her exact features are also difficult to discern since she is covered in gothy black make up, silver rings and tattoos.[448] Larsson is not in any way a master stylist and his symbolism is as blunt as a bright red tie on a presidential candidate. Lisbeth's layers of clothing, her second 'leather' skin, are clearly meant to signify her emotional reserve and her psychological remoteness. Like "The Piano Teacher's" Erika Kohut, Lisbeth's mouth puckers inward and her eyes are hooded, wary.

[448] See Appendix D, Figure 39

You might think Lisbeth's 'sidekick,' the Robin to her Batman, is the second protagonist of Larsson's trilogy, the indefatigable journalist and 'harmless' womanizer Mikael Blomquist. But you would be wrong. Her sidekick is her Mac computer or, when that is not available, her palm pilot. The gleaming metal of the palm pilot and the silver edges of her computer meld seamlessly into the silver rings of Lisbeth's hands. Her computer is a limb, an organ, an essential part of her body. She is Cyborgian. But, then, what superhero is not a Cyborg? Part of the superhero charm is that they superheroes are never entirely 'human.' Their powers are so extraordinary that they seem mechanical, robotic-- Cyborgian. In Larsson's final book, *The Girl who Played with Fire*, Lisbeth becomes permanently Cyborgian. A bullet is imbedded in her brain (a microchip, a flash drive) and can not be taken out. Skin grows around metal as her brain heals.

Significantly, in terms of my thinking for this part of the chapter, almost all superheroes are violent. In fact, it is partly this violence that leads to the discovery of their origins, their psychology or both. Remember Superman and how he discovers that he is not really from a small farm town in American but actually from the planet Krypton? Superhero stories are stories of self-origin, of 'self discovery' through sudden action and often inexplicable powers. Physical violence inflicted on the superhero and on others by the superhero is always necessary for the origin story to be complete. I point this out not to make a general commentary about the violence of heroic figures in our culture but to give support to my argument and further to claim

that my argument about the usefulness of acting violently towards others is neither new nor unusual. It is only through multiple instances of doing violence to other bodies that Lisbeth is able to construct a narrative of herself.

Lisbeth's costume or 'clothing skin' are also an indication (and, again, it is an unsubtle one) of her marginalized status in Swedish society. Her mohawked, died hair contrasts with the fresh scrubbed blondness of her fellow citizens in the subway. Later we learn that Lisbeth was placed in a mental hospital for defending her mother against her abusive father. At the age of 24 she is still a ward of the state and is required to have a guardian. We also learn that she repeatedly tried to tell doctors, social workers and religious figures of her mother's abuse but was ignored (deliberately it seems). So she stops talking. When people ask her questions, particularly people in a position of authority, she doesn't answer them. There are numerous examples of this in all three books of Larsson's trilogy. When the villainous Dr. Teleborian, the psychiatrist assigned to the 13 year old Lisbeth's case, refuses to believe Lisbeth's tale of abuse, Lisbeth simply stops talking to him. She is tied up and put in solitary confinement for days at a time, but her mouth remains sealed.

There is an undoubted aggression to Lisbeth's silence, similar in nature to the aggressiveness of her mohawked hair being sculpted into dagger-like points or the silver spikes on her leather jacket. But like the spikes and the skin and the second skin of her leather jacket, Lisbeth's silence is practical. It protects her from the

insensitive intrusion of the doctors, nurses and social workers who seem to willfully misunderstood her and deliberately harm her. Lisbeth's silence acknowledges the failure of the spoken word to accurately convey her feelings of frustration and fear. Moreover, it is rooted in the wisdom of experience; it has been the case, as in the example of her relationship with Dr. Teleborian, that when she speaks, no one listens. She has learned the treachery of language, its ability to be changed, skewed or simply ignored by those who possess more authority than she does. So, like the self-harmers who carve into their own skin or like the graffiti artist Rev who painted his story in a dark tunnel, Lisbeth uses her own, non-verbal language to communicate.

It is the language of violence, physical and intellectual violence; it is a language that proves exponentially more effective than verbal monologue or chit chat. Lisbeth's experience with the inefficacy of verbal language and the power of violence and physical language brings to mind the annoying and often untrue adage "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Well, in Lisbeth's experience this is partly true. Her own words have no effect, but her violence does.

Let me sketch out the instances where violent touch is occurring, what its effects are and how these acts of violence help Lisbeth protect and speak for herself. Through these acts of harm towards others, Lisbeth, like individuals who self-harm, is able to witness for herself and discover the often mysterious connection between the events in her life.

It is a scene of violence played out over and over again on TV, in movies, in "real life," (however you may choose to distinguish or define 'the real' in your life). Lisbeth is raped. Raped by her guardian, the colorless lawyer, Nils Burman. This is the scene in *GWTDT t*hat make some feminist critics cringe; they see the rape as one more instance of fetishizing sexual violence. As the newspaper *The Guardian* notes: "It has been universally panned as anti-woman." [449] I disagree with this; the rape is brutal, showing very little of Lisbeth (or Burman's) naked bodies; the bedroom in which the rape occurs is neither luxurious nor sordid; it is decorated in brown upon tan, it is the essence of neutrality and forgetability. Burman himself is the human equivalent of brown and tan décor. He has no gleam of the villain and no dash of the debonair older man. He emits no aura of power; he is decidedly middle-aged, with bad skin, thinning hair and a shelf full of binders filled with run of the mill legal memoranda. I can't think of one particular aesthetic or sensory detail that strikes me as alluring or titillating in any way. Burman is rather like Kane's Ian—utterly banal, seizing on the last shred of 'authority' he has by violating a younger and physically weaker female. The banality of the rapist and the rape are, in fact, what make them so disturbing. They are such common occurrences that even the women who experience the pain and horror of them are not surprised when they experience them. As Larsson writes of Salander, "Salander did not know a single girl who at some point had not been forced to perform some sort of sexual act against her will...There

[449] ?, The Guardian?

was no point whimpering about it."[450] This type of violation—'violent touch'—is expected.

But let's not forget that Lisbeth has her superhero skills to rely on. She does not tell the police of her rape; as established earlier, she neither trusts authority nor does she trust verbal language. The fact that a young girl in a dependent position would be touched violently by her guardian is presumably expected; the fact that she should reciprocate that violent touch back upon her rapist is much more unexpected. Using retaliatory violence is the only way for her regain control of her skin and, in the most literal sense, 'her life.'As Salander's guardian, Burman has unprecedented power over her life. He writes monthly reports documenting her behavior and, if he sees fit, can control her social activities and her finances. Burman's sexual violation of Lisbeth's body is a culmination of all the many liberties he has taken with the 'body of her life.' Salander's retaliatory violence—and the self-harm that comes from this retaliatory violence--also allows her to witness for herself in multiple ways.

There is a surprising parallel between the scene of Lisbeth's rape and the scene where Lisbeth uses physical violence against Burman. I don't know if Larsson intentionally wrote the scenes in a kind of "parallelism," but the mirroring of their mirroring is unexpectedly satisfying. Lisbeth's physical violence towards Burman allows her to transfer the violences committed on her body to Burman's body. I would have liked to call the parallel scenes of violence between Burman and Lisbeth

[450] Larsson, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,*

"doubled penetrations," but after consultation, it was suggested that the phrase was too obviously pornographic and, moreover, that the phrase was amusing. I feel that both the pornographic and comic connotations of "doubled penetrations" are apt. However, bowing to wisdom, I will rename the parallelism of these two scenes "mirrored violences." It is a less effective name, but more respectable. Let me sketch the particulars of these mirrored scenes for you.

In the first scene, the scene of Lisbeth's rape, Burman punches her in the face to incapacitate her and then holds her down on the bed; Burman then proceeds to tie Lisbeth more securely to the bed. After this action, Larsson's narrative of the rape becomes increasingly less detailed and less vividly imagined. In Oplev's cinematic version of this scene, we see about ten seconds of the rape itself (sans pictures of graphic body parts) and then the visual of the rape fades and about ten seconds of Lisbeth's harrowing–and in no way erotic—screaming ensues. The next image we see is of Lisbeth dressed and silent leaving Burman's apartment. She limps back to her apartment and slips into a tub of bathwater.

In the "mirrored" scene, which takes place a few days after Lisbeth's initial rape, Lisbeth substitutes Burman's fist punch for the electric punch of a taser; instead of tying Burman to a bed, she ropes him to the floor in fetal position. Instead of raping Burman with a human penis, she penetrates him with a plastic dildo. At the scene of Lisbeth's rape, Burman makes it explicitly clear that her physical, legal and financial person are literally 'in his hands.' Similarly, during Lisbeth's scene of

revenge, she makes it clear that unless Burman completely 'washes his hands of her,' she will damage his body and his reputation.

I think Lisbeth protects herself with her "metal skin" in the same way that self-harmers protect themselves with a double skin: the wounded skin hidden from the world and the smooth one that is displayed to the world. Skin is mostly soft, penetrable. If Lisbeth were to touch Burman with her soft under skin, she might not be able to transfer her wounds onto his wounded body; indeed, if she felt her fingers being submerged into Burman's skin, she might feel as though she was making herself and her body vulnerable to Burman for the second time. The metal of the taser, the needle and the dildo and the leather of her jacket and boots are not soft; metal and tough leather are not as easily penetrated; they penetrate. Though it may not need saying, the metal objects, in particular, and the way in which Lisbeth manipulates them, are undeniably phallic. In some sense, Lisbeth takes a part of Burman's body and uses it against him; the phallic power that Burman claimed over Lisbeth is, in Lisbeth's hands, a power that humiliates him.

These scenes are not only scenes of violence towards Burman, but they inflict a violence of Lisabeth. After her rape, Lisbeth gets her own tattoo—a tattoo right across the ankle bone; the tattoo is a type of rope, rather like the rope that Burman used to paralyze her body. I can understand that the pain of the tattoo allow her to reassert authority over her own body. I understand too that the visual of the tattoo and the pain of its creation will serve as a physical remembrance of her violation.

There are other self-harms: Lisabeth listens to the recording of her rape at least twice: once, right after the rape and again, while Burman listens to it. This auditory experience must be horrifying—Lisabeth must feel every scream rattle in her throat and every sound must wrack her body. Lisabeth also willingly re-enters Burman's apartment—a space where her body was viciously violated. Yes, she re-enters with a taser and a video camera and a rope, but her actions are still risky. By some failure of equipment: an unworking taser, a badly tied knot, Burman might once again harm Lisabeth. Just placing her body in the same space as Burman must be a self-harm; feeling his stare, his breath on her; hearing his voice; seeing the body that did her so much damage.

A few readings of Lisabeth's 'self-harm' come to mind. Lisabeth can only take her revenge on Burman by also inflicting violence on herself. Distressingly, the rape binds them together in some way. Lisabeth can not tattoo Burman without touching him; And she can not play the recording of her rape for Burman without hearing it as well. Lisabeth's vengeance is also the only way that she can claim her autonomy back from Burman. She endures his presence temporarily, so that she will never have to endure it again.[451]

I cannot leave the examination of these parallel scenes without focusing on another penetrative device, the most powerful of all Lisbeth's instruments—a video

[451] This concept could be examined in greater detail. However, for now, its enough to observe the interesting ways in which violence to others and self violence intermingle.

camera. In previous meetings with Burman, Lisbeth was asked explicit questions about her sexuality and in one meeting was forced to perform oral sex on Burman. Unbeknown to Burman, when Lisbeth comes to his apartment on the night of the rape, she has a hidden camera in her backpack. With the hidden eye of her camera, Lisbeth penetrates Burman's body and the desires that body has; essentially, Lisbeth violates the privacy of Burman's body with her camera. Because Burman is unaware that Lisbeth has a camera, the camera and its record could be seen as a visual rape of his body. Again, a type of penetrating phallic eye.

From my admittedly biased viewpoint, the camera's violation of Burman is fully justifiable given his previous, unsolicited penetrations of Lisbeth. The camera's violation is also a violation born out of necessity. Lisbeth's sturdy clothing functions as a second skin and the taser and tattoo needle function like unbreakable steel limbs. The camera acts as a second pair of eyes. Through the secret eye of the camera, Lisbeth is able to witness for her own experience. And, because of her mistrust of verbal language, the camera eye function as a way for others to witness for her. The first witness to the camera's recording is Lisbeth herself. It is as though she must rewatch the scene of her rape because she does not entirely trust the pain of her body. As alluded to, Lisbeth is most comfortable with electronic devices. At the beginning of the book, we learn that her one constant friend is named Plague; he is a fellow computer hacker and a shut-in who rarely ventures outside. Lisbeth's primary form of communication with others socially, for her job and as she researches more deeply

into her own history, is electronic and mechanical. She trusts the eye of the camera more than her own eyes. More accurately, the eyes of the camera or the computer or whichever electronic device she is using ***are*** her eyes.

The second witness to the rape is Burman. As he lies tied up on the floor waiting for his tattooing to begin, Lisbeth shows him the video, thus forcing him to witness the brutality of his body against the pain of her own. Most video recording are not just visual, but auditory. Burman experiences his rape of Lisbeth through multiple senses: tacitly through the use of the rope, dildo and tattoo needle; visually, through the video and auditorialy by hearing her screams on the camera and listening to her threats. Burman's body relives his rape of Lisbeth in a similar way to which she experienced the rape; it fills his senses, engulfs his body and destabilizes the societal role he has imagined for himself. Take a breath and let's review why not only violence to the self—self-harm in its various manifestations—but violence to others can be a way in which to witness for the self. This violence is a necessary violence, one that coheres rather than fragments.

Lisbeth's necessary violence is "two-fold;" it is both directly and indirectly tactile. Her direct assaults on Burman's body allow her to shed some of her own wounded skin onto him. These direct assaults also cause Burman to feel physically vulnerable and helpless, transferring the emotions Salander had when she was raped onto Burman as well. Salander's "violation" of Burman's body goes even further by marking his skin with a tattoo needle and visually penetrating his sexual desire with

her camera. Through these acts of tactile violence, Lisbeth inverts the fabled "male gaze." Burman's naked body is on video, tied up and displayed to Lisbeth and, further, Lisbeth warns him that he will be constantly watched by her and the eye of her computer. Burman, the fusty middle-aged rapist, is caught in the net of what was once *his* male gaze. Lisbeth's violence also does something very literal to Burman's sexual prowess. I don't mean that she robs him of his symbolic phallic power—although she does this too—I think she robs Burman of the use of his actual penis and any sexual desire that the penis might have demonstrated. Lisbeth takes the penis, and the phallic power that comes with it, as her own. She robs Burman's body.

So in this scene of necessary violence you see Lisbeth's power, but you also see Burman's nakedness. His penis so proudly displayed during Lisbeth's rape is absent. Instead there is Lisbeth's dildo, tattoo needle and camera eye. Moreover the words of Burman's tattoo[452] make it nearly impossible for him to have sexual relationships with other women. Lisbeth's promise to Burman: that she will watch him and will release the video of her rape if he gives the merest sign of sexual activity. It might be interesting to note that after she robs Burman of his phallic

[452] A further note on tattoos.. The significance of tattoos is made obvious through the name of the first book in Larsson's series, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Interestingly—we never find out why—Lisbeth has a large colored dragon on her back. Perhaps this is because Larsson passed away before the final book of his trilogy was completed. But Lisbeth also has numerous other tattoos. She gets one of these tattoos immediately after her rape. The tattoo is a thin band around the ankle; I would venture to say that it, in some way, mirrors the rope that tied her hands and feet during the rape. The band is a reminder of the powerless position her body was placed in and the indent the rape left on her**.** Like self-harmers with their scars, Salander seems to use her tattoos as physical markers of significant life events.

power and sexual prowess, she also (at a later date and using a painfully obviously symbol) handles and hides his gun. Rape is significant because it's unfortunately ubiquitous. The violence that Lisbeth displays in reaction to her rape is a satisfying imaginative possibility. In some circumstances, violence can lead to knowledge and the possibility of a certain kind of freedom; for Lisbeth, the beginning of the knowledge she gains about her early life starts in ransacking Burman's computer and office after her rape. And without Burman's wagging phallus asserting its guardianship authority, Lisbeth is able to control her body, her finances and her relationships, sexual or otherwise. No airy heights then: I will content myself with introducing you to punk super heroines and displaced penises. Roar as you may.

Let's examine this line from Larsson: "the computer that had been so thoroughly penetrated."[453] The penetration, as I hope you might realize from my previous discussion of Lisabeth, is performed by Lisbeth and her unrivaled computer skills. Indeed, the word penetrating is often and unmistakably used when Larsson writes of Lisbeth's hacking—her great technical gift for tearing down 'firewalls,' privacy settings and codes of private citizens and public companies. Lisbeth's hacking, her penetration of the computer is, in many ways, the greatest act of violence that Lisbeth enacts in the *GWDT* series. Being a contemporary superhero, she seems to be able to find out any and all information through her technological penetration, information that the objects of her research are often unaware of. It is partly how she

[453] Larsson, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,*

controls Burman and his actions. She penetrates his computer and finds out that he has illegal offshore financial accounts that she can expose. Importantly, Lisbeth's penetrative hacking is also what allows the case that the journalist, Blomquist, is working on to be solved. Most importantly, her 'penetration' through the computer, through her own intelligence and physical prowess (she shoots, she punches, she tattoos) allows her put together a cohesive story of her own life.

At the end of the *GWDT*, Lisbeth's mother, so severely abused that she has been placed in a nursing home, dies. Of her death, Larsson writes "her mother's death meant that the wound would never heal, since she would never now get an answer to the questions she had wanted to ask."[454] The juxtaposition of her mother and wounding is significant. There are two wounds here: the open wound Lisbeth has mysteriously acquired in the past (a past that is as mysterious to the reader as to Lisbeth); the second wound is the wounded, broken body of Lisbeth's mother—a wound that if effectually probed may yield up the secrets to Lisbeth's wounding. In both cases, mother's and daughter's wounds act as conduits to "self knowledge."

But Lisbeth's mother does die and Lisbeth must find another way of discovering the secrets to her past; she proceeds to do this through more violence. The violence perpetrated by her and onto her, each wound, and each act of violence seems to take her closer to a strange conspiracy about her life. A brief list of the injuries Lisbeth undergoes in the second book: she is punched, kicked and shot at

[454] Larsson, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 54.

multiple times. Less directly physical, but no less intrusive, she is falsely accused of killing two reporters; is smeared in the press as a devil-worshiping, prostitute lesbian; and finally has a disastrous encounter with her long-lost criminal of a father.

It feels more like (and I hesitate to use this hackneyed phrase) self-discovery. Perhaps, this is because it is a crime novel, a fast paced "thriller"—a genre in which each violence, each threat is threaded with pleasurable suspense. As in many thrillers (think of the popular Bourne novels and movies), Lisbeth's past is truly discovered through these violences. The shredding of the skin, rape, forceful tattooing, burning, and bullets inside the head paradoxically make Lisbeth's history more comprehensible. Here, I am defining Lisbeth's self as her mysterious history. The increasing violence does lead to "self-discovery" for Salander, but these discoveries are pertinent to the reading/watching audience. On the increasingly battered body of Salander, the reader is able to put together a bloody, but more or less complete mosaic of Salander's history and the murky history of the government secrets.

Appendix A



Figure 1: Janet Frame

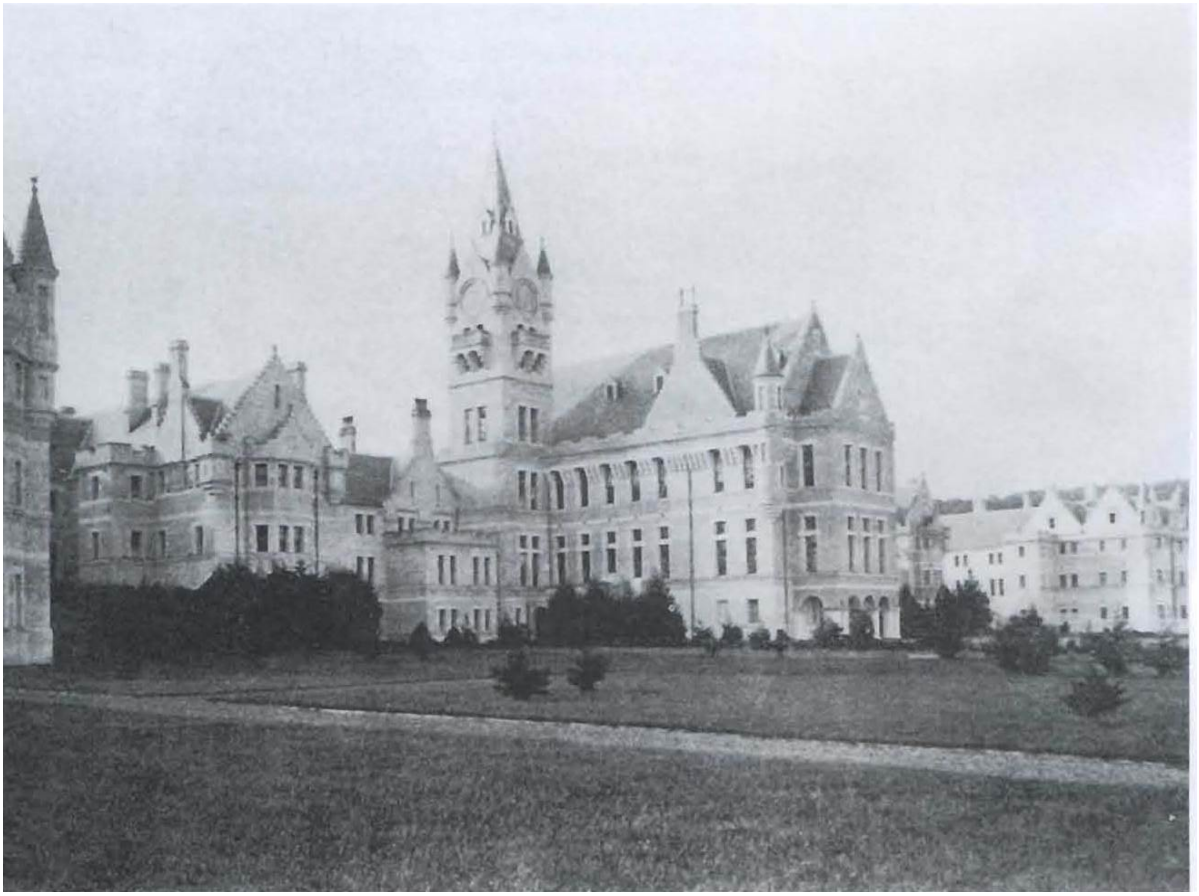


Figure 2: Seacliff Mental Hospital

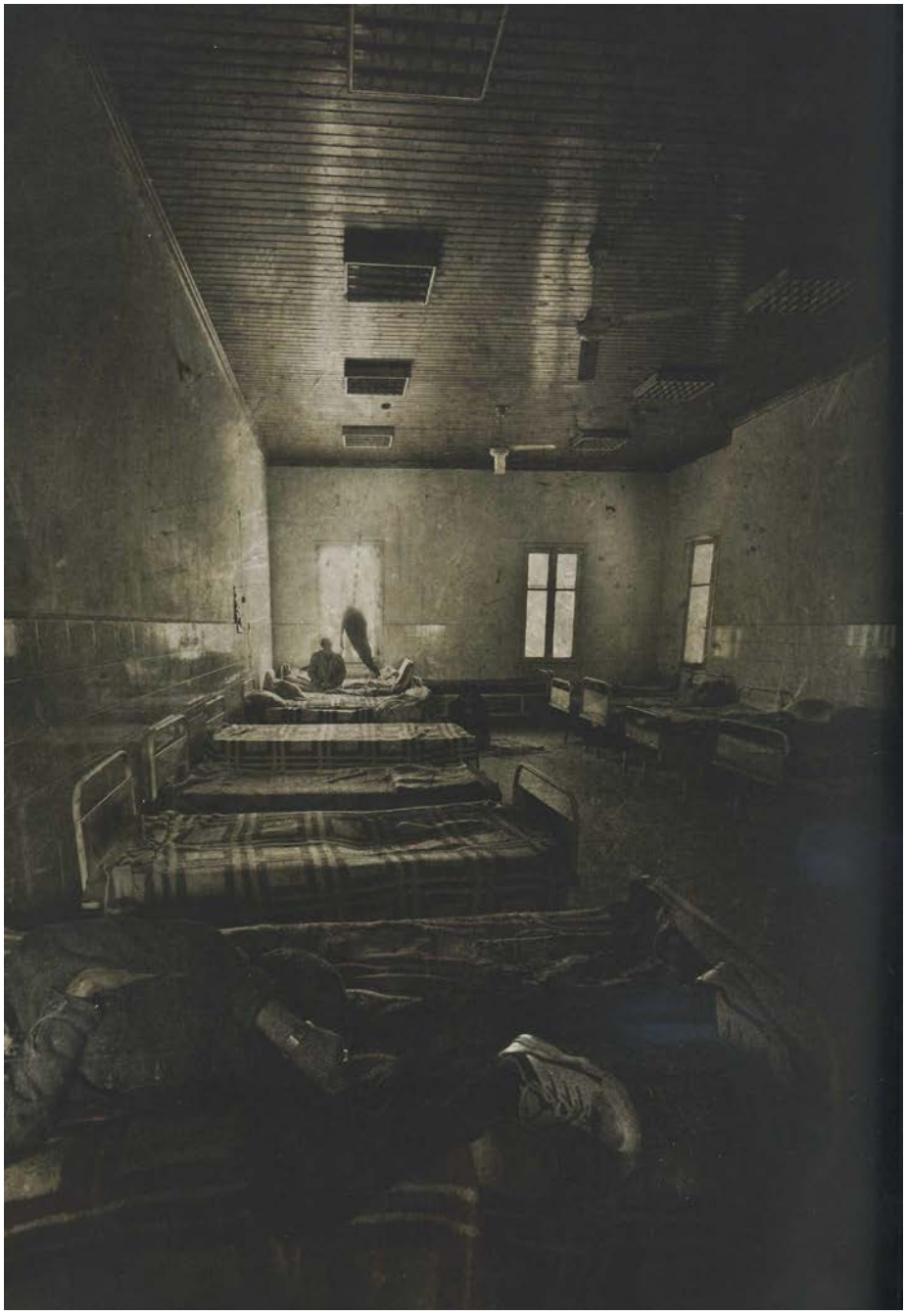


Figure 3: Nermine Hammam's "Metanoia" in Eyemazing, Issue 4, 2009

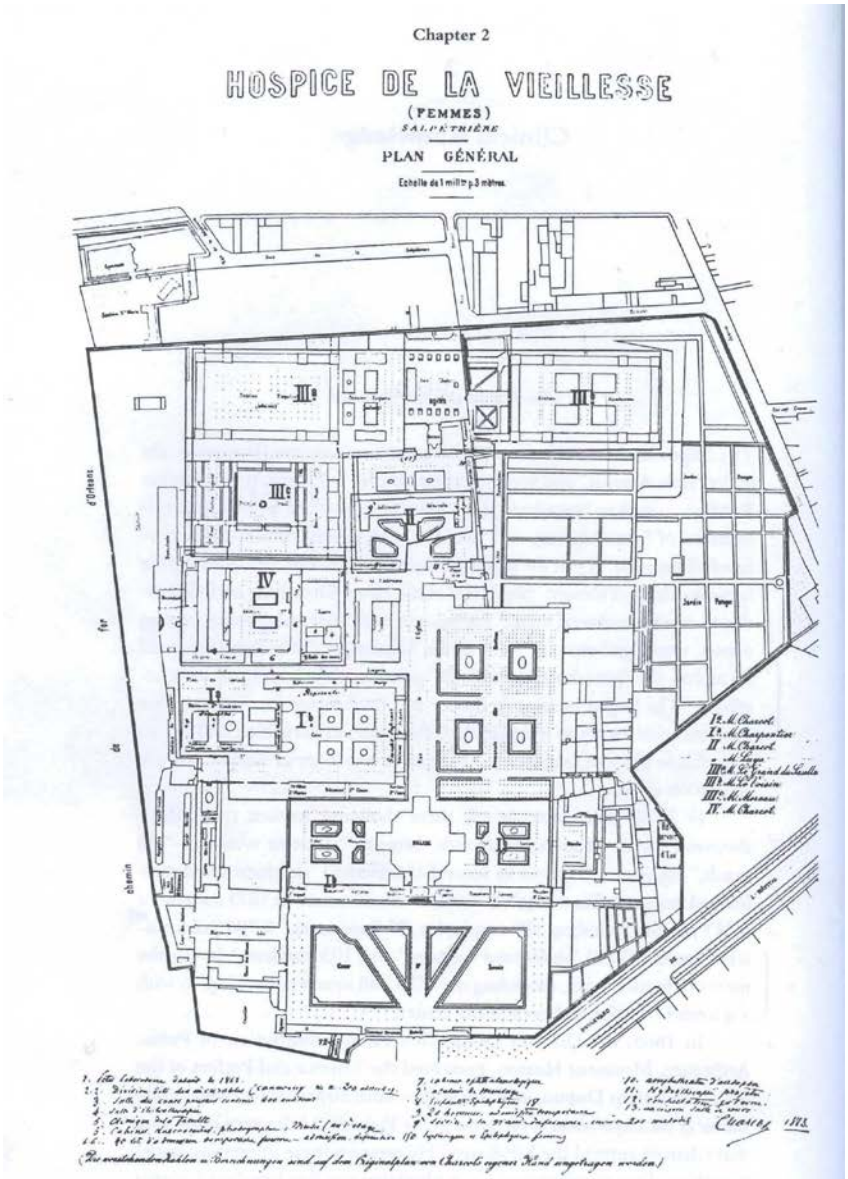


Figure 4: Map of Salpetriere in Didi-Huberman

Appendix B



Figure 5: Woodman's "House 4"



Figure 6: Woodman's "Untitled"



Figure 7: Woodman's "Untitled"



Figure 8: Woodman's "Space 2"

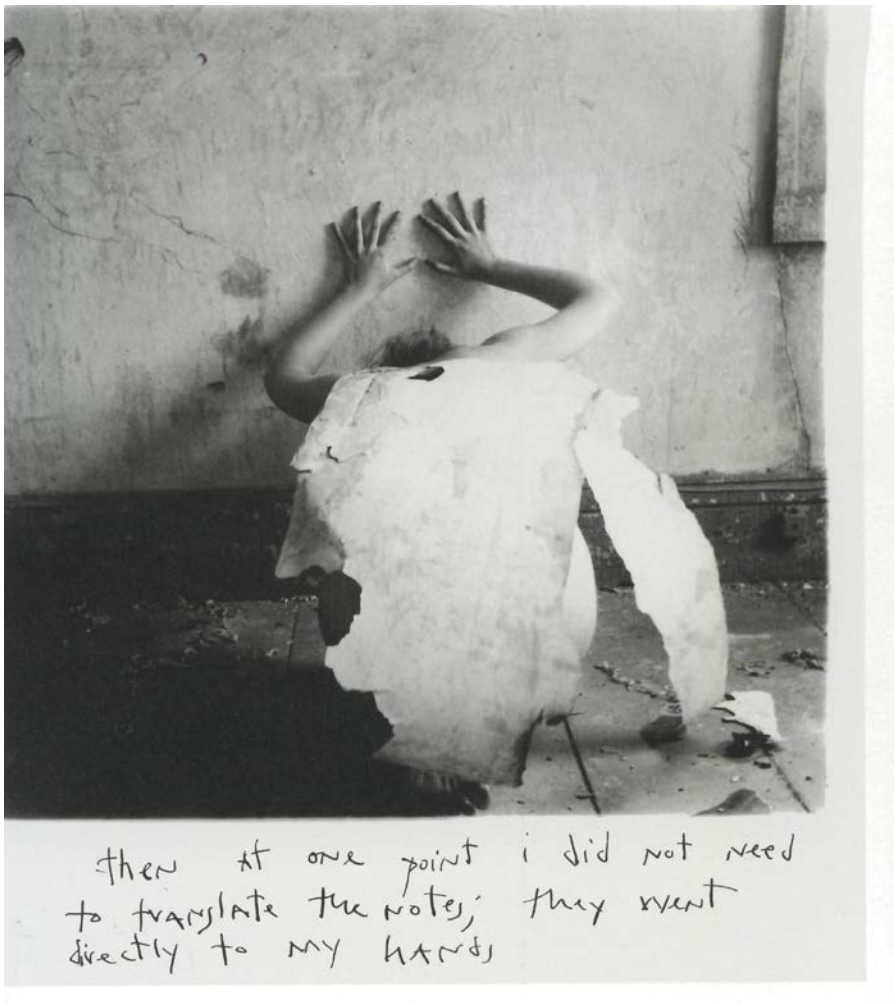


Figure 9: Woodman's "I did not need to translate"



Figure 10: Schneemanns "Interior Scroll"

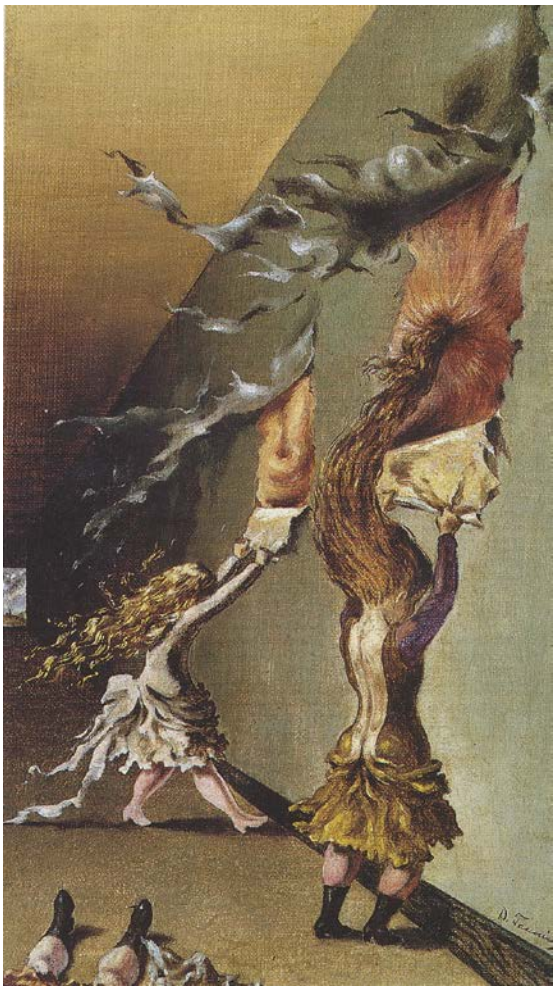


Figure 11: Tanning's"Children's Games"



Figure 12: Woodman's "House 3"



Figure 13: Gaskell's "Half-Life"



Figure 14: Woodman's "Providence"



Figure 15: Carrington's "Self-Portrait"



Figure 16: Woodman's "NY 1979-80"

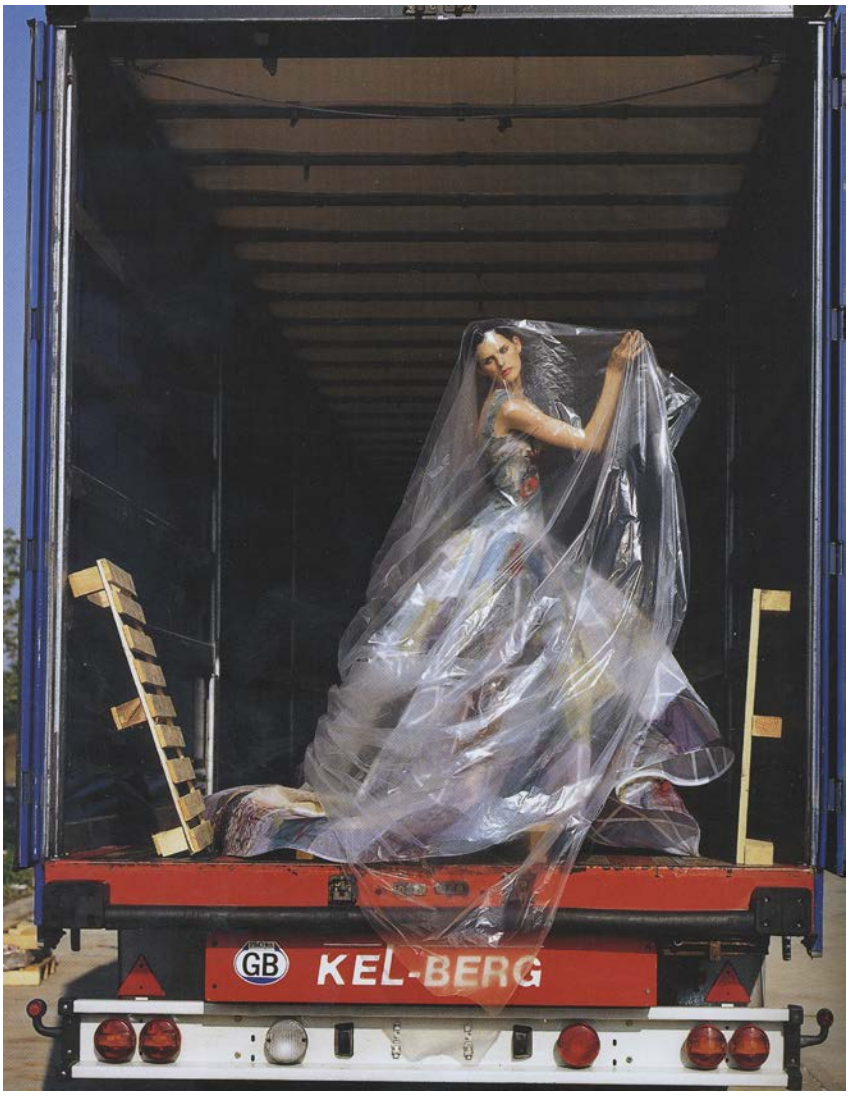


Figure 17: Tim Walker's photograph in Vogue



Figure 18: Cindy Sherman's film still 37

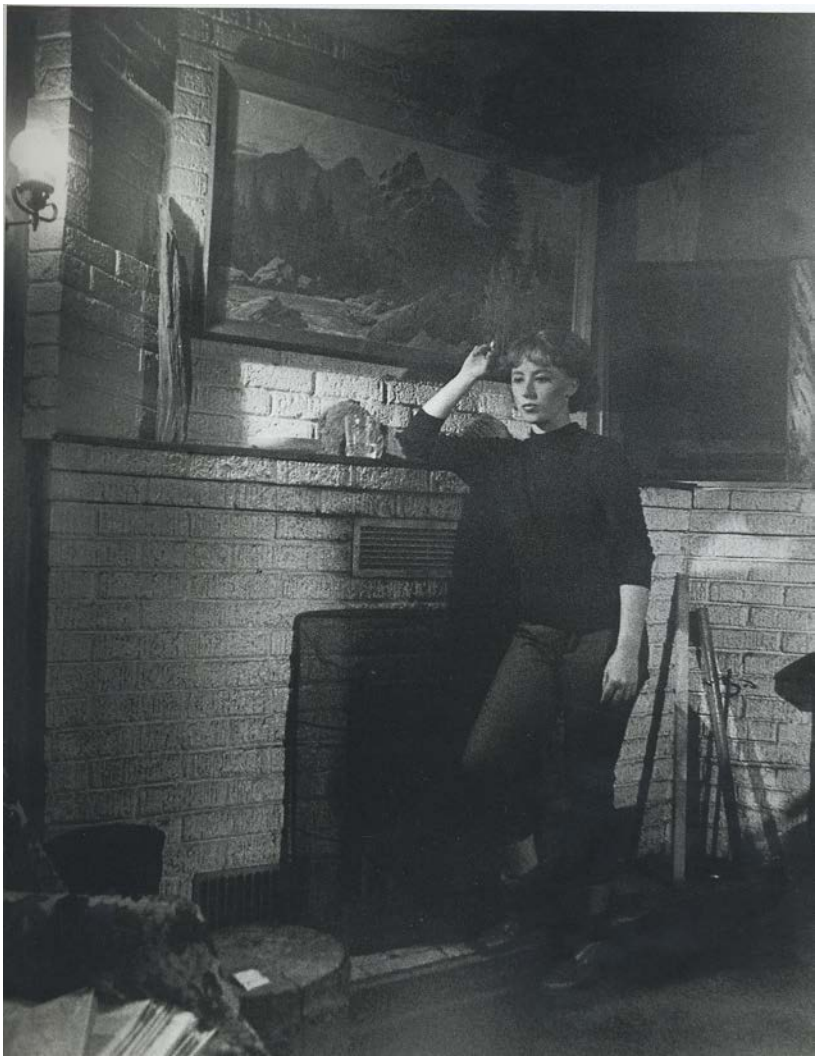


Figure 19: Sherman's film still 33



Figure 20: "Dazed and Confused"



Figure 21: Woodman's "Self-Portrait at Age 13"



Figure 22: "Untitled"

Appendix C

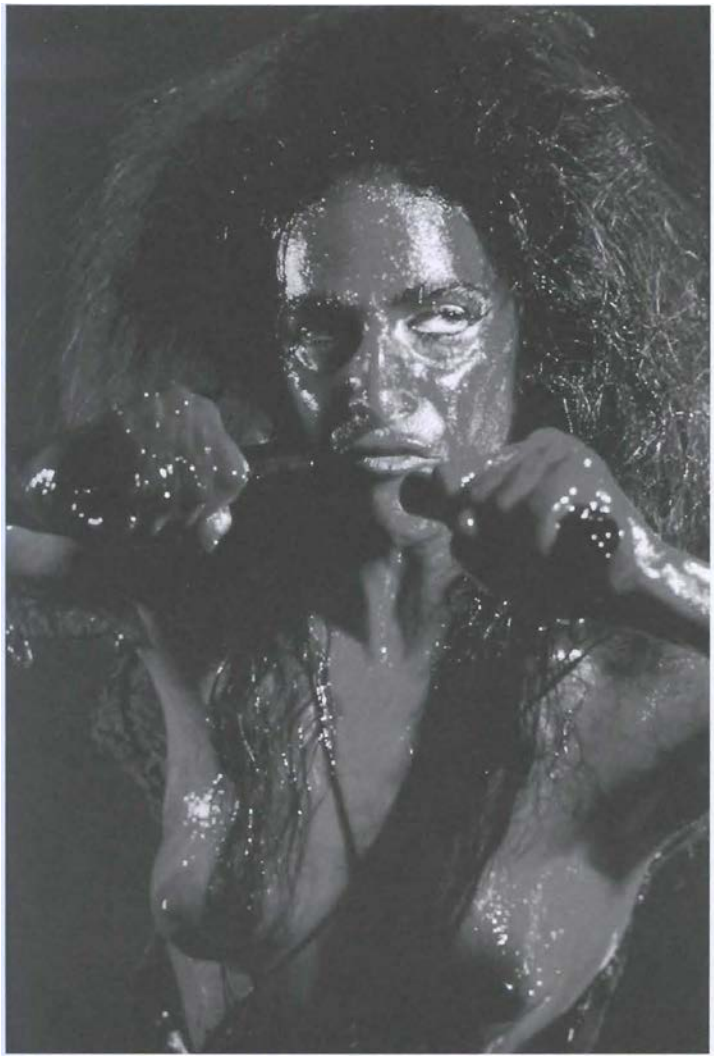


Figure 23: Galas performing her Mass



Figure 24: Abramovic performing "Rhythm O"

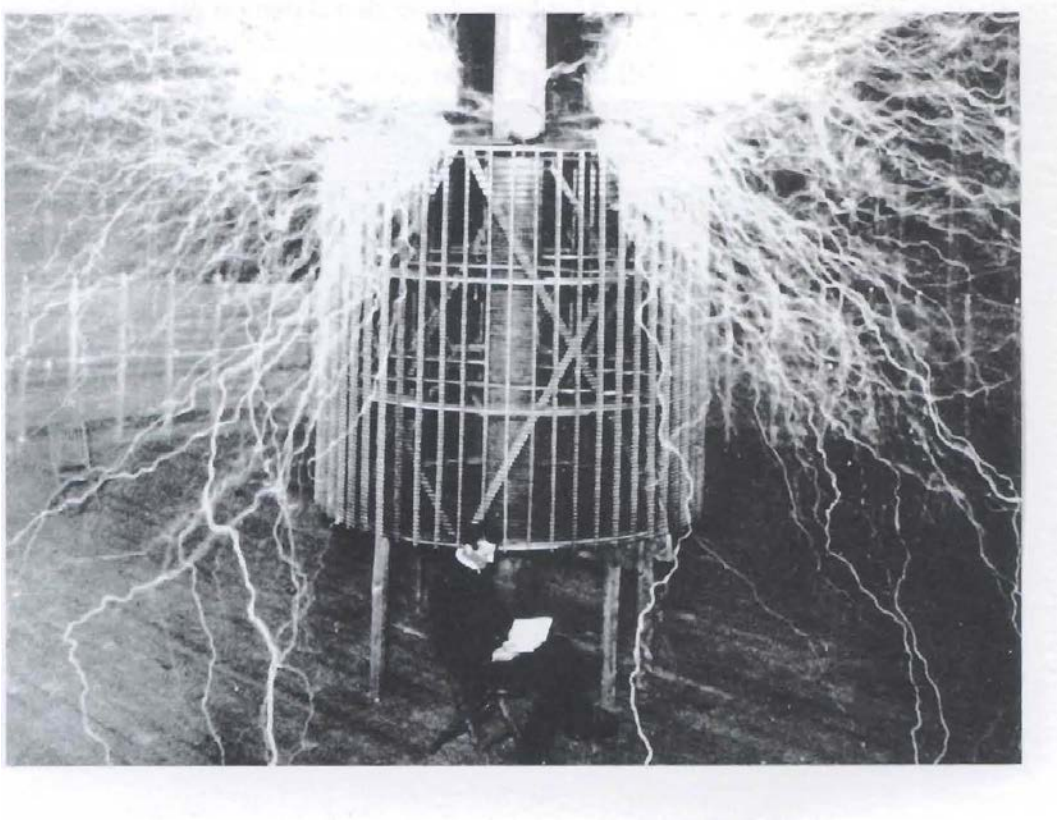


Figure 25: Tesla and his coil

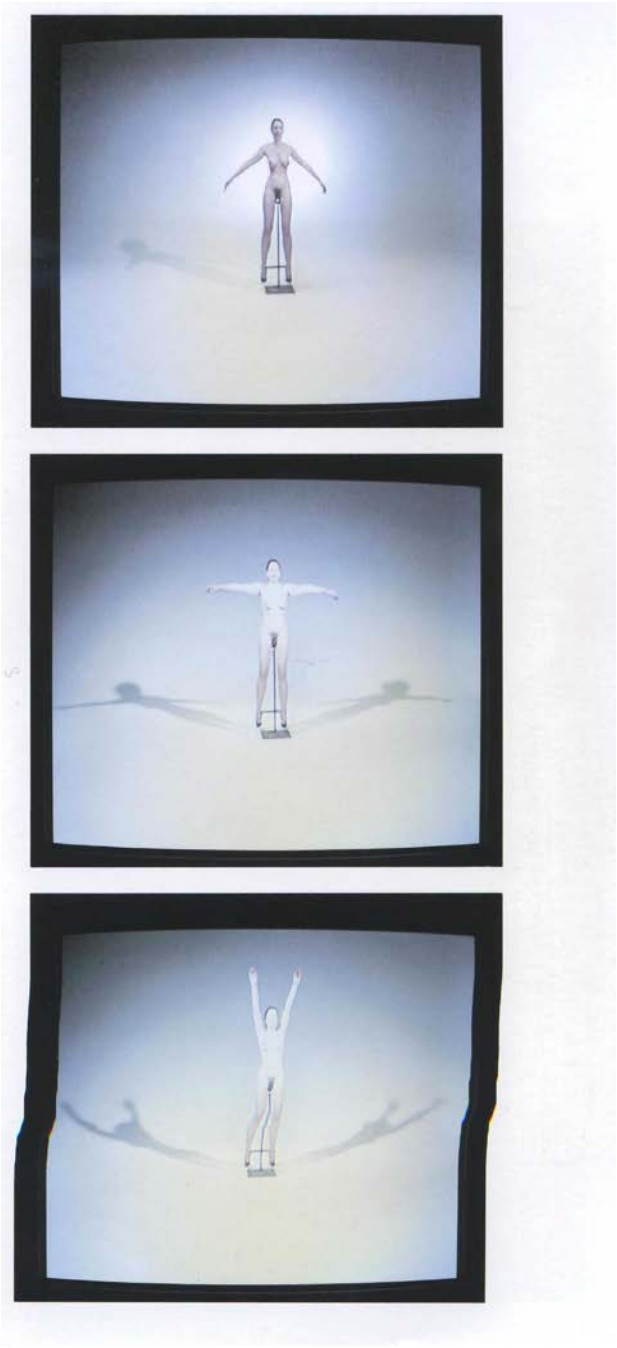


Figure 26: Abramovic's "Luminosity"

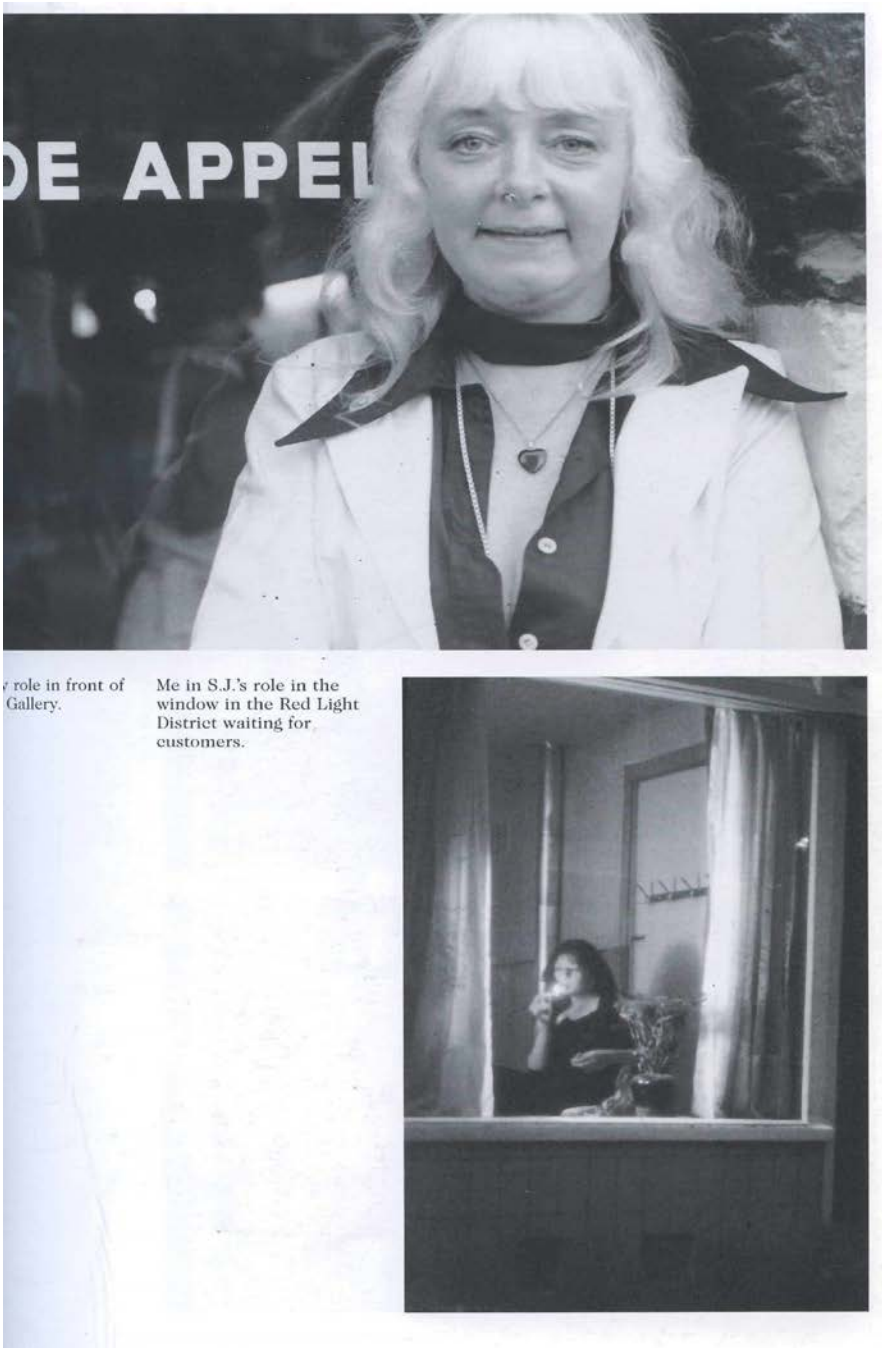


Figure 27: Abramovic's "Role Exchange"



Figure 28: A performance of "Nightsea Crossing"



Figure 29: Abramovic's "Balkan Baroque"



Figure 30: Abramovic performing Export's "Genital Panic"



Figure 31: Abramovic's "The Artist is Present"

Appendix D

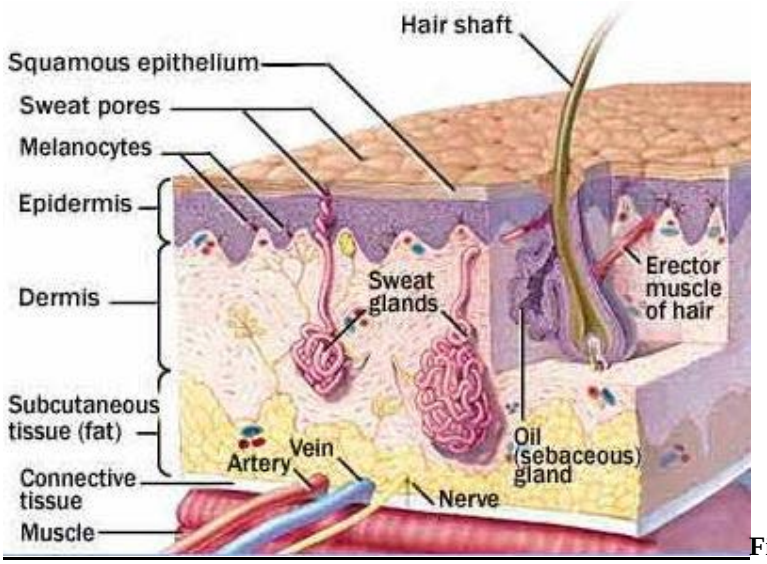


Figure 32: The Skin



Figure 33: "Black Swan"



Figure 34:"In My Skin"



Figure 35: Esther Dinner



Figure 36: Louis Pembroke's artwork



Figure 37: last scenes of "In My Skin"



Figure 38: "The Piano Teacher"



Figure 39: Noomi Rapace as Salander

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