Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
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Chapter 5

Images That Do Not Rest:
The Installations of Lawrence Malstaf
Images That Do Not Rest: The Installations of Lawrence Malstaf

Warburg regarded works of art not as once-and-for-all, self-authenticating objects but as the select vehicles of cultural memory. Works of art were therefore fraught not only with untapped treasures of memory but also with misunderstandings and riddles. Warburg would never have been tempted to treat artworks as dream forms, but they share with dreams those initially inexplicable transformations, displacements, and reversals that puzzle us and cry out for interpretation.1

Belgian artist Lawrence Malstaf creates installations that invite the viewer to enter interactive environments and to become actor and spectator at the same time.2 Another group of his works deals with reworking images from the past – portraits, sculptures, which are often literally set in motion. Malstaf studied industrial design and, during the early stages of his career, he worked with choreographers creating scenographies for their pieces.3 Several of his installations borrow religious motifs: Sandbible, 1999, is a book with hollowed pages filled with sand and laid open on a vibrating surface (Fig. 61).4 The vibrations gradually change the surface in the sand thus making the quivering book appear as if it was simultaneously writing and erasing itself. Madonna, 2000, is a life-size hollow sculpture made of semi-transparent adhesive tape and illuminated from within (Fig. 62). It releases air and collapses slowly then, in sudden darkness, it is noisily re-inflated. The translucent, semi-rigid material keeps the sculpture in a vertical position without any support, yet it is still flexible enough to allow the stream of air coming out of it to collapse it slowly. One of the hands points downwards, touching the belly and the other is raised in a greeting-like gesture. This “breathing” sculpture borrows a religious figure with a long history of depictions, and at the same time presents its re-interpretation. Shrink, 1995, alludes to religious meanings more indirectly

Fig. 61 Lawrence Malstaf, *Sandbible*, 1999

Fig. 62 Lawrence Malstaf, *Madonna*, 2000
The installation consists of two large, transparent plastic sheets; the visitor is invited to enter between the sheets, and a device gradually sucks the air out from between them, leaving the body (in the illustration, the artist himself) vacuum-packed and vertically suspended. The transparent tube inserted between the two surfaces allows the person inside the installation to regulate the flow of air. As a result of the increasing pressure between the plastic sheets, the surface of the packed body gradually freezes into multiple micro-folds. For the duration of the performance, shown on a video screen next to the empty installation, the person inside moves slowly and changes positions, which vary from an almost embryonic position to one resembling a crucified body.

Malstaf’s pieces reside in the space between sculpture, installation and performance, and set in motion a number of religious motifs. These artworks resist univocal iconographic interpretations that would refer them to a text or explanatory narrative. By setting flexible surfaces in motion and by using fluid elements such as light, sand and air, the three installations foreground the transformability of the body, and simultaneously illustrate a profound ambiguity about images. Precisely because an image is irreducible to one particular meaning, it has the power to fix or even invent the body. The three installations make for interesting cases that address the complex cultural history of representing the human body in images. This is a history that touches upon medicine and science, which traditionally claim visual mastery over the body. The installations problematise the body’s status in the visual world, in the sense that it can be, and often is, considered a medium in the artistic, as well as in the religious sense. Hans Belting argues that internal and external representations, or mental and physical images, are two sides of the same phenomenon, and that images exist and migrate between our bodies, the media of images as a mental construction, and their physical media as their support. Malstaf’s installation is a visual object itself, but also a screen where images seen in the past, or, in a broader sense, mental images, can be projected. His installations transform the very condition of mediality, the capacity of a body or physical object to be a medium and to be the site of, and transmit images.

Shrink presents not an image, but a living body that functions as a screen and invites the viewer to project interpretations, to see other images onto it. In this case the body becomes both an image of itself and a screen, a place where other images...

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5 Hans Belting, An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body, Trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 36. 6 In Belting’s eloquent formulation: “The medality of images is thus rooted in a body analogy. Our bodies function as media themselves, living media as opposed to fabricated media. Images rely on two symbolic acts which both involve our living body: the act of fabrication and the act of perception, the one being the purpose of the other.” Ibid., p. 3.
Fig. 63 Lawrence Malstaf, *Shrink*, 1995
“happen.” Sandbible, Shrink and Madonna all resist a univocal reading, because they simultaneously present well-known motifs, their traditional association with certain meanings and their inversions. These counter-motifs are not scandalous or iconoclastic in the traditional sense; the religious motif is used to ask questions pertaining to the very practice of image-making and the body as a medium of images. Malstaf reinterprets the figure of the Virgin Mary to present a contemporary interpretation of the idea of the incarnation and the motif of Annunciation. Arguably in his installations he reclaims these motifs related both to divine, spontaneous creation and to the very practice of image making.

“Written on the sand of flesh...”

Sandbible transforms the Bible into a visual object. There are no signs, letters or sentences on its pages, only the moving sand, which gradually transforms itself. As the artist himself points out, one of the associations invoked by Sandbible is the story of Jesus who, when asked whether a woman who sinned should be stoned to death, did not answer but wrote with his finger in the sand. The installation alludes to several other themes. The motif of writing in the sand is borrowed to comment on the capacity of a medium to retain a trace, image or instance of writing and the extent to which the medium modifies the mediated content. In a broader sense, the gesture of writing in the sand suggests the resistance to interpretation, or the impossibility to attribute one fixed meaning, interpretation of a statement, or text.

On another level, by employing the instability of sand as a medium as its central element, the work almost literally restages one of Jacques Lacan’s definitions of the symptom as a “symbol written on the sand of flesh.” Lacan refers to the enigmatic outcome of writing on an instable medium in order to articulate the semantic ambiguity of the symptom. In the symptom the relationship between the signifier and the signified is much less stable than for instance in the symbol, which can be interpreted

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unambiguously. In the Lacanian sense the symptom “speaks” the subject, whose very flesh, the matter of his or her body, is the medium of content previously repressed. In Lacan’s phrase the transformability of the sand stands for the transformability of the body.

Georges Didi-Huberman, who refers to this definition by Lacan, argues that the term “symptom” can capture a crucial aspect of the complex life of images when transposed from a clinical to a critical category. As he explains, following Freud, the symptom is “over-determined both synchronically (it means several things at the same time) and diachronically (it modifies itself over time).” It appears to interrupt the normal course of events and according to the logic of a law that resists a trivial type of observation. In that sense the symptom is the “return of the repressed”; it allows for unconscious content to become visible, or to re-surface, to be dramatised at the surface of the body, which is the symptom’s location par excellence. Furthermore, the symptom has a “mutable and metamorphic character”, as it displaces itself on the body’s surface substituting one primary location for another. Then the image-symptom would manifest itself as an anachronism, as an old problem that comes to trouble our present. In contrast to the symbol, the symptom does not have a univocal meaning. In Didi-Huberman’s words:

The symbol, ordinarily made to be understood, becomes symptom the moment it displaces itself and loses its primary identity, when its proliferation suffocates its signification, transgressing the limits of its proper semiotic field.

The symptom as a critical category provides an alternative model to interpret the relationship between body and image. It is a model that differs from representation (especially in its mimetic modality), in the sense that the correspondence between the signified and the signifier is much more open and flexible, acknowledging the body itself as a medium.

The category of the symptom opens up a possibility to read how the three installations by Malstaf work with time, both with the micro-time of the rhythms of the living body, and the macro-time of the history of its representations. Sandbible presents a transformed and transformable Bible that distances itself from the religious text. The quivering sand-book places an emphasis on the act of reading, by actually making it impossible. Even if it were presenting a real text, the movement would blur it and diso-

rient the gaze that attempts to read. In Lacan’s definition sand is a metaphor for flesh. The body is a mediating surface of its own symptom; both sand and flesh resist writing in the sense of leaving a permanent trace. *Sandbible* opens up a possibility to complicate the meaning of Lacan’s phrase. A central moment in the installation is that we can only see where we cannot read anymore. Seeing an image cannot be interpreted as reading, as an activity that fixes the image into a concept.\(^{14}\) *Sandbible* reminds us that the visual image is similar to a symptom; it brings together a variety of meanings that can contradict one another. It uses the Bible to demonstrate that the process of mediation cannot be reduced to inscription of writing on a mediating surface. In this sense the installation suggests a way of looking at *Shrink* and *Madonna* as they articulate a similar question by focusing on the body in their respective ways. The mobile garment of *Madonna* transforms an absent body into a flaming surface; in Shrink the living body is defined as a screen, which resonates with different images-signifiers and simultaneously evades being “fixed” by any of them.

**Self-Annunciation**

The “breathing” sculpture of *Madonna*, an empty shell sculpted out of tape is a negative cast out of an allegedly existing figure. The contrast between the darker hollow space of the absent face and the illuminated garment visually resembles a photonegative where the dark areas of the positive image appear as light. In addition to that inversion, Madonna conflates several iconographic motifs. The position of the hands suggests the scene of the Visitation in spite of the absence of Mary’s cousin Elisabeth, the second participant in the scene. The Annunciation is another popular scene from the Marian iconographic tradition. It typically depicts Mary reading, as the archangel Gabriel announces that she is to be the mother of the Saviour, and the Holy Ghost, usually represented as a beam of light.

Malstaf’s contemporary *Madonna* does not simply reproduce either the Visitation or the Annunciation scene. Rather, it fragments the first, by cutting out Elisabeth, and inverts the second, by staging *exhalation* and containing the *light* within the figure. The inversions of those motifs suspend any possibility for an unambiguous reading that would refer *Madonna* to a particular biblical scene. Not only is it a visual conflation that, quite literally, sets in motion the figure of Mary, but it also intervenes in the way theological doctrine defines her body. According to the Christian doctrine of incarna-

tion, Mary is considered an uncorrupted medium for the human manifestation of God. The issue of whether Christ passed through the Virgin's body as through a canal without being formed in her, or whether she indeed actively participated in the formation of that body-image with her own body, was important for early theologians. The emphasis on her human nature, as Hans Belting points out, prevents her from acquiring a fully divine status, which would subsequently cast doubt on Christ's human aspect and, in another way, makes her resemble a pagan goddess-mother. Her human body was considered a medium for the visible image of the invisible God. Analogously, the icon, as Marie-José Mondzain argues, is an interpretation of the incarnation, and as a visual medium, was also defined as a virgin space for the sacred image:

Thought about the Son is thought about the image, thought about the image is thought about place and space (the icon), thought about space is thought about the bodies of women under the double sign, already broached, of virginity and materiality.

A trace of the motif of the incarnation still plays out in twentieth-century art. Within a religion of incarnation, the central doctrine of which involves a miraculous conception, in De Duves' words:

Women have been condemned to being the medium and the vehicle of incarnation [...]. They are virgins and mothers, bereft of their own flesh, or else they are fallen women. It is on the place of woman in the economy of incarnation that the status of images – and hence of art – has depended in Christianity.

De Duve argues that even modernism did not break this pact, which is, to a great extent, negotiated between men, and translates incarnation through the formula “painting = woman.” Thus, the relationship between the artist genius and the canvas, or the medium as a virginal space for his ideas, is a trace of the Christian doctrine, which reduces women to muted media for the image of God.

15 “Whoever claims that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a canal, without having been formed in her in a way that is both human and divine, divine because its was without the activity of a man, human because it was according to the normal process of pregnancy, he too is a complete stranger to God”, as quoted by Marie-José Mondzain “Iconic Space and the Rule of Lands”, Hypatia 15, 4:2002, p. 65-6. 16 Hans Belting Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 33. 17 Mondzain, “Iconic Space and the Rule of Lands”, p. 66 18 Thierry De Duve, “Come on, humans, one more effort if you want to be post-Christians!” in: Political Theologies. Public Religions in a Post-Secular World, Ed. by Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 663.
Malstaf’s “breathing” Madonna deconstructs her religious counterpart from within. It does not stand for, or represent the Virgin Mary in the proper sense of the word. In a double gesture, it makes itself similar to an image that belongs to the iconography of Mary, and simultaneously blurs that resemblance. By inverting the figure of Mary, Madonna becomes an intervention in the history of her representations, as well as in the history that establishes the equation between women and media. In the case of Christian doctrine, the process of mediation happens as incarnation, which requires Annunciation – the Word – speech that announces itself and affects the medium of flesh. The installation restages in reverse the moment of interaction between the materiality of the flesh and the intangibility of the spirit. In Madonna, however, there is no flesh to write on, and the spirit is no longer an exterior force as depicted in religious paintings, where the Holy Spirit descends on Mary at the Annunciation. In this version of the Annunciation, Madonna mirrors the impossible act of writing in the sand, presented in Sandbible. It is the Madonna’s body that radiates light and exhales; the Word does not come into her. Instead, her body announces itself by the light and air it emanates. Perhaps it is one of the artworks that contains, in De Duve’s words, “incarnate images”, but one that is not born from the breath of a God and a virgin’s womb. In that sense Madonna destabilises the sign of equality between women and media by suggesting another definition of materiality, namely one where flesh is no longer affected by a master-signifier and has a voice, and a body: a power to present herself.

Next to being an inversion of the Annunciation scene, which problematises the notion of medium as associated with the idea of the incarnation, Madonna is a material, or a technical inversion. It presents the Madonna in the negative, but not as an iconoclastic negation. The sculpture is a cast, an indexical image created by contact between an object and a mediating surface. The imprint is of one of the oldest techniques of producing images; it is considered to be especially authentic, since it is the result of the direct contact between a mediating surface and the “represented” object. It is, however, not a mimetic representation. It is a negative image, or a counter-form.20 The imprint is a paradoxical image in the sense that it signifies simultaneously the definite, but past presence of a body and its absence in the moment of seeing the image.

Madonna presents itself as a cast of a supposedly existing sculpture of the Virgin Mary. She is a “positive” image as a form seen from outside, but at the same time, the light inside the sculpture renders her body in the negative; it visually resembles a

photonegative. The negative figure filled with light corresponds to the photograph-
ic image, which is itself a result of “writing with light” thus pointing to the technical condition of a medium that is usually associated with truthful rendering of the world. Thus, the installation refers to two ways of producing images that eliminate, or at least minimise, the role of the hand of a maker. On this level the installation addresses the very practice of image-making; it resonates with the motif of the acheiropoietic image. The religious motif, or the image of the Madonna, further complicates this reference to the incarnation, which implies spontaneous creation. Madonna “thinks” what an image is, and contemplates its own conditions.\(^{21}\) The figure radiates light, which not only stands for the Holy Spirit as in religious images, but is also “the transcendental condition of all visibility, the invisible condition of all the visible.”\(^{22}\) According to Louis Marin, light in painting is a point of rupture in representation, since it does not represent nor stand for anything else but is the condition of both creation and perception of the image. The luminous Madonna that radiates, instead of being penetrated by divine light, is in that sense no longer a medium, a sensitive surface that receives the touch of God, but an image itself because it literally contains the condition of its own visibility – light. There is no external (in other words transcendent, divine) source of light, that source that is displaced and located in the body.

The hollow figure of Madonna performs a technical and iconographic inversion, which can be described as a counter-motif, a visually identifiable motif and its inversion. Madonna is not a sculpture of the Virgin Mary. Yet, at the same time it doubly repeats Mary in its title and shape. In this case it is impossible to separate the iconographic, visual inversion from the material one. We see the Annunciation reversed, precisely because the figure is a three-dimensional negative of a Madonna. In analogy to the image-imprint, which is a counter-form, counter-motif is an inversion as well as a demonstration of the reversed object.\(^{23}\) This mobile sculpture does not convey a single meaning.

In a similar manner to the Renaissance art discussed by Aby Warburg, Malstaf’s installations take images and motifs from the past and out of their context to destabilise or even reverse their meaning. Warburg considered works of art not as “self-authenticating objects” expressing some essence of art but as a “vehicles of cultural memory” that in their workings resemble dreams and share with them “inexplicable transformations, displacements, and reversals that puzzle us and cry out for interpretation.” He placed emphasis on the work of art not as a self-contained entity striving to ideal form, but as giving expression to contradictory cultural contents, and was interested not in works of art that were generated for art’s sake, but in images that were created for some external reason. Images then appear as translators of these cultural contents, as rendering them visual. Central to his understanding of the way images fulfil their mediating function was the concept of survival:

Warburg recognized that there was more to the reuse of antique prototypes than the fact that the prototypes were usable; nor was it enough to say that Renaissance artists applied classical source images in keeping with their original meanings. These were mostly figures and gestures of exceptional significance: that was clear from the works of art themselves.

For Warburg these surviving formulas, the figures and gestures with exceptional significance, were sites of coexistence of contradictory meanings. As Kurt Forster explains: “In Renaissance hands, an antique formula expressive of fear and horror becomes an expression of youthful, conquering heroism.” One and the same element became an embodiment of contradictory contents, and ambiguity one of the central dimensions of the image. The notion of antithetical expression to a great extent coincides with the category of the symptom not as a clinical, but as a critical category.

*Shrink* and *Madonna* are unquestionably part of a very different period and context compared to the visual survivals in Renaissance art. Re-using an existing motif points to the past and thus establishes continuity, referring to a tradition. Yet, the very same motif is used as a tool to claim discontinuity, a break with the tradition, insofar as it is invested with a new meaning and is not used as a religious image. Analogous-

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ly, the continued life of religious motifs is associated with the discontinuity in their use and meaning. The two installations can be seen in terms of the Warburgian concept of antithetical expression; as images they are similarly ambiguous and open for interpretation. However, in these contemporary cases the ambiguity is a result of play of reversals that produce negatives and counter-forms or images that complicate them. This new visual production proves that each borrowing is not simply a technical copy, but an active work with the past, as well as an active work of the past. Besides the notion of antithetical expression, a second important moment opens up possibility to see the two pieces related to the type of analysis Warburg developed. His concept of pathos formula, articulated his interest in the human body and its powers of expression, and remains relevant to these two cases.

Being both a representation of a pregnant woman and allegedly a cast, Madonna points to two technologies for reproduction, one technical and one organic. Human, or, more generally, biological reproduction, allows one to formulate the problem of resemblance as related to the transmission of forms. Didi-Huberman argues that it is analogous to use the imprint as a means of transmission of form, involving physical contact between two agents necessary for the production of an image, or another body. The hollow sculpture destabilises the logic of the imprint by literalising the figure of the Virgin Mary who, according to Christian doctrine, is considered an uncorrupted vessel for the transmission of (the imprint of) God into human form. Malstaf’s hollow Madonna brings the moment of Annunciation to its illustrative extreme: it is the moment of contact between God and a human body, where the latter, however, is no longer a receptive and passive medium. It is a moving image-imprint itself, an image with its own breath, rather than the result of a unique and original “touch” of a pre-existing divine entity. In other words, through the described counter-motif this installation problematises our implicit notions of medium as a receptive mediating surface of a transcendent, original meaning.

Sandbible as an object-transformed-into-image is a site of co-presence of multiple references: the Bible, the story of Jesus writing in the sand. The enigmatic Madonna conflates several motifs associated with representations of the life of Mary and, as a result, appears as a generalisation of her figure. Both are temporally complex, to use Didi-Huberman’s term – anachronic objects, sites where images and elements belonging to different time periods co-exist – the Bible and the Madonna figure as past but also as contemporary objects are embedded in the contemporary context of the in-

28 Belting observes, following Aby Warburg, that “the use of pictorial motifs from Antiquity that could not claim any religious significance during the Renaissance actually may have been a means of emancipation from the icon images.” Likeness and Presence, p. 11. 29 Didi-Huberman, L’empreinte, p. 38.
stallation format. Next to this, they are anachronic in a more complex way, in that they resonate with the memory of their viewer. On this level Madonna becomes open to associations with other female characters, turning it into a transformable image.

In his article "Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm," Didi-Huberman argues that the symptom is at the heart of the temporal, bodily and semiotic models in the work of Aby Warburg. Especially his notions of pathos formula (Pathosformel) and survival (Nachleben) seem to be surprisingly relevant to the contemporary works that re-cycle religious motifs. They were introduced by Warburg as an attempt to adequately capture the polyvalence and plasticity of images and their "life", or "force" or "impersonal power" in a history of images that consists of "dialectic of rhizomes, repetitions, symptoms."

Survival refers to the continuity, or afterlife, of images and motifs throughout different historical periods, and describes the metamorphosis of bodily gestures expressing strong emotions. Pathos formulas "are ways of representing moments of high passion – life in movement – in art (and life) as recognisable signs of those passions and emotions."

Survival and pathos formulas allow for the capturing of temporal and anthropomorphic over-determination of images in our culture. Pathos formulas are: "the visible symptoms – corporeal, gestural, presented, figured – of a psychic time irreducible to the simple thread of rhetorical, sentimental, or individual turns." The notions of survival and pathos formula allow for articulation of the complex positioning of images in time, and foreground the fact that

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30 "Fatality of anachronism? That is what can separate even two perfect contemporaries such as Alberti and Fra Angelico, because they did not at all think ‘at the same time.’ Now this situation can only be qualified as ‘fatal’ – negative, destructive – from the point of view of an ideal, and therefore impoverished, conception of history itself. It is better to recognise the necessity of anachronism as something positive: it seems to be internal to the objects themselves – the images – whose history we are trying to reconstruct. In a first approximation, then, anachronism would be the temporal way of expressing the exuberance, complexity and overdetermination of images." Georges Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," Trans, Peter Mason, In: Compelling Visuality, Ed. by Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 37.


33 Didi-Huberman “Dialektik des Monstrums,” p. 622. As Didi-Huberman puts it: "When Warburg rests his eyes on a pathetic Mary Magdalene by Niccolò dell’Arca, Donatello, or Bertoldo di Giovanni, it becomes clear that gestural ‘expression’ is only symbolic in that it is first symptomatic. Here, the gestural formula ‘expresses’ solely to crystallize a moment of intensity for the female saint, which appears, above all, as a veritable rupture in the symbolic order of evangelical history. It is the moment of a contretemps in which the unbridled desire of Antique maenads is repeated in Mary Magdalene’s body." Ibid., p. 624.
corporeal representations – apart from having a specific meaning in a particular context – always have an unreadable aspect that resists univocal interpretation.  

*Madonna* is indisputably situated in a different context than the one discussed by Warburg. However, the installation includes a representation of a female figure and in this sense repeats motifs related to the iconography of Mary and uses air and accessories in motion. The moving garment of *Madonna* cannot be considered as survival in Warburg’s sense, because the sculpture does not repeat a separate gesture expressing a strong emotion. Instead, the mobile sculpture appropriates the figure of Mary; the title is an additional indication that this figure represents, or in a broader sense refers to the Christian saint. The literal presence of motion (caused by air-streams) does not repeat a pictorial formula, but rather points to the mediation of motion in still images (painting and sculpture). The literal presence of air in this case differs from representation in painting where it functions as a tool to set garments or hair in motion, which in turn is associated with the expression of strong emotion. Seen in the context of the concept of survival, the element of air, which normally stands for the Holy Spirit, acquires another meaning – it is a force that passes through things and sets them in motion. The air in *Madonna* is impossible to pin down to one meaning; it is the breath of the divine, but in reverse and, simultaneously, it is the force of the figure, which exhales, and thus “makes its own breath exterior.” *Madonna*’s quasi-rigid surface is a representation of a garment, not a real one, but it is set in motion by a real stream of air. The combination of these two elements foregrounds the fact that the figure displaces a religious icon, placing it in the space of the contemporary art gallery, and turns itself into a comment on the history of representation of the female body experiencing and expressing strong emotion.

Perhaps one of the most iconic female figures that *Madonna* resonates with is Gianlorenzo Bernini’s sculpture *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, 1645-52 (Fig. 64).  

![Image of Ecstasy of Saint Theresa by Gianlorenzo Bernini](https://example.com/bernnini_ecstasy.jpg)

The saint is reclining on a cloud and an angel is piercing her heart with an arrow; the scene is illuminated by beams of light. The ecstasy of Theresa is expressed by the complex landscape of the garment that is so dynamic that it resembles a flame. What makes these rather different female figures similar is the dynamic surface of their numerous folded garments. While in Bernini’s sculpture the emotion is conveyed by the expression of the face and the flaming garment, in *Madonna* it is both her flaming dress and the rhythm of respiration that points to ecstasy or overwhelming sadness. Her emotion,

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which “happens” on and through the surface of her transformable body, cannot be clearly interpreted. *Madonna* also places a mobile, transformable version of a familiar image from the past in a contemporary art gallery. The figure is an image-symptom, as Didi-Huberman defines the term in the critical sense – a return of the repressed that troubles our present. But a symptom of what? Certainly not of the madness of the represented figure, but rather, of the ambiguity of images, or the impossibility to reduce them to a single, fixed meaning.

Apart from pointing to the history of representation of a female body in passion, *Madonna* can also be seen in the context of another, more recent moment in the history of images. Some authors have argued that Charcot can be seen as Warburg’s predecessor in terms of his interdisciplinary approach, by building iconographic inventories while using, and in fact manipulating, the medium of photography in the observation of the body during moments of pathos. The female patients of the Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital were directed to fit to the iconography of the hysterical attack, and therefore “prove” the existence of the hysterical symptom. However, Warburg’s understanding of images of female bodies was essentially different from that of Charcot. As Didi-Huberman phrases it:

For Charcot, the hysteric is a master signifier to which everything – from the represented maenad to the present patient – must be reduced. For Warburg, on the contrary, Ninfa remains a floating signifier traipsing from one incarnation to another without anything trying to draw her limits.

For Charcot, madness was a negative category, an illness. For Warburg, in contrast, it was a positive aspect of the image that is related to the impossibility to reduce it to

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37 Didi-Huberman indicates that Schade proposes this idea, Sigrid Schade, “Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body. The pathos formula as an aesthetic staging of psychiatric discourse – A blind spot in the reception of Warburg”, *Art History*, 18: 1995, pp. 499-517. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, Trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003). 38 “Whether by recourse to hypnosis, experimentation with electric-shock therapy or through the establishment of an ‘iconography,’ Charcot’s stake remained the same: he wanted to master the differences of the symptom. And this was only concretely possible by making the hysterics themselves more mad, making them *conform to the images* that preceded them in his artistic ‘iconography.’ Therefore, the symptom’s differences could only be mastered through the development of an historical sophism, to which was added an iconographic sophism in which real, suffering bodies were forced to create themselves in the image of figures collected in atlases as ‘proofs’ of a definitively established clinical tableau” Didi-Huberman, *Dialektik des Monstrums*, p. 630. 39 Ibid., p. 631.
Fig. 64 Gianlorenzo Bernini: Ecstasy of St Teresa, 1645–52
one fixed meaning, and to the fact that as a living part of culture, the image always carries an unreadable surplus of meaning.

*Madonna* as a work of art situates itself at that crucial juncture between images and madness, where in one part of their shared history, images are used to invent the mad body and, in another part, they remain untameable, remaining complicit with the transformability of the body. If for Didi-Huberman “hysteria” is a term that stands for the terrible history of fixing the body to imaginary madness, in the case of *Madonna* it plays a role in a critical sense: as hysteria not of the body, but of the image itself. *Madonna* is a “mad” image, a mechanical object, performing its gesture in a reversed and repeated Annunciation. The moving sculpture conforms to its master-signifier – the Annunciation scene associated with an “economy incarnation” – but only to some extent. It also exceeds it because it repeats it negatively and points to the history that fixed the body of Mary as a medium of the divine. According to Warburg, this history is intertwined with another history of representation of the female body in passion. *Madonna* simultaneously shows the Virgin of the visitation and that of the annunciation and, refusing to stop there, becomes a floating signifier with multiple incarnations. *Madonna* is a symptom-image that indicates a double history: a history of the image as a master-signifier of the female body, and a counter-history of the shared madness of bodies and images.

**Shrink**

*Shrink* is designed to hold a person between two vertically hung plastic sheets and in some presentations of the installation the viewers are also invited to literally go in the artwork and experience being suspended between the two surfaces. Perhaps the central “theme”, what it first offers to the gaze, is not a particular object or even the living body suspended there, but the pressure, the radical contact that joins the two flexible and transparent surfaces of this “canvas.” The result is enigmatic; it transforms the suspended body into an image and leaves it open to many potential readings. Yet at the same time it seems to cancel any particular interpretation. Thus, *Shrink* sends the viewer’s gaze to visual models that, in this cultural context, one is currently accustomed to seeing. In a certain sense, this installation is related to the paradigm of the image-imprint, or the image generated through contact.

Didi-Huberman observes that making an imprint means creating resemblance not through imitation, but through contact. That so simple, at-first-glance gesture, as Didi-Huberman shows, should be considered as a complex practice that proliferates
in different areas of cultural production that exceed what we identify as visual art. As such it occupies a central place in our (implicit) notions of medium, technicity and image. The imprint suspends what we would call mimetic modality of the image; in most cases it consists of negatives, counter-forms and dissemblances, which require a specific type of seeing, a gaze that not only just sees, but has to search and actively interpret. It is a fact that its conceptual correlate – the notion of trace strongly resonates with some philosophical vocabularies and in particular with projects concerned with critique of the notion of origin. The imprint embodies, as well as opens, different layers of time and never presents itself as a simple image. It oscillates between being in contact with the origin or being its loss, between being the manifestation of authenticity of presence or the loss of that authenticity through technical reproduction, between producing the unique or the serial, between resemblance and dissemblance, between decision and accident, between the same and the other, between presence and loss, absence.\textsuperscript{40} The simple gesture of making an imprint is one of the oldest technical gestures in the human history, or a “technical survival.”

\textit{Shrink} is centred upon a technical inversion in a stronger sense than \textit{Madonna}, since it reproduces the very constellation required to make an imprint. Considered in the context of the paradigm of the image-imprint, \textit{Shrink} performs a double substitution, namely a temporal and a material one: temporal because it reproduces the \textit{moment of making} the imprint, and material because it substitutes the opaque support with an entirely transparent and flexible surface. Instead of being presented with a trace, which is normally interpreted as evidence that “someone was here” or “something took place”, the viewer is confronted with the presence of a body transformed into a living, breathing image. It is no longer the loss of the body, its absence, that is relevant – as would be the case with a real imprint; but neither is it simply the presence of the body. The real imprint usually left on an opaque surface is substituted with the living body that is supposed to produce it.

In \textit{Shrink} the tension between the transparency of the plastic sheets and the opacity of the suspended body makes possible the exposure of the body as technology, but it also builds this image as a living screen. In that sense it resonates with the pregnancy of \textit{Madonna}, and points to two technologies for reproduction, or transmission of forms: one technical (the imprint) and one organic (the pregnancy). That transparent screen, however, cannot possibly be part of a process that would form another living body – just as \textit{Madonna} is not pregnant; it is a hollow sculpture filled with a stream of air. At that point \textit{Shrink} problematises resemblance as a fundamental aspect of visual objects. We are no longer looking at a negative resemblance, or a coun-

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 19.
ter-form, or an imprint. Instead, the installation presents a self-forming body, an image that creates itself.

The artist’s vacuum-packed body is not presented simply as a “body.” If it were, nothing interesting, nothing of the order of the symptom would be visible. It is, instead, transformed into a screen-image, and its frame is precisely the contact. The pressure of the air between the two surfaces is an invisible element that frames and embraces the body, pointing to motifs belonging to different cultural contexts: vacuum-packed food, a crucifix. Shrink reiterates the pneumatic pregnancy of Madonna to the extent that it, quite literally, contains a body. This reading is perhaps disputable, since a straightforward relationship to the mentioned visual models is difficult to establish. Shrink and Madonna refer to Christian iconography through inverted resemblances. Several inverted themes are simultaneously present on the surface of Shrink, thus creating a montage, a constellation of images seemingly removed from one another. The installation is a place where all these themes overlap, yet it simultaneously cancels out every single one of them, resisting a univocal reading.

Sandbible is a self-deconstructing book that contains sand, the sand of flesh, as Lacan would have it. Madonna, then, suggests a virginal womb, the place where the Word becomes flesh. This virginal womb, in turn, is made transparent in Shrink, and thus functions as an “interruption” of one of the intriguing visual formulas in religious painting – the pregnancy of Mary as invisibility invested with a divine presence. In addition, Shrink exceeds the logic of the imprint because it is a moving image. The way air and breathing are used constitutes one of the major inversions or counter-motifs in the installation. The air, which is gradually sucked out of the space between the two plastic sheets, corresponds to the exhalation that gradually collapses the figure of Madonna. The literal presence of air in the two installations points to its expressive potential in painting and simultaneously reiterates the very old cultural constellation of meanings associated with breathing – most generally life, but also, soul and spirit.41 Figures of air or wind in Italian Renaissance art became central for Warburg’s understanding of the pathos formula and survival.42 No matter how much later the installation followed Botticelli’s paintings, they have something in common: air. For Warburg, air or wind is the “fluid par excellence”; it not only “profoundly touches the things it

41 Also, curiously enough, the entry on Aesthetics in Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (1998) states that: “Aisthesis descends from a word meaning ‘to breathe’, an archaic metaphor or perception as pneumatic […] Things, as it were, breathe themselves out, we, as it were, breathe them in, and on this etymological view aisthesis is of a piece with life itself.” Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 1, p. 428.
passes over”, but constitutes a “means of figuration.” As Didi-Huberman phrases this:

It is a particular movement or a trembling, a particular disturbance of surfaces, a symptom, an index of strangeness that affects a single body and, by the same token, signals itself as a spiritus, a bearer of thoughts and the movements of the affects.

The expressive potential of air as the fluid force that touches and moves surfaces makes Shrink and Botticelli’s Birth of Venus resemble each other. Venus’ fluid hair, painted and thus made to freeze in a still image resembles the artist’s hair locked between the two plastic sheets. The air that is gradually sucked out of the space between the two surfaces in Shrink functions as a means of figuration, and simultaneously as a sculpting force. The pressure of the air embraces the body not in floating folds of a garment but produces a quasi-rigid sculpture. It acts on the surface of the body, the symptomal location par excellence. But does the air in this case serve as an “index for the movements of the soul”? Perhaps all these frozen folds function as a symptom of the extreme tension between a frozen, sculpted image and the pulsating life of the body. In other words, they are a symptom of the tension between the still image, as the presence of an absence, as something that mortifies its object, and the image as a living object that presents, announces itself and no longer simply re-presents. 

Sandbible, Madonna and Shrink are contemporary artworks in which the body re-surfaces, once again, as an object-symptom. They show how religion or art try to gain mastery over the body by fixing it in images, and at the same time demonstrate that the body’s great transformability eludes master-signifiers. Shrink and Madonna are not representations of the body in the proper sense of the word; they do not show an image of the body, nor do they define it as a medium of another image. The two works re-interpret the idea of incarnation, which is still implicitly present in our notions of what a medium is. They present the body no longer as the medium of an external, invisible, divine master-signifier. In other words, the installations question the opposition between body and soul, flesh and spirit, which is so deeply carved into Western culture. By drawing upon the history of anthropomorphic representations, these installations call for another way of both imaging and imagining the body as medium of its own image, in its power to create itself.