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by

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Giving Ground

A Personal Account of Voice, Movement and Femininity in Texas

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Report

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Dedication

To my family, for teaching me how to tell stories. In memory of Gelmut.

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Abstract

Giving Ground

A Personal Account of Voice, Movement and Femininity in Texas

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

Supervisor: Jeff Williams

My work springs from the place where my body touches Texas. In my thesis report I attempt to lay out my embodied experience of living here and how this intersects with phenomenology and Butler's theory of the displaced feminine, whilst describing some of the work I have made in response to these experiences. I will talk about, body, voice, ground, femininity, movement and animation, excavating the common threads and desires that run through my work.

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Ground

We lift off the tarmac and I lose ground. I lose the literal ground, the ground I was raised on—the particular verdant fine grasses, the rich wet crumbles of deep brown earth shot through with the pink and blue veins of accidentally severed earthworms—and, with wrenching rapidity, I lose my grounding; my *Grund* (reason, purpose; that which lies at the foundation). My assumptions, my fears, my ambitions have become groundless and now only exists as untethered habits of mind. Pushing off from the the horizontal to the vertical—like a swimmer flipped 90 degrees—I become re-oriented. For a moment I will be weightless, the normative tethers slack; then, with a wrenching and a vibration, the world will *right itself*, we will touch down, will touch others in the jostle for hand luggage, we will touch them in the thirsty line for immigration control at LAX, waiting to evidence our grounds for legal entry into America, where we stand for so long that children around us begin to faint and paramedics rush them off to be rehydrated like astronaut food

THE BODY

The body is the thing you cannot touch; or rather where touching flips into being touched, for

if my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: The moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand.¹

The body is untouchable. Our sensory and our intellectual understanding of the world is grounded in the body—yet it is out of scope of its own narrative, its own analysis². The ground of the body is necessary for touching to occur³, it is the precondition for the establishment of scope. The body is uncontained by the system of reference that is grounded in it; the body overflows the boundaries of scope⁴. When body/ground *is* figured in scope—that is, whenever it enters discourse—then the body is also always already ‘fully erased by its very representation’⁵. The body becomes ‘spectral’⁶ haunting the discourse that has displaced it.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 141.

² We see an illustration of this watching Nancy Holt visibly struggling to think over the slightly delayed feedback of her own voice in *Boomerang*. ‘I think, that it makes my thinking slower’ (1:01), she is always ahead and behind herself, unable to observe herself without being displaced by her own image.

Serra, Richard. *Boomerang*. 1974. In Video Data Bank. Accessed July 2, 2018

³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 31.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter, On the Limits of “Sex”*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 39.

⁵ Butler on Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter*, 36.

⁶ Butler on Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter*, 36.

In Circulation

Two hours later we are still standing in line. It is a minor inconvenience for me—nothing compared to what people of color, people who don't speak English or people who are undocumented face. This is just part of the low grade discomfort tax that is exacted from all aliens in the US; the extra time you have to spend at the DPS, the hours doing complicated taxes because you can never apply for anything online, the background insecurity that comes with long work permit processing times, application fees, the lawyers fees. Eventually we will be processed by humorless men who have been trained to be aggressive, taught how to nip that little smile in the eyes you give a tired stranger in the bud.

In Austin I once saw a police training exercise. I was on my way to take my theory driving test. My dad was visiting. He had insisted we take the bus. It was over a hundred degrees and the sun was beating down on us. We were walking through one of those industrial areas a ways out of town, when we saw them. The officers were arranged on a small green patch in the shade of a tall windowless building, holding bright blue plastic machine guns. They were taking turns to shout at each other to GET OUT OF THE CAR NOW GET OUT OF THE CAR NOW ON THE GROUND HANDS ON YOUR HEAD OR I WILL SHOOT YOU.

After customs we are released into circulation. I feel like one of those radioactive tracers they use in diagnosis; both inconspicuous and iridescent in my whiteness, trackable by USCIS; injected into the stream of people being belched out into arrivals, tracing the outline of the otherwise invisible grounding of this new world. For now, I have an immigration status half-life of about two years after which, partially decayed, I will be flushed from the national body.

Voice

My voice, once my primary medium of communication in both life and work has become flattened out into a cliché of Britishness. When I speak, eyes glaze over until the obligatory ‘I love your accent!’⁷ without a single word having made it through the haze of fetishized colonial fantasy; women in primly buttoned cardigans vie with the cast of *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey* for interpretive dominance (I have since learned to harden my vowels and readjust my vocabulary). Britishness—especially the vaguely upper class (read non-cockney) British accent—acts as a whitening and a feminizing agent. The sophistication it implies is demure, understated, ordered⁸. I have an extra stratum of privilege, of deference given to me, a heightened expectation of quaint grace and emotional continence. I do not quite have gravitas—that manly tension on my vocal chords produced by the ‘testicles functioning as loom weights’⁹; but I do have the ‘Silence [that] is the kosmos [good order] of women’¹⁰, not so much in my lack of speech but in the ‘good order’ of my phonemes. The ‘silence’ is never so much a withholding, but a supporting murmur, a soothing buzz. Wow, that’s so interesting. Really? I never knew....The gentle affirmative chatter that the imperative discourse of dominance is grounded in.

⁷ This is the sanitized, over the counter version of this remark, less G rated versions are common.

⁸ as though, after careful consideration of points made to me in a conversation, I would say something like ‘To do nothing is the hardest job of all’.

⁹ Anne Carson on Aristotle, “The Gender of Sound” in *Glass Irony and God*, (New York: New Direction Books, 1995), 119.

¹⁰ “Carson on Sophocles , “The Gender of Sound”, 127

Contemporary denigrations of women's voices focus on uptalk, run-on sentences and vocal fry¹¹ (how will anyone ever take you seriously?), characteristically female sounds that are perceived as 'too light or too shrill to command respect'¹² but when female voice occupies a more 'masculine' commanding role it becomes 'unbounded'¹³—the woman swelling past herself into something grotesque and monstrous.

Carson singles out the *ololyga*, a 'sound representing either intense pleasure or intense pain', as the archetypal female cry. In *The Gender of Sound* Carson deals primarily with the inordinate, inappropriate and threatening sounds of women, the sounds that make them exiles, sent beyond the city limits, cast out of the circle of civil society¹⁴. These sounds are noise, not language, even the language for the noise—*ololyga*—is onomatopoeic; the word is itself noise. Women, in this paradigm, cannot articulate themselves¹⁵, their speech cannot be made sense of in scope, yet they are the vessel of language.

Carson draws the connection between the 'upper and the lower mouth'¹⁶, citing the belief that treating one will affect the other (e.g. the loss of virginity will cause a

¹¹ Uptalk is the practice of speaking with a rising inflection, making statement sound like questions. Vocal fry is the grating sound made by dropping one's voice to its lowest natural register when drawing out words at the end of sentences.

¹² ¹² Carson on Sophocles, "The Gender of Sound", 120.

¹³ Carson, "The Gender of Sound", 124.

¹⁴ *ibid* 125.

¹⁵ This too is backed up in quantitative analysis of literature. In *Nabokov's Favorite Word is Mauve* Blatt finds that women are most likely to shiver, weep, murmur and scream (Blatt 52). All inarticulate, unintelligible forms of speech, except for marrying, a performative speech act that is not discursive but generative).

¹⁶ Carson, "The Gender of Sound", [p.131

woman's voice to deepen). The lower mouth is delinquent and distressing, congress with it is to be avoided if possible. Access to the womb however is necessary; it is the ground from which meaning springs. Access to this vital resource, whilst circumventing conversation with the lower mouth, is exemplified in Christ's conception; Mary is impregnated through her ear¹⁷, the word is always already displacing the embodied experience. In paintings of the annunciation the words are often represented visually; banners of text or sometimes there just a golden ray of light that directly penetrates the virgin's ear or her belly through a small hole in her robe.

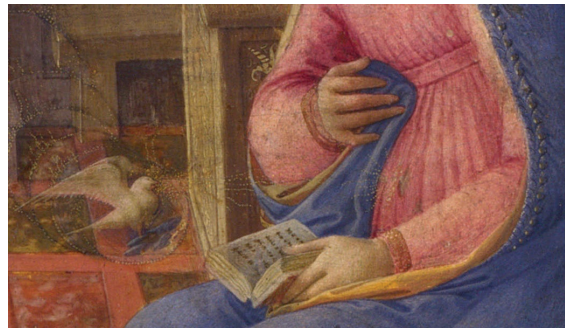


Figure 1:(left) detail from Martini's *Annunciation*, (right) detail from Lippi's

In Berger's short essay on translation, he genders language as 'doubtless[ly] female'¹⁸. Citing the expression 'mother tongue' as evidence for this gendering, he then

¹⁷ Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, (Oxford University Press 2012), p. 83.

¹⁸ John Berger, "Selbstporträt" in *Ein Geschenk für Rosa*, trans. Hans Jürgen Balmes (Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich 2018) 8.

I have not been able to find the exact version of this essay in an English publication. It appears that after having first published it in the Guardian, Berger made some edits to the relevant passages. All translations back from the German are my own.

situates the origin of language not in the woman's mouth but in her 'phonetic womb' ¹⁹. Berger goes on to describe all languages as fundamentally the same²⁰, managing an impressive act of virile imperialistic auto-cunnilingus, impregnating his generic metaphorical mother with her own tongue.

My impulse is always to work from within the dominant discourse, to practice from a place of compliance and submission, to take this flat projection of female identity and inflate it like a blow-up doll. I think of my work as institutional pornography, giving the institution what it wants, fetishized, amplified and overt. If it is a wants to be admired and told what a big boy it is then that is what I will do. If the institution is a University radiating out from a phallic tower incarnadine with the pleasure of releasing its progeny into the world, presenting pert follicled metal balls at its base then the orientation of institutional desire as projected through architecture is clear.



Figure 2: (left) Donald Lipski's *The West* on UT campus, (right): UT Tower lit up

¹⁹ John Berger, "Selbstporträt", 9.

²⁰ *ibid*

Instead of the raw, threatening cry, I want to find a mundane and pliant ology, not one of ecstasy or pain but of that other coupling so often found in gendered discourse: 'Stuplimity';²¹

a syncretism of boredom and astonishment, of what "dulls" with what "irritates" or agitates, of excessive excitation with extreme desensitization or fatigue.²²

²¹ A nice contraction of stupid (or stupefied) and sublime, which is the ultimate masculine state, the state of dryness, the state of remove, the Wanderer Above the Fog.

²² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Harvard University Press, 2005), 271.

WOW (that's amazing!)

A giant amazed blimp head—my face inflated, stretched and magnified a thousand times until it is all keen eyes and parted lips—floats above you in a paroxysm of wonder. The room fills with a breathy, helium-enhanced stream of awed exclamation—WOW ooooooooooh WOOOW.....an undirected and incontinent stream of grating amazement.



Figure 3: (above) WOW (that's amazing!) closeup

Its voice (my voice) hyper feminized, sweet, and irritating, interrupting you whenever you try to speak²³—WOW, that's amazing! The blimp is an attempt to comply

²³Further in Blatt's analysis fictional women are also more likely to 'interrupt' their male counterparts (Blatt 53). Back in the real world this pattern of perceiving women as interrupting also holds true.

with the projected desires of my new surroundings, to create a self-displacing inflatable that stands in for me, the helium protecting me from gravity, from the Aristotelian testicles of gravitas²⁴, taking over the emotional labor of fascinated servility, magnified in desire, saccharin and grotesque, the dreamy body horror of a melodious fart. Initially you are subject, gazing, but under the relentless intensity of its wide-eyed amazement you become object; the gaze is directed at you—the porn is watching back.



Figure 4: installation view of *WOW (that's amazing!)*

In a study on the conversation patterns of the justices of the supreme court researchers found that although men interrupted significantly more than women, women who interrupted were perceived much more negatively (Jacobi and Schweers 2017).

²⁴ ...and the aforementioned steel balls of the University of Texas

ORIENTATION

Becoming foreign forces the experience of norms into an active mode. My skin ripples and prickles under the new gaze, the ambient repositioning of my body by architecture, by infrastructure. I am a transplant, a graft; the hairs on my body have become hooked little burdock burrs leaving me sticky and abrasive, I cannot interface properly, the space between faces has become improper to me. I do not know how to face the world, how to face others: ‘the significance of the face is not simply “in” or “on” the face, but a question of how we face the face, or how we are faced.’²⁵ To be in the world is to face, is to be oriented. It is to have proximity and to be involved, and to become transparent to oneself in this involvement; the feeling of floating in body temperature water, of wearing a world that fits perfectly. But being oriented is equally to become opaque to oneself, to have the body become obtrusive and to be forced into visibility, forced into having its connection to the world questioned and foregrounded.

At home I was expert at being. I knew where to cross the road and which stores sell what, how to blend with the ambient mood. Most of all I knew how to interface, how to be with others. I was clear on what bonds of indebtedness I had with the people around me, with the government, with strangers; how they see me, how my body functions, how my body connects to the public body, through immunization, through physical proximity, through my voice/accent, race, work. They had set the sidewalk beneath my feet, regulated the airflow around me, the platform, the doors that close to keep me pressed against the bodies of other commuters, sending me flowing through the veins of the city.

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (S.I.: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 171

Agents of the state, which is in turn an agent of the people, have touched my womb and have touched my mother's; their hands have welcomed me into the world.

Texas

Dasein has had its historicity so thoroughly uprooted by tradition that [it] seeks to veil the fact that it has no ground of its own to stand on.²⁶

Here in Texas the relational network is foreign to me. There are clear differences in how we treat each others bodies, our choices and responsibilities. You do not pay for my abortion; my marriage means more legally; public health and the military, areas where the body and the state interface, are approached very differently; the healthcare bills, the guns seen, the guns unseen, the orientation of the architecture with its blank unselfconscious machismo, its beige frontier bravado; matchstick houses and tyvek palaces clad in faux European stonework, sullen and awkward in their longing and insecurity. Here, you do not feel obliged to provide a sidewalk; public space is imagined as a place for mobile private space.

This orientation towards vehicular transportation is grounded in the history of slavery and the displacement of Native peoples. Before Texas joined the US, it was an independent republic, having ceded from Mexico in part because of Mexico's growing restrictions on slave ownership²⁷. During this period Texas incurred great debt fighting Native Americans, particularly during the Lamar presidency that put forward a policy of aggressive hostility²⁸. The United States balked at taking on this debt, eventually passing a joint resolution for annexation stating that Texas would "retain funds, debts [...] and [...]"

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 43

²⁷ Menchaca, Martha. 2001. *Recovering History, Constructing Race : The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed July 3, 2018). 166.

²⁸ Handbook of Texas Online, W. E. S. Dickerson, "INDIAN RELATIONS," accessed July 03, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/bzi01>.

all the vacant and unappropriated lands lying within its limits”²⁹. It thereby was granted almost total control over its own lands and mineral deposits. As a result less than 2% of land in Texas is owned by the federal Government. Much of the state land has since been sold and almost none is accessible to the public. Exacerbating this state of affairs are laws restricting public right of way on private property. The US has no codified rambler’s rights³⁰, instead there are strict prohibitions on trespassing. There used to be free right of passage over private property for all free men but this changed after the civil war, when all free men began to include people of color.³¹ So now, moving through Texas, the hostile history of displacement and intolerance marks the landscape—fences, cutting off the flow of foot traffic like tourniquets, occlude the countryside so that we have nearly forgotten the open field of possibilities; driving along arterial roads, to invigorate those vital organs of commerce and family.

I have been trying to get a feeling for how you and I are indebted to each other here and how that relationship is mediated through my body and the public body, the state and institutions; through our touch, the touching of our agents.

²⁹Texas Library and State Commission, “Joint Resolution for Annexing Texas to the United States Approved March 1, 1845” accessed July 03, 2018, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/annexation/march1845.html>

³⁰ Ramblers rights are the rights to public right of way that cover much of the countryside in the UK. People can walk almost anywhere they want especially in Scotland and Wales. The Tragedy of the Commons in America is that the commons were expropriated by racist colonizers not that too many people were grazing their sheep on public land etc. In fact it was to keep freed slaves from being financially self sufficient that their right to use the land was restricted. (Ilgunas 2018) Interestingly Texas maintains rights of way regarding passage through perennial waterways.

³¹ Ken Ilgunas “Chapter 1: The Right To Roam” in *This Land Is Our Land: How We Lost the Right to Roam and How to Take It Back*, (Penguin, 2018)

In Texas you can still traverse private land but only with a hunting pass. You can even buy a hunting pass that does not allow you to hunt but only to cross the land.

As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another—whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional or imaginary. Contact is crisis.³²

I grew up in Germany, held close by the paternal state, watching me, cushioning my falls. I was raised in the close family of the nation state; we had a common project, cradle to grave, with my parents, both healthcare workers, shuttling between the two. The air was thick with the invisible connections I had with the people around me, each object in circulation a prop for the imagined community I was a part of. I imagined myself leaning into the thick cords of intertwined social connections like a wrestler catapulting herself into the ring; or like when you are at a concert or on a crowded subway and you realise that, in the press of bodies, you are not holding your own weight anymore.

But here this is not so. Here there is not that strange and sumptuous vibration when I set my cheap new pink and gold sunglasses on the wood slatted table at the cafe. There is no third meaning generated where the plastic of one vulgar delicate arm touches the translucent spongy chestnut varnish lending hardwood aspirations to the greying pine. Tiny ants swarm around the great proud rays of surface tension that my drink has left on the table, entirely failing to elicit that soft, deep vibrato of the the fabric of the field of the world.

Mood is retroactive. The liquid quality of days is transparent from within. Only looking back at the pooling weeks and months does the tint become apparent, the flavor of a particular time as clear viscous solution pooling and filling the space between, the slow movement of the currents like the inevitable drift to the kitchen at the end of a party, the slow sinking of an ill-timed remark into the soft carpet of conversation.

³² Carson “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman Dirt and Desire”, in *of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. Halperin, David M., John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.135

I was searching for the connective flavor of this place, for contingency and dependence, and found it in the position of the passenger, always alongside, passive, carried by forces that were not my own. I started thinking of the car as a lens, focusing and reshaping the world around me; as an orientation device, extending and folding the body, flowing over the satin loops of freeways at night. I took photographs from this position of dependence, trying to bring this orientation into my work in a more literal, experiential way.

Agent Wonder

I wanted to create a position of physical vulnerability for the viewer that felt isolated within a system that was opaque and strange. The primary feature of the *Agent Wonder* installation is rickety grey high chair/school desk/office workstation of welded steel. On the chair you sit in an infantilized suspension, your face brought right up against a tiny screen, your body both too short and too big.



Figure 5: Agent Wonder and The Days of Arbitration

The screen is embedded in a massive wad of pink bubblegum, as if the aggregate of decades of masticated polymers under waiting room chairs has become sentient, had coagulated into a sticky brain.

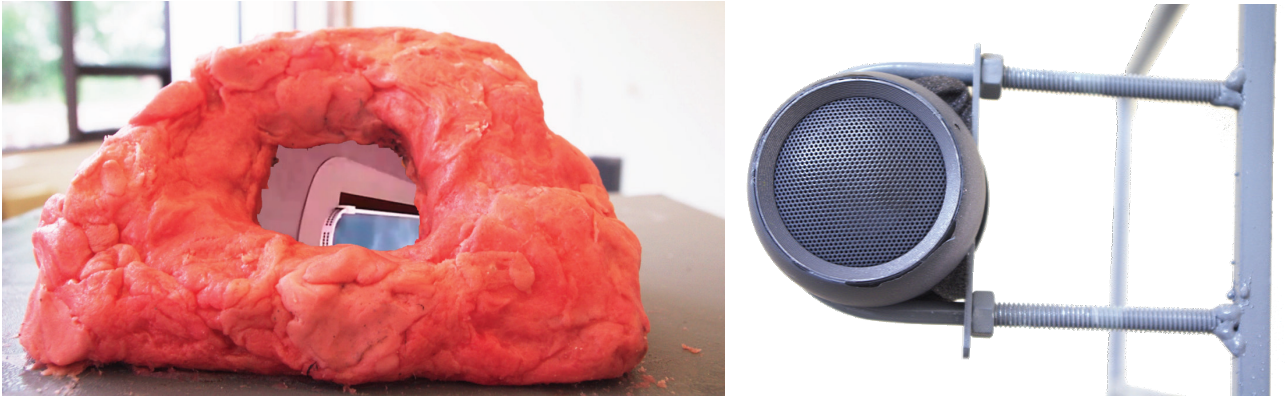


Figure 6: (left) *Agent Wonder* bubblegum and screen, (right) *Agent Wonder* speaker

Last year my phone began to develop its own independent photographic and video practice. The footage on the screen is from places I had been visiting in search of answers; the LBJ and George W Bush presidential libraries, the 6th Floor Museum, and footage my phone took independently (mostly of the sky and my thumb, my strangely distended hand as I run).

My phone is *my* passenger, nestled in my backpack, my pocket, my hand; it understands being circulated, being touched and sat on. Working with my phone allows me to relinquish agency and let this perfect prosthetic interface, attuned to my tastes, fears, desires, direct my practice. Next to your ear a small speaker faces away from you, playing a voice that rattles off an FBI-style report on the activities of an Agent Wonder.

The script is written using the clues provided by my phone's 'ghost'. My phone's being is institutional, embedded in a globalized economy, shaped by silicon valley ideology and machine learning algorithms that rely on our aggregated voices; so when my phone 'misunderstands' my speech and writes *The window is beautiful; I can see you all the way through the glass door through the house and through the window on the other side. I take the U-line, I go to the doctor-sky and the road is the same creamy*

possible violet, the orange light spooling on what would otherwise be the horizon, then it is all of us writing together, heuristically, statistically—again here spectral ground, the displacement of intangible embodied labor by aggregate abstraction.



Figure 7: *Agent Wonder* installation view

BODY AND WORLD

Phenomenology is a kind of touching; a palpating of the world with the senses. Objects are worldly; promiscuous in their circulation—being touched, carrying an ever expanding field of meaning and uses and associations. They are touched not only by us and our language but also the hands and language of others and other objects. Phenomenology and affect theory deal with the space between body and world. They leave the body porous, the world's boundaries transgressed, touched by the eye and the hand. Ultimately though, body and world are still considered fundamentally discrete.

We think of the body as a system, we think of the body as a team. We learn that we are full of codependent but troublingly autonomous organisms; gut bacteria, the microbiome, even the stealthy transcription of that apocryphal manuscript of deoxyribonucleic acid—all working together in a contingent, fragile symbiosis. Into this world foreign objects are thrust. There are the meshes and screws of routine surgeries, the pacemakers, the lumpy insulin dispensers dug into the flesh of the belly. These are edge cases, we think, boundary conditions of chronic illness and disability. But the largest cyborg demographic by far are fertile women. Perhaps this is particularly on my mind today, having just had the little plastic 'T' inside me replaced, the headless cross, the Tau of contraception; Saint Anthony's Egyptian interdiction; the word as barrier, the word between (inter+dicere), fending off the little dopplegangers intent on sharing my flesh, drawing nutrients from my blood (I had my IUD replaced). I feel open, a cyborg 'no longer structured by the polarity of public and private,'³³ (it having been necessary to be rather public with my privates).

³³ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in *The Haraway Reader*, (Routledge, 2004), 9.

THE FEMININE

Butler argues that all ‘binary oppositions are formulated through the exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities’³⁴. Irigaray’s feminine is not that which exists in the male/female, nor the mind/matter binary (where matter is figured as feminine)³⁵; instead, Butler writes that Irigaray’s “‘feminine’ [...] cannot be said to *be* anything, to participate in ontology at all’. The feminine is ‘set under erasure as the impossible necessity that enables any ontology’³⁶. We normally (normatively) situate the boundary of our body—the area of our personal displacement and overflow—within the confines of our skin. In touching others we are brought up against a binary, a body/body division, a positioning of distinct subjectivities. You are you, I am me, each skin contains a distinct subject, steering an unwieldy meat machine through the obstacle course of daily life. Pregnancy breaks this fragile conceit. The concepts of subject and object, the self and the other make no sense when faced with the foundation of the very life they are trying to describe. The outside has become the inside and the inside will become the outside. A woman’s inside, that which she bounds, which she is the boundary of, is not just a singular subject, but also not distinctly separate from what will eventually be figured as an other. This ambiguity cannot be acknowledged, must be exiled from discourse: we must fence off the ‘field of disruptive possibilities’³⁷, cultivate the closed garden, the tamed miniaturized interiority. Here, Mary stands or sits under the portico, the diaphragm of a tympanum serving the

³⁴ Butler on Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter*, p.35f.

³⁵ Ibid p.35

³⁶ In structure this greatly resembles Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the problem of ‘rational’ reflection. On this point MMP argues that enlightenment ontology is not wrong—rather it can only exist only in a self-referential loop and cannot access or acknowledge materiality, even though it is the reason it even exists.

³⁷ Butler on Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter*, p.35.

dual function of architectural hymen and presenting her as equivalent to the body of the church, the upturned arc, the vessel (we will come back to this image). The archangel has entered her private space; in the background we see a wilderness, the ‘field of disruptive possibilities’ that we are closed off from.



Figure 8: Still from The Golfers, girl with incubator, sleeping

Dominion

I am cycling—at night or in the early morning when it is still/already hot; I approach the golf course obliquely, in passing. I am peripheral, am ancillary (as I am necessary, am ground, but not integral) to it. My path is strewn with expended white and yellow orbs, shot high into the sky with poorly controlled stokes, now fruitlessly seeding the adjoining asphalt. Here, on the golf course, there is a soft undulating geometry, alternately concave and convex; there are and rules and conventions. The golf course is diminutive, a petite kingdom that can be surveilled from a grassy mound, leaning back slightly, hands on hips, fingers spread over lower back for support.



Figure 9: Still from *The Golfers*, girl cycling

A cultivated landscape is a sign of dominion. The golf course is set against a hostile environment, dwarfed by the highlands, the wild ocean cliffs, set lush gemlike

into an arid desert, taking up large swathes of prime real estate in downtown LA³⁸; the mastery of its creation all the clearer against these wild places, both natural and man made. The golf course does not bear fruit, it stands as a triumph against all reason or circumstance; a space of exclusive access, replacing public parks, housing, agricultural land. The pace is sedate, just good old boys having a good old time; class, race and gender having comfortably excluded the disruptive otherness. This is the field of domesticated narrowness, rooted deep in the labour of the bodies and the body of the land that it excludes. Notorious for its intense water usage, the golf course frequently drains the land around it, erasing and displacing the ecosystem on which they are grounded.

³⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, “A good walk spoiled”, *Revisionist History*, Podcast audio, June. 14, 2017. <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/11-a-good-walk-spoiled>



Figure 10: Study for *The Golfers*, golfers

Golfers

I roll to a stop, here, beside Tolkien's³⁹ last safe haven, this tiny pastoral paradise; the English garden. They have gathered here, in the domesticated nature, in the tiny empire/miniature dominion, by the trimmed hedge in the shadow of The East. The men who think they are normal have belts and small gestures. When they stand up they redo the upper button of a suit jacket, when they sit down they undo said button. As they step back to let you pass they place a hand on their stomachs below their ribs, above the navel—not far from the solar plexus—folding slightly as though faintly apologetic of their bellies. They clasp right hands, while the left moves out to cradle an elbow; in a moment of intense emotion foreheads meet, a palm will hold the base of a skull as with an infant, stoking and grasping the neck.

³⁹ Another author who famously participates in the erasure of women, *The Hobbit* containing only one lonely female pronoun, an isolated 'her' (Blatt 2017, p.41). The Shire is effectively a live-in golf course.

In *The Golfers* a girl picks up these small geodesic eggs, these tiny planets. Gigantic and unbounded, she is their monstrous steward; she incubates and hatches them: Behold the handmaiden of the Lord (Ecce Ancilla Domini), but not shy and awkward like in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Annunciation*—rather placid as in Fra Angelico's/Fra Filippo Lippi's versions. She too, robed in red and blue, receives the celestial missive impassively—but the structural reproductive power is reclaimed through the process of hand drawn animation.



Figure 11: Series of stills from *The Golfers*, hatching

Movement

Many annunciations are set before the moment of consent. Initially Mary is ‘greatly troubled’ at being told she is pregnant and in many representations we see her startled and even recoiling.



Figure 12: Two *Annunciations*. Left: Lorezo Lotto, Right: Martini and Memmi

In these moments her gestures move into the body language of unproductivity, turning away, agitated, in motion, her movements reminiscent of those in Londe’s study of ‘hysterical’ women. And truly her womb is ‘wandering’, recoiling. In *The Infernal Dream* of Mutt and Jeff Beloff explores the dichotomy of the productive and the unproductive body at the origin of motion picture. The photograph is a mark left by the

body; motion is that averaging out of the sum of these marks; ‘abstracted from the individual’⁴⁰. Beloff compares the work of Etienne-Jules Marey who worked on designing efficient movements to, that of Londe on his hysterics:

So we see that from the very beginning of motion picture recording, the productive body was shadowed by its unproductive double.⁴¹

The pursuit of efficient, (male gendered) movement, the utopian movement of the worker, leads us to ever greater abstraction until we reach Aleksei Gastev’s *Social Engineering Machine*⁴². This soviet era apparatus purported to be able cure social ills through the operation of levers and cranks. Now, alas, we are left only with incomprehensible diagrams and one mysterious photograph.

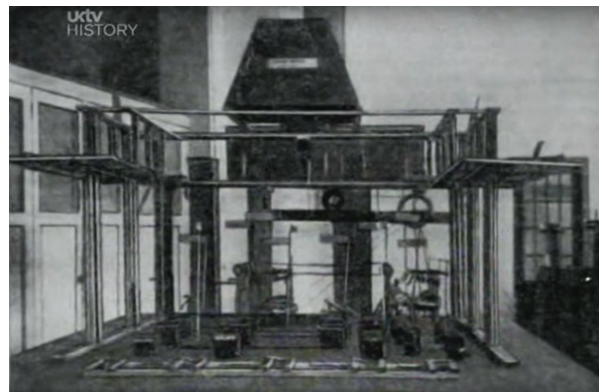
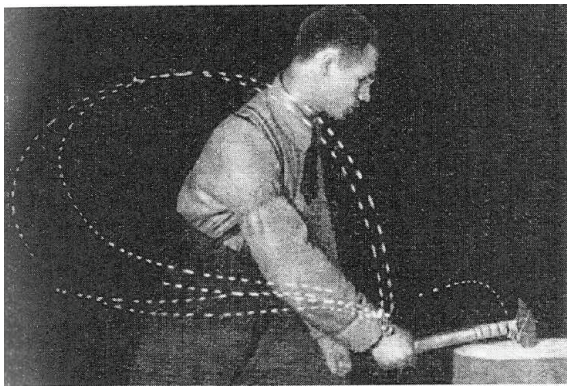


Figure 13: Alexei Gaste, (left) A cyclogram of cutting metal with a chisel and hammer, (right) Social Engineering Machine

⁴⁰ Zoe Beloff, *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*, (Site Gallery: 2011), p.8.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.9.

⁴² *Pandora’s Box*, directed by Adam Curtis (London, UK: BBC 2, 1992), Television Series.



Figure 14: animation cels from *The Golfers* displayed in frame

Animation

These often semi-phrenological endeavours of classification and optimization of the human body focus on the labor of those observed. We photograph the worker swinging a hammer, the horse running, the bird flying in a harness. In hand drawn animation this dynamic is turned on its head; the labour is not that of the object but that of the subject, a process of excessive reproduction, part extreme handcraft, part overtly mechanical. We are observing the gestures of the maker engaged in their own erasure; each drawn line flickering and flowing into motion, until the life of the character I am drawing takes over and my mark making disappears. The world of the animation is both

over-explicitly imagined by the artists and exists entirely in the eye of the viewer, as, unlike other video, it is in no way an imprint of the world. Animations are inherently transgressive, they

reveal a hidden potential in their constant improvisation and metamorphosis. They map out a world that is in constant flux. A line can turn into a man and then turn into house or a mouse, a word, or an idea in a bubble.⁴³

Beloff's parallel with rhyming words is apt, the animated form is similarly delinquent, always first a limerick, a rude pun, an absurd revolt. This insistence on oscillating between mechanical repetition and handcraft is part of a set of strategies used by many female identifying artists thematising their own femininity⁴⁴. The visibility and invisibility of our labour (our actual production of living bodies and our, and our contributions to other creative work), is a kind of sleight of hand in which our hand itself is alternately revealed and concealed. What is it then to animate our tiny golfers, to bring them close by 'palpating [them] with our look [...] because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh'⁴⁵; to swallow them, to contain them entirely. Again we become their ground, the implicit and explicit life giver, monstrous and tender.

So now, dear reader, I was so diminutive and small that I could comfortably slipped into the soft muff of my tall, dear sweet, woman. The hand that held me as I floated. Unspeakably tender, the woman gazed at me: now I was her child, now her little mouse, now her husband. And always I was everything to her. She was the towering, powerful, large presence, and I the small one.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Julia Skelly, *Radical decadence: excess in contemporary feminist textiles and craft*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). p.65ff, 78

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 131.

⁴⁶ Walser, Robert, Susan Bernofsky, Lydia Davis, and Christopher Middleton. *Looking at Pictures*. (New York: New Directions, 2015), p. 15

How do we reflect back into ourselves if we are oriented entirely towards this little man—if ‘always’ he is ‘everything’ to us. Large and formless and soft and porous as we are, will we discover our own hand in the folds of the ‘soft muff’ or will we be relegated to coarser meaning of that word.



Figure 15: two stills from *The Golfers*, showing hatched golfers with golf course

VESSEL

If we are indeed to incorporate both *muffs* into our ontology then some reorganization is in order. Pregnancy and reproduction are not edge cases, they are the pre-ontological foundation of life. It is essential for phallogocentric ontologies to totally erase from discourse this ‘impossible necessity’ that they themselves cannot exist without. If this battle were to be lost, our own fundamental porosity, our inside-outness, our inversion⁴⁷ would be recognized in its boundless bodying forth of perception itself, like when ‘my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand’⁴⁸.

Conservative groups have long pushed to figure the ambiguous connected matter that is part of a woman’s own circulatory system as a distinct subject-other from the moment of conception, whilst tacitly maintaining the impossibility of fluid complex double agency within a single organism. In *The Body and Its Works, Haunted by Desire* Amelia Jones reflects on the issue of agency in her own pregnancy:

Was I a person? A full subject of meaning and action, in charge of my embodied (cognitive, emotional, corporeal) self? Or was I simply a vessel, a thing...? The mainstream doctors I consulted clearly believed the latter, consigning me to objecthood⁴⁹

Butler addresses the figure of the vessel, arguing that to figure the feminine as a vessel ‘freezes the feminine’⁵⁰ into a form that is both limited to reproductive activity and

⁴⁷ It is no coincidence that homosexuality is feared on a similar level to a woman's right to choose and in men is often described as a ‘feminizing’.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, p. 133

⁴⁹ Amelia Jones “The Body and Its Works, Haunted by Desire” in *Creating Ourselves: The Self in Art*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2017). p.140.

precluded from any agency within the creation of the human. This is the root of hysteria, the wandering womb is spectral, haunting the frozen vessel of femininity. We see this dynamic play out in artistic production; the female body, the model, the muse, is object, matter, ground; is essential without being acknowledged as creative. In *Maiden Voyage (boatolin)* I wanted to be both the vessel and that which is contained within it, to exist at the exact site of my displacement, a living image, a metaphor for my own femininity—in short a literal vessel that was formed after my form, that contained me; a cast and mould, a figurative short circuit.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p.41.

Maiden Voyage (boatolin)



Figure 16: *Maiden Voyage (boatolin)*, still from video of performance sculpture

The boatolin collapses in on itself, mashing the female body into the cello, the instrument that is metonymic of that body. The lazy masturbatory excess of stroking oneself merges into the apocalyptic decadence of playing the violin as the titanic sinks, the sea levels rise and the world is swallowed by water. Looking back to Charlotte Moorman, the iconic artist and cellist whose body defined her coverage as ‘The Topless Cellist’, issues of gender and artistic production are foregrounded. Being an artist is to look, being a woman is to be looked at; being a female artist is to oscillate between

subject- and objecthood. In her essay *Why is my Art not as Good as Me* Betterton suggests the ‘the live presence of the artists in her work is one way in which she can assert her agency as an artist, thereby confronting the relationship between them’⁵¹. I am a lady Gregor Samsa stuck on her back; a metamorphosis of literal artistic objectification, the musical self-muse, framed by the domestic banality of the apartment complex or public leisure pool.



Figure 17: boatolin in apartment complex pool. Photo credit riel Sturchio

⁵¹ Betterton, Rosemary, “Why Is My Art Not As Good As Me?: Femininity, Feminism and ‘Life-Drawing’ in Tracey Emin’s Art” in *The art of Tracey Emin*. Thames & Hudson, 2002. P. 34

In the live performance I float lazily on my back, a flipped figurehead negligently plucking at the strings; playing an indolent variation on ‘Nearer my God to Thee’ (said to be the hymn the band played as the Titanic sank). My focus is ostensibly inward, feeling the vibration expanding into my spine and my ribs, from my stern to my sternum, where my back rests against the inside of the instrument.



Figure 18: *Maiden Voyage (boatolin)*, with audience member, at Glasgow International, Scotland. Photo credit Michael Cochrane and Love Unlimited

When a visitor enters the pool I feel their body displacing the water, rocking me gently from side to side, creating small currents through their movement. Above the water the sound is muted, but when they sink below the surface it becomes amplified, twangy and strange. This is my domain ‘A female flourishes more in an environment of

water'⁵². The wetness of my female body here is externalised, overflowing both my body and my mind; 'physiologically and psychologically women are wet '⁵³. Here I am magnified in my sexuality, you can literally bathe in the wetness I inhabit, suspended in my architectural womb.

⁵² Hippokrates in Carson "Putting Her in Her Place: Woman Dirt and Desire", in of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World, eds. Halperin, David M., John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999)

⁵³ Ibid

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