The ghost artist

*Tracing spectral embodiment as a figure of aesthetic resistance, in an unknown woman’s eighteenth century paintings, and works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois*

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Tracing spectral embodiment as a figure of aesthetic resistance, in an unknown woman’s C18th century paintings, and works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois.
THE GHOST ARTIST

Tracing spectral embodiment as a figure of aesthetic resistance, in an unknown woman's Eighteenth century paintings, and works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois.

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The Ghost Artist
Tracing spectral embodiment as a figure of aesthetic resistance, in works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois.

With The Ghost Artist, I seek to define a conceptual figurine hovering within the work of women artists who have rejected portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. Traced as a spectral representation of the body, this figurine resists visual naturalism in favour of a fantasised approach to portrayal, created out of self-knowing aesthetic stand-ins. These stand-ins reconfigure the skin of a unified, naturalistic body image, and offer a partial, multiple, and permeable idea of the subject in its place.

Surprised recognition of my own artistic approach in a notebook of paintings by an anonymous eighteenth-century artist, became the starting point of an analysis that concludes these paintings were most likely created by a woman artist. Her entwining of detailed observational study with an imaginative exploration of her inner world is then traced, as a method, in the works of two other women working roughly one and two hundred years later: in serial works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois that are also considered in terms of the close attention they gave to materials close to their lived, bodily experience. A commonality of practice is found in this choice to create artworks from such contact with surfaces that would have been intimately known from the sensing side of each artist’s skin. I argue that this intimate knowledge was the conduit through which their work also reproduces, or holds, something of their life experience, as image. This reading of the artwork as a ghostly ‘holder’ is also bound into the seriality of the selected works, as it is an idea of the body as a diffracted form that requires the viewer to collaborate in imagining a unity from parts that are never all visible at the same time. This spectral body, hovering on the edge of vision, is traced with new research into the little-studied notebook, and The Paintings for the Temple by Af Klint. These are interpreted within a psychoanalytic framework more familiar to readings of the work of Bourgeois, whose Cells are considered in a case study focused on their visually permeable skins.

Unfurling these ideas backwards in time has created a genealogy of a spectral form of portraiture, held within things, and within which a woman portrayed ‘as’ thing is also present. The Ghost Artist focuses on case studies that resist and return this dehumanisation, traced as a metaphorical body, and revealed within the ‘skins’ of eighteenth century firewood, nineteenth century maps and embroideries, and twentieth century rooms and cages. These bodies insist upon a displaced form of presence, in which the classical self-portrait, with its emphasis on the skin, and its potential for self-alienation, is returned as an aesthetic vitality, found within the re-presented skins of actual domestic objects. This feminist re-scripting of objectification imagines the body as a situation in time, rather than a static thing. It is an approach I found within older women’s practices, and it may be that it takes half a lifetime to find a way to work out, and work with, the rage that these works, in their different ways, all insist upon. It is a self-realisation as image that continues to resonate with women’s cultural needs today.

As a work of artistic research, The Ghost Artist is itself ghosted by the fictional tale of Jess, a middle-aged woman who is written into its margins. It is further interwoven with reproductions of the writer’s own serial stand-in bodies, The Ice Cream Paintings (2008–2016), and D.I. Y. (2014–present).
De fantoom kunstenaar
Spectrale belichaming als esthetische opstand in de vrouwelijke kunstenaarspraktijk, en zijn seriële sporen in het werk van een anoniem achttiende-eeuwse kunstenaar, Hilma af Klint, en Louise Bourgeois.

Met The Ghost Artist probeer ik de conceptuele figuur te definieren die in het werk van vrouwelijke kunstenaars aanwezig is, die de portretkunst hebben afgezworen als een adequate wijze van vastlegging van een leven waarin objectificatie een aan den lijve beleefde realiteit is. Opgevat als een spectrale representatie van het lichaam ontstijgt deze figuur een visueel naturalistische weergave. In plaats daarvan is een gefantaseerde wijze van portretteren gekomen, die van zichzelf bewuste, esthetische stand-ins van de kunstenaar toont.

Deze stand-ins geven nieuwe vormen aan de huid van het eenvormige, naturalistische lichaamsbeeld en vervangen deze door een gedeeltelijke, meervoudige en doorlaatbare weergave van de geportretteerde.

Tot mijn verrassing herkende ik veel van mijn eigen artistieke benadering terug in een notitieboek van schilderingen van een anonieme achttiende-eeuwse kunstenaar, wat leidde tot een nader onderzoek van deze werken. Mijn conclusie is dat ze hoogstwaarschijnlijk gemaakt zijn door een vrouwelijke kunstenaar. Haar gedetailleerde observaties gecombineerd met een verbeeldingsrijke exploratie van de eigen innerlijke wereld heb ik als methode teruggevonden in het seriële werk van twee andere vrouwelijke kunstenaars, die respectievelijk grofweg 100 en 200 jaar later leefden: Hilma af Klint en Louise Bourgeois. Ook hun werken worden bestudeerd in het licht van hun nadrukkelijk gebruik van bepaalde materialen, waarmee zij een nauwe, lijfelijke band hadden. Hun kunstenaarspraktijk vertoont overeenkomsten in de keuze om werken te maken die voortkomen uit een dergelijk contact met materiële oppervlakken, waarvan zij door huidcontact ieder een intieme, zintuiglijke kennis hadden. De centrale stelling in mijn onderzoek is dan ook dat deze intieme, zintuiglijke kennis als kanaal fungeert voor de weergave van de levenservaring van deze kunstenaars in hun beeldende werk. De lezing van het kunstwerk als verschijning en container wordt versterkt door de serialiteit van de geselecteerde kunstwerken, die het idee van het lichaam als een gefragmenteerde vorm weerspiegelt.

De beschouwer wordt als het ware uitgenodigd om bij te dragen aan de verbeelding van de eenheid van de delen, die nooit in hun geheel tegelijkertijd zichtbaar zijn. Dit spectrale lichaam, dat grenst aan een visioen, wordt hier voor het eerst getraceerd in het notitieboekje van de achttiende-eeuwse kunstenaar en Af Klint’s serie Schilderijen voor de Tempel. Deze worden geïnterpreteerd binnen een psychoanalytisch kader, dat meestal is voorbehouden aan de duiding van Louise Bourgeois’ werken. In een aparte case study ga ik dieper in op de visueel doorlaatbare huid van haar serie Cells.

Door deze opvattingen teruggaand in de tijd te ontvouwen, is er een genealogie van de spectrale portretvorm ontstaan. De gepportretteerde is gevat in objecten, waarbij ook de notie van de ‘vrouw als object’ een plaats heeft. In The Ghost Artist wordt deze ontmenschelijking in een aantal case studies aan het licht gebracht en weerlegd: de ‘huid’ van achttiende-eeuws brandhout, negentiende-eeuwse kaarten en borduurwerk en twintigste-eeuwse kamers en kooien wordt beschreven als metafoor voor het lichaam. De lichamen benadrukken een verdrongen aanwezigheid, waarmee het klassieke zelfportret — met zijn nadruk op de huid, die vervreemding van het Zelf in de hand werkt — een nieuwe esthetische vitaliteit krijgt dankzij de weergave van de textuur van alledaagse objecten. De op deze wijze tot stand gebrachte feministische overschrijving van het begrip objectificatie benadert het lichaam eerder als een in de tijd geplaatste situatie dan als een statisch ding. Deze benadering heb ik gevonden in de kunstenaarspraktijk van de genoemde kunstenaars op het moment dat zij oudere vrouwen waren geworden. Misschien kost het nu eenmaal een half leven om een manier te vinden de woede — die in alle bestudeerde werken op uiteenlopende manieren zijn van zich laat spreken — in het creatieve proces in te zetten. Deze zelfrealisatie in het beeld blijft relevant voor de culturele behoeften van vrouwen vandaag de dag.

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If I were an architect, an architect in love, I would redesign my body. Mail you the blueprints. Redraw. I’d move my blood lines to make rivers in places you would like to swim. I’d use my muscle to shore up hills; I’d use my ribs to pile bridges from here to there (delicate little bridges that would sail above my heart). I’d paint the interior of my skin with birds and light; my breasts would be two small mountains you would sleep between; my feet the boats upon which you flow through time; my eyes the mirror you most deeply crave; my two mouths the music that wakes you to a city you’ve always wanted to call home.

1

These anonymous words were hand written onto the architectural blue print of a building that was never built, and found by Peggy Phelan when she visited an archive dedicated to these well planned out dreams. I found it on page 22 of her book, Mourning Sex, Routledge, London, 1997.
Once upon a time, a young artist painted a watercolour of a naked woman on her knees, facing a naked standing man. The woman’s arms hung loosely by her sides and her hands were marked with blood. The kitchen knife on the ground was streaked with red and the man’s guts were sliced open from chest to groin. The woman looked, not up, but straight ahead at her work. It was *The Earnest Search for Love*, a painting of a young woman’s bewilderment in the face of her cultural conditioning, and the moment when, in a confusion of knife and brush, she transformed a transgressive desire into an image. Disallowed rage was described in its sublimation into an art work—a fantasy of how the given power structure might be otherwise. The woman’s stained hands were at rest as she took in the new image forming in the bloody mirror now in front of her.

Claiming the right to look, and to make pictures from what we see is a political act, as those with the most rights define what it is that we all see. *The Earnest Search for Love* was a painting of a woman on her knees, searching for a way to cope with this violent truth of the image. It was a small watercolour, it was mine, and I had made it because I could not understand. I see now that it depicted a desperate claim for the right to make my own picture, but I also know that, at the time, my earnest search was not really ‘thought.’ This was the first trace of knowledge that was difficult for me to think, that strained against my received world view of ‘how things are.’ I had forgotten about it, but it came floating back with the arrival of an old book of watercolours that also portrays intimate domestic scenes and half-formed images. These are not of blood and guts, but this leathery old book-body had surfaced towards me like an unnamed corpse, and *The Earnest Search for Love* had surfaced with it, a body from my inner archive. Together, they were pointing the way to what was not yet a concept.
I see now that the image I drew as forming out of blood and guts had been my recognition that, while an anatomical dissection will not reveal the mysteries of emotional life, a representation of the things we are able to see and touch could be a way to register those experiences that cut invisibly through all our bodies. A series of anonymous watercolours, jumping out at me from an undated manuscript, was bringing this back into renewed focus. I wasn’t sure where the bodies were this time, but the quickening attention that tied this anonymous book to a painting that was now only a memory, heralded what would become The Ghost Artist, a story of invisibly present bodies, in Ghostly Matters, sociologist Avery Gordon (1958–) considers this quickening, and what it can mean when cultural objects seem to hold barely visible content, or when a form seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. 2

Ghostly Matters reveals the way repressed historical narratives can be traced through their exclusion from our histories, in seemingly invisible remains that nevertheless leave some sort of trace. The manuscript is a physically present object in the world, but it has no title, or record of who painted the fifty-two watercolours resting between its covers, where they did it, or when. Something in the artist’s method had drawn me affectively towards it, but I had virtually no ‘cold knowledge’ of the book’s provenance, and the floating worlds painted on its pages left me with the tingling notion that I was looking into a woman’s world however, and I wanted to understand more.

The archival records are slight, but in Part One, I consider what is already written, and go on to follow the material and cultural signposts that date the book. A preoccupation with time begins as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is platonization of women’s ageing that draws together the ideas of many recent thinkers, 3 however The Ghost Artist focusses on the image, the way some older women artists have worked with ideas of the body in their mid and later years, and returned imagery to the world that both acknowledges the scab, and fills the gap site beneath with new forms of body. In three case studies, I reveal a spectral figure that I argue is the holder for this artistic movement, a figure taken up by women who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. The new forms of ‘stand-in’ bodies that I find within the work of the anonymous manuscript artist, Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), all circumvent this visible body, and offer fantastised forms of portrayal that allow the experience of life, which is obscured by objectification, to be shared. Together, these case studies suggest a genealogy, a way of working consistent from the late Enlightenment to the twenty-first century.

Many of our contemporary stereotypes of older women have their roots in old witch imagery, but looking through it did not lead me to an art history of commissioned oil paintings. It led to more populist images, the printing press, and the early years of mechanical reproduction. Etchings and woodcuts spread rapidly through seventeenth century Europe as the spread of print technology allowed more and more people to see, own, and share pictures. A popular format of this dispersal was the Emblem book, and looking at the ways older women were depicted in these, introduced me to the now outmoded but poetic form of an Emblem, an amalgamation of “symbolic pictures, usually accompanied by mottoes and […] often also by a prose commentary.” 4 This approach to words in relation to images, which Emblem historian Mara Wade (1954–) defines as ‘a process of reciprocal reading of texts and images, whereby the back and forth between the words and the pictures creates meaning’, 5 resonated with my experience of painting, where thinking often happens more with congealing liquids than with words. A structure that encouraged a shuttling ‘back and forth’ relationship of intersecting meanings, gaps and overlaps, presented a way to write that might avoid the neutering capacities of the word.

The essay Two Ends of the Emblem, by art historian James Elkins (1955–) focuses on the point where these gaps widen. 6

2 Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological, 1997, p. 8

3 More evidence of this, still current, misogyny I was looking for, but the erasure that it covered. 7 Somehow, this indeterminate ghost was reminding me that although women’s bodies are richly scattered throughout art history, their busy lives are barely registered, and as they age, a faltering number of stereotypes become the scabs that cover an expanding cultural gap site.

In 2013, Lynne Segal (1944–) published an affirmative contemplation of women’s ageing that draws together the ideas of many recent thinkers, however The Ghost Artist focusses on the image, the way some older women artists have worked with ideas of the body in their mid and later years, and returned imagery to the world that both acknowledges the scab, and fills the gap site beneath with new forms of body. In three case studies, I reveal a spectral figure that I argue is the holder for this artistic movement, a figure taken up by women who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. The new forms of ‘stand-in’ bodies that I find within the work of the anonymous manuscript artist, Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), all circumvent this visible body, and offer fantastised forms of portrayal that allow the experience of life, which is obscured by objectification, to be shared. Together, these case studies suggest a genealogy, a way of working consistent from the late Enlightenment to the twenty-first century.

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The essay Two Ends of the Emblem, by art historian James Elkins focuses on the point where these gaps widen.
Emblem book imagery was often simply drawn and easy to reproduce, and lent itself to being played around with. Two Ends of the Emblem explores this, and how initially related emblem parts were sometimes reworked until what may originally have been a concise locus of meanings becomes something quite opaque. The loss of image readability was perhaps at the core of my middle-aged-artist questions, as personal visual codes falling away, losing their context and the meanings they once had, were becoming my life. My social definition as a woman was changing, and I had been tracking this in pareidolic paintings of melting ice cream figurines and barely balanced household debris. It was, therefore, with curiosity that I turned the page to see what the deliquescent Emblem book would be. The answer was the untitled manuscript, full of watercolours, and known only by its archival designation: MS Ferguson 115. Elkins writes of this enigmatic and anonymous object as "one of the most amazing manuscripts the author has ever seen," and reveals that its key is to notice that each painting uses the framing device of a cut cross-section of a tree trunk or branch. Within the age rings and bark of these painted log-ends, the artist conjures up imagined worlds. The brush strokes that define each of the circular log-ends entangle themselves with these interior scenes as they spiral inwards towards a transforming heart wood. Unsure if it even is an Emblem book, Elkins explores suggestions of alchemical and mystical symbolism.

Within the archival gaps, imagined worlds, and uncracked codes of this possible Emblem book, I recognized paintings that had been created with a technique similar to the one I brought to ice cream. It is a way of generating surprises, and it was also the bloody mirror of The Earnest Search for Love. It relies on meditative staring, and as I began to return this, with slow looking at these deforming and reforming patterns of wood, the record of a life rose out of the surreal combinations of alchemical, botanical, and religious symbolism. As time ran through my own body like it was an open mesh, the manuscript paper, and its imagery, slowly found places and times. Echoes of different semiotic systems and historically traceable fashion details pointed towards central European wars, and historic battles for minds and spirits. As this is a book of paintings, the only textual clues are in the short Latin dedication on the first page. Its wording suggests an alchemical treatise, and the symbolic Ouroboros, the snake of eternity, swims throughout, tying these magical worlds to a pre-Enlightenment world view, while other references point to early Romantic pre-occupations. My 'supposedly well-trained eyes' would go on to locate this pivotal moment in history more precisely, but the trace of the woman I thought to be the maker of this world would remain tantalizingly on the edge of vision. She did remain however, and The Ghost Artist is the story of her trace as it unfolds out of her paintings, and then goes on to unfold, as a method, in the work...
of other women artists living one, and two hundred years after this book was made. I was looking at a way of working, a way of seeing the world.

The emblem method that I had been exploring when I came to the manuscript, has also remained, and it has become the structuring device of this book. The Ghost Artist takes on the three viewpoints that emblems offer—the image, a short motto, and a longer text—and disfracts this triad construction across these pages as a whole. This embeds an analytic text within a collection of images that work alongside its stated points, and shadows these with another form of writing, not the motto, but a broken fictional narrative. With the gaps and overlaps between these three forms, I hope that other sorts of gaps, those of history and invisible interiority, might somehow breach into visibility.

Images appear as both objects of study, and painted outcomes of it. These outcomes, my paintings, performatively mark the abstract body of these written thoughts, and act as resting places throughout the text.

Emblematic mottoes have been replaced by a story, the tale of a middle-aged woman whose life is written into the margins. Jess’s tale of desire juggles the problem that “If what I want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the “I” is a moving target, the very goal of a misnomer. I am, in my desire, negotiating what has been wanted of me.” Her involuntary engagement with this feeding, gutting loop of life, and her tense awareness of time passing, tell their own ghostly story.

The longer emblematic text has become this writing. As the artist of The Earliest Search, looking has been my primary method of research, but to bring these ideas into definition, I have been drawn to how women thinkers conceive of the world, and the key ideas I work with are weighted towards the literary. Here is my desire turning into the making of a misnomer. By merging imaginative embodiment with the idea of spectral embodiment could be explored. Presenting this analysis, as part of an emblematic structure balanced by fiction and images, is an experiment in artistic history writing.

It attempts a crystalline structure that might catch the light of both analysis and imagination, as they each, from their differing angles, seek to define the shape of an absence.

This absence is the missing art historical body of women’s lives. Women’s forms are scattered throughout art history, but their daily lives are rarely told stories in an historical narrative that stops at their skins. I had an idea that the manuscript was trying to tell such a story, if only I could find the right angle from which to see it. Could the spectral gap that the artist’s anonymity defines, be an example of the wider cultural gap site that is the image record of women’s preoccupations and ways of seeing the world? As the established codes of art history work with economy—names, dates, places, payments—either relating to the artist, the commissioner, or the subject portrayed, the lack of all of these had denied the manuscript a meaningful place in the art historical record. So, while its leathery cultural body is physically preserved, its nameless skin leaves its dynamic inner life virtually unknown. Such an object is an apt stand-in for the many nameless women of art history, and The Ghost Artist establishes how this presence of an absent subject might be performed, and goes on to ask whether this can be framed as an example of a revenant return of ghosted female subjectivity that is traceable, as a formal approach, in the work of others.

In The Apparitional Lesbian, historian Terry Castle (1953–) also looks for an invisible woman, and records how, as someone unresponsive to the economy of male desire, the lesbian was widely considered not to exist before around 1900. Castle’s analysis reveals that she was nevertheless actively written into literary history, and there to be seen in early film; a figure that was present but somehow unrecognisable, a mere apparition in the eyes of a readership culturally conditioned not to recognize her form. By studying the material of another, Castle is able to document her historic presence. The other woman rumoured to live in this no-man’s land outside of the male desire economy is the ageing one, and The Ghost Artist seeks to define her outline within the cultural body of the manuscript, The Paintings for the Temple, by Hilma af Klint and the Cells of Louise Bourgeois. A woman’s outline, and skin, are among her greatest vulnerabilities within the powerful social economy of the image however, and I argue that it is in re-thinking how a skin might be represented, that the stand-in figures within these artist’s works portray this vulnerable embodiment.

The paintings of the manuscript begin as studies of wooden surfaces. Searching for images within the dents and stains of ageing logs, the artist treated these like black mirrors, seeing into them, conjuring form out of the marks, cracks, and rotted holes of everyday firewood. Letting her imagination work slowly into such familiar materials was a different order of study to the recording of confirmable visual data. This artist saw herself in her imaginative projections, and recorded a wooden ‘skin’ that was both there, and not really there. By merging imaginative seeing-in with observation, she was creating another sort of body portraying. Seeing herself in another form, that of a piece of wood, was a way to separate self-portrayal from body mimesis.
This is an idea I go on to explore with contemporary ideas of psychological embodiment. These were not part of the Enlightenment world-view the manuscript grew out of, but, while all artworks are residues of the cultures that made them, they also perform in relation to what we as contemporary viewers are able to see. This is what Castle laid bare, and it is a position art historian Mieke Bal (1946–), in Quoting Caravaggio, calls the constantly ‘re-visioning’ viewpoint of the present, where we all eternally live. We are also produced by a constantly morphing present, and art works in effect morph with us, shape-shifting in the ways they can be seen. The Ghost Artist has been written from Bal’s eternal present, with Castle’s magnifying glass in hand, and an old Emblem book for a pattern.

An apparitional figure rises out of this, one that rejects portraiture as an adequate form of portrayal. Women’s representation as images created for the pleasure of others has been their historic subversion beneath an objectifying cultural gaze, a social reality that much of art history has both reflected and reiterated. This powerful cultural force slides over the gaps left by women’s unrecorded lives; the ghosted subjectivities that lie silently beneath it. In Part Two I employ a Lacanian understanding of this force to think about the manuscript as a more fantastic form of portrayal, and I connect the liberating potential of such imagining to more contemporary artworks that at first, I only sensed inhabited these unmarked graves. The Ghost Artist is the path this haunting recognition took in becoming the ‘cold knowledge’ needed to define these relations.

Inscription in the art historical record is further explored in an analysis of a curatorial experiment by Scottish artist Fiona Jardine (1976–). The 2011 exhibition Troglydites also sought to tease apart the seemingly secure relationship between body description and subject description that portraiture historically represents. Jardine was given access to the collections of Paisley Museum, and from these, she selected a group of commissioned portrait paintings that she presented alongside a group of ceramic pots. In a set of visual relationships carefully choreographed around a written text and the museum’s titles plates, the power of naming was re-distributed, and Jardine was able to reveal portraiture as primarily an emblematic, rather than a naturalistic, vessel of identity. I consider how the artist’s ‘re-visioning’ destabilized the dominance of traditional portraiture as an adequate portrayal of a subject, and moved the viewer towards an understanding of the imaginative, fantasising potential of other sorts of cultural mirrors. Setting this in relation to the destabilised self-portrayals of painter Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) and photographer Cindy Sherman (1954–), the specific function the manuscript artist asked of her blackly mirroring logs comes into renewed focus.

The essential cultural role of such a displaced image of subjectivity is one visual theorist Peggy Phelan (1948–) points to in Mourning Sex, when she writes that

Endless looking for an interior beneath the surface of the bodies and images with which we are forever ensnared is the catastrophe of living (in)skin. Skinned alive, our bodies are sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths. Phelan is interested in those who struggle to find their identities performatively returned to them within culture, and in how the temporality of performance, its constant renewal, might offer a form capable of touching on this. My approach to the manuscript both acknowledges and responds to this need for ‘endless looking for an interior beneath the surface’ in its serial re-imaging of what a meaningful reflection might look like, when the mirror that was this artist’s cultural world, returned only her absence back to her. Mourning the passage of time, of life, is deeply inscribed in the choice of the log as a stand-in for such an absent body, marked as it by its annual age rings, and destined for the flames. Seeing the outline of an invisible Self within such images, is to both see, and suggest that the artist saw, a ghost. However, as Maria Pilar Blanco (d.o.b. unknown) and Esther Peeren (1976–), in Conceptualizing Spectralities, make clear, while a ghost may have insight to offer, especially into those matters that are commonly considered not to matter [...] the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside it, excluded from perception and, consequently, from both the archive as the depository of the sanctioned, acknowledged past and politics as the (re)imagined present and future.

The manuscript spends its days in a university archive, but as a ‘tangible ambiguity’ with virtually no contextualising identity. The speculative figure I conjure from its pages is also far from what the ‘sanctioned, acknowledged past’ has so far considered to be there. This figure is, additionally, one that has been ‘commonly considered not to matter’, that of an older woman. The artist’s sketchy grasp of human anatomy reveals she was probably untrained, a lack of access suggested by every brush stroke made as she tries, nevertheless, to picture her world. Her outline within the shadows of her stand-in, wooden, multiple body reveals a form that might hold our deaths, a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.
In Jess’s mind a clear cryogenic vessel overflowed with liquid nitrogen, which boiled forever down and outwards with her need to burn. This as a possibility. To look at the mirror on the wall, and paint what she saw there, would not have achieved this result, as the visible surface of her skin was also the location of her objectification, or loss of subjectivity. Asking an actual domestic object to stand in for this presented a vehicle of return with which she could insistently record her lived experience, while also acknowledging its obliteration within the given cultural forms of record-keeping in her time. Seeing life within the bounding surfaces of interchangeable, inert, and unfeeling bits of wood is to return a vision of a silent domestic object, through which subjectivity nevertheless relentlessly presses.

Such knowing, metaphorical, possession is also traceable in The Paintings for the Temple, by Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. This cycle of paintings was created in the early years of the twentieth century, but was virtually unknown until the early 2000’s. Like the manuscript, Af Klint’s work has been held within an archive, but barely exhibited by an art world that has only recently become interested. For fifty years they existed as art world ghosts, in an ironic material re-enactment of the invisible spirits that the artist wrote of as haunting her own interiority. From the age of 44, Af Klint strove to find a visual form for these inner experiences, and previous commentaries on the artist’s work have mostly focussed on approaches to The Paintings for the Temple suggested by the ways the artist herself wrote about this process. By looking at the work itself however, and connecting it with previously un-researched aspects of the artist’s life, I have found connections to the Af Klint family’s map making history, and to the Swedish Life Reform movement, to which many of the artist’s friends dedicated their lives. Aligning the material skins of the paintings, as objects, with maps of the sea, I find a metaphor for the body of the culturally invisible creative woman, tattooed and returned to visibility through pages, round and through a sculpture, round a room, to which many of the artist’s friends dedicated their lives. The patterns embedded therein repeat embroidery patterns from Adelborg’s collection of folk textiles, built up as part of a wider cultural impetus to preserve Swedish traditions. They are the patterns anonymously designed by countless peasant women seeking to decorate their lives in remote farming communities. Brought into the part-bodies of a cycle of paintings conceived as a single entity, like the fifty-two paintings of the anonymous manuscript, The Paintings for the Temple unite these personal and political image histories within a cyclical body that is infused with the permeating force of light as a sexually freeing concept within Nordic Romanticism.

The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.

The conceptual figure of return that these light-filled paintings define, and which connects them to the manuscript, comes back in a different form within the visually permeable skins of the late Cell cycle by French American artist Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois entered psychoanalysis when she was forty, and her later work is deeply informed by her understanding of this approach to ourselves in the world. Her first brush with Freudian ideas had been in the Paris of her youth however, when she had mingled with the Surrealists. She never joined this artistic movement, but her later work revisits Surrealist approaches to the submerged forces of the unconscious. The men of Surrealism had been motivated by the revolutionary potential of transgressive desire, but Bourgeois redirected their approach to make sense of their method in relation to her female experience. I will argue that the taboo she consistently touches on is not that of transgressive desire, but socially disallowed female rage. In my final chapter, A Room of One’s Own, I explore how the transparent conceptual figure I trace in the shadows of the manuscript, and in the light filled bodies of the Temple world ghosts, can be traced in the Cells in its angry form. These are sculptural bodies that we literally see ‘through.’ With the invasive power of vision, we cut into dirty cages filled with an algae of mutilated body parts, often placed within a litter of used up domesticity. Catching sight of ourselves mirrored into this world, through skins of glass and wire walls, we become affectively entwined in the artist’s screaming structures. I have approached The Paintings for the Temple and the manuscript with the same psychoanalytic ideas that are commonly used to explore Bourgeois’ work, and looking back in this way may only be possible from a present that includes the Cells. However, all these bodies-of-work resonate with a similar, insistent, thrum of internal life that these ideas merely give words to. Each visual realisation of this finally metaphorical carrier of this life has been found within the skin of a domestic object. These stand-ins, for the visible skins of the women who made them, are given aesthetic vitality through the meditative re-presentation of the sight and touch of the world at their hand’s reach, the world experienced every day from inside those skins. In finding a conceptual metaphor for the visible object mingled with invisibility, these aesthetic bodies offer artistic resting places for the endless seeker ‘sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.’ To see these bodies-of-work, which are built up in serial form, we are obliged to dance in time, looking back, forward, sometimes around, building meaning from bits and pieces as our oscillations, through pages, round and through a sculpture, round a room, require both memory and imagination to patch readings together out of parts. From its continual present, the dance takes us back to a speculative reading of an old book as an...
anonymous record of an ageing woman, negotiating picture-making in an attempt to make sense of her inner world. The dance finds her tracing her life within an aesthetic field that possibly offered her no other mirror, and that is only being recognised and valued now, centuries later.
PART ONE: SHADOWS AND LIGHT
The anonymous manuscript is a hand-painted book of water-colours, not a printed book, and is in the collection of Glasgow University library. It is known only by its archival designation, MS Ferguson 115, and dated by the library as being painted between 1699 and 1799. It is unsigned and is an almost entirely unstudied artefact of high invisibility. It is part of the Ferguson Collection of Books and Manuscripts, 7500 volumes collected by John Ferguson (1838–1916), bibliographer and Professor of Chemistry at the university from 1874 to 1915. Ferguson’s professional interests led him to collect all he could on the early roots of his subject, and the collection is focussed on alchemy, early chemistry, witchcraft, Cabbalism, Rosicrucianism, Free Masonry, and Romany literature. It includes 317 manuscripts, nearly entirely alchemical in nature. Ferguson’s book collection was purchased by the university from his estate in 1921.

The manuscript’s fifty-two hand painted watercolours are held within blank boards 196 x 153 mm in size and covered in worn, fawn coloured leather. The end papers have, sadly, been torn out. On the inside front cover is a bookplate of the Victorian collector Edward Hailstone (1818–90). This is the only link to the book’s history before it came to John Ferguson, but there is no record of when the book entered Ferguson’s collection. However, Hailstone’s book collection was split when he died, going either to the collection of York Minster, or the sale rooms of Sotheby’s in London (4–14 February 1891, and at Walton Hall, Yorkshire 2–7 Feb 1891). By this time, Ferguson was a professor and spending a lot of time buying books. It is possible that he purchased MS Ferguson 115 at one of these auctions. I found the Sotheby’s auction catalogues in the British Library, but a day spent reading every listed item of sale led to nothing. The book may have been sold as a parcel listed simply as ‘miscellaneous chap-books’ but there is no further information.

My first encounter with MS 115 had been with four black and white reproductions, and, despite their dismal quality, a frisson of uncanny recognition had stolen up my neck. Delicate paintings of the cut ends of fire logs revealed bark and outer age rings, but heart wood that transformed into clouds, figures, and strange animals. These magical worlds bridged into my own, and in the absence of any further online resources, I decided to visit the archive.

The paraphernalia of a reading room are the everyday of academic life, but the winged foam supports, clustered on tables and slung with the beaded silk stockings of page holders, had an animistic presence to my artist eyes. As I silently sucked them in, and adjusted to the voiceless rustling of the room, I was also trying hard not to be disappointed. The manuscript is — modest. The size of a biggish paperback, and 200-year old used. The plain leather cover is worn and rubbed, as if it had been carried around a lot in a bag. It most closely resembles an old sketch book, which is what it probably is. Resting on its winged support, it gushed ‘mistake.’ There were too many angels and badly drawn kings and queens, bad drawing generally in fact, and so much brown. Why had I ever thought this might be interesting? And yet. Pages 13, 14, page 27, page 31. The artist’s unspoken voice drew me past my prejudices. Clearly, I had been hoping for a bit more razzamatazz, but this book was bare, the performance of classical skill was not part of whatever this was. Going backwards and forwards through these pages was to look into a private world of gentle monsters and village folk, cut disquietingly with death, violence, and emptiness, and wrapped in repetition. Gabriel was certainly there, and a man in a mitre hat, but the ouroboros was out for a swim, and easily overpowered them.

As the reading room darkened and I wandered off, I realised my day had been like a trip in the Tardis of my Dr Who childhood, going back in time with the brush marks of this deeply personal vision, by-passing the (missing) historical data of who, when, where, what for, the butterfly pins that hold objects in historical narratives, and landing instead on an unknown terrain. The sometimes-dense layering of paint revealed changing decisions and a lengthy working time. I doubted the paintings were pre-planned, every page looked more like an attempt or a question, one about pain, mortality, family, reproduction, and unknowable strangeness. The bare lack of professional flourish betrayed sincere striving to work something out. As recognition of these artistic processes came and went, the work’s unknowability brought up self-doubt along with the hairs on my arms. Anthony Vidler (1941–) points out in Buried Alive, that when Freud writes on the uncanny, he suggests that fear of being buried alive by mistake can induce some of its strongest expressions. There was something about this object’s burial...
in the archive that touched on Vidler’s further observation that uncovering what has been long buried is essentially the work of psychoanalysis. Did I touch my fear of death when I handled this book? Or did I touch my fear of artistic death in reaching out to an artistic hand that seemed to be rising out of an unmarked grave?

I revisit psychological and artistic death in the second half of this writing, but to make that possible, the first half compiles my research on this uncanny object. This began with Adam McLean (1948–), a Scottish specialist on hermetic literature, whose short book on MS Ferguson 175 suggests that it is facile to describe such a strange manuscript by the overused work ‘unique,’ but there is truly nothing similar to this work to be found among the many thousands of alchemical manuscripts that survive in libraries and specialist collections.

In a meeting with McLean, he made the point that, although alchemical languages tend to be esoteric and uniquely developed, there are commonly used symbols that reveal at least an historic web of sources and influences. Individual texts also reveal structure and sequence, as they are a record of process. Despite many years of familiarity with MS 715, he had been unable to either create this historical web, or find structuring sequences, and so wondered if it is alchemical at all, and whether it might more usefully be considered as an isolated historical maverick. This was a full stop before I got started, but I saw his point. Known alchemical texts reveal clear symbolic repetitions and sequences, and while many of them were spectacularly beautiful, their seriality nevertheless suggests an encoding meant to be read as such, perhaps as records of events happening in the hermetic vessel or furnace, but not the doubting, suggesting autobiographic ‘hand-writing’ of the manuscript, which displays a commitment in the brush work that is fundamentally lodged in a testing, curiosity driven visual mode, for its own sake, and not as a record of ‘elsewhere.’ Even when she is drawing such an alchemical standard as the ouroboros, it is performing, its curves are decided afresh on each page, sometimes alive and twisting, sometimes dead and passive. These are decisions based on the need for certain aesthetic, not symbolic, readings.

So, these paintings can almost be contextualized as the deliquesced remains of an emblem series that has lost its context (Elkins), or as seeming to be alchemical, but failing to meet the criteria of alchemical manuscripts that survive in libraries and the library archive describes it as. A space would then remain open for these depicted transmutations to hold the more autobiographic voice I thought I saw there. Could this fifty-two-page image sequence record a personal journey or inner dilemma?

Elkins would go on to publish What Heaven Looks Like, Comments on a Strange Wordless Book, a meditative, page-by-page commentary on MS 175, which also notes the divergence from classical alchemical texts, but, lacking any other clear historical ties, he finds these paintings to be strangely ‘mute,’ a site of possible projection, but ultimately unknowable. Elkins also thought the artist might have been a woman though, and he imagines her at work.

A woman sits down to her secret work. She lives alone —her husband has died, and her children have grown and moved away. The church lingers in her thoughts, but she is no longer sure what its stories mean. It is the very end of the Renaissance, and the old certainties are gone. Even the myths and legends seem wrong as they drift in and out of her solitary thoughts. She goes out the back of her house and walks up a slope to a woodpile. She selects a cut log, and carries it back to her room. She stands it on the floor next to her chair, and she leans over to look at the cut surface. She studies the drops of dew and the damp soft bark. She moves her fingers in gentle circles, following the fine brown rings in the wood. Cracks score the surface like spokes of a wheel. She tests them with her fingernail.

I was moved by this recognisable imagination of practice, made possible by the lack of actual biographical data, that important factor in the manuscript’s historical isolation. I also saw a woman’s world view haunting painfully intimate paintings created by someone who may have been drawing on earlier training or audience, with its needs for norms of recognition.

Ferguson was a chemistry historian and in 1906 he published The Bibliotheca Chemica (1906), where he defines three periods of chemical literature: the pre-1600 alchemical period with its belief in transmutation; the intro-chemistry in transmutation; the intro-chemistry period from 1600–1800 defined by the archival study of the older information; and the post 1800 modern period of scientific chemistry. He discusses the connections between these stranded forms of old and new knowledge, and goes on to point out that it is an illustration of the persistence of an idea that all through the eighteen century […] when entirely new theories were advanced, the controversy as to the reality of transmutation—as a fact and as a theory—was still sustained.
He points to a certain wilfulness in relation to this idea, a need for magical transformation that was not being met by scientific advancement alone, and could no longer be fully accounted for by church teaching. This resonated with my own willful interest, and a developing idea that the book’s occluded imagery might lie closer to contemporary ideas of the unconscious than to the early languages of chemistry. McLean understands the journey towards the twentieth century ideas to be a core work of alchemy however, when he states that the tradition is for him fundamentally spiritual, a means for exploring our inner space […] a practical method for investigating the substance of our being, by mediating upon chemical processes. The alchemists worked with their retorts, heating, calcining, subliming, distilling substances, watching all the while the transformations within their experiments. They used events in their experiments as seed images for meditations, forming visual mantras from chemical changes. The alchemists reflected and mirrored these outward events into their interior world. They saw the processes in their flasks as an interaction and linking of the spiritual and the material. The spirit rose up, separating from the substance at the bottom of their flasks and descended again to spiritualise the material into an essence or tincture. As the alchemists reworked these experiments over in their souls, they further drew parallels with the greater laboratory of Nature. They saw the work within their flasks as a kind of microcosm of macrocosmic Nature.  

There are no images of the hermetic vessel itself in the manuscript, but the stand-in vessel of a log end also functions as a microcosm of the larger tree, and the larger tree is a standard alchemical, and Christian, metaphor of the cycle of life, the ordering of being, and process itself. If this book was from the eighteenth century as the library suggested, then with Ferguson’s noting of the persistence of the ideas surrounding the world, a ‘secret’ being both a recipe (or receipt) and a developing idea that the book’s occluded imagery might lie closer to contemporary ideas of the unconscious than to the early languages of chemistry. McLean understands the journey towards the twentieth century ideas to be a core work of alchemy however, when he states that the tradition is for him fundamentally spiritual, a means for exploring our inner space […] a practical method for investigating the substance of our being, by mediating upon chemical processes. The alchemists worked with their retorts, heating, calcining, subliming, distilling substances, watching all the while the transformations within their experiments. They used events in their experiments as seed images for meditations, forming visual mantras from chemical changes. The alchemists reflected and mirrored these outward events into their interior world. They saw the processes in their flasks as an interaction and linking of the spiritual and the material. The spirit rose up, separating from the substance at the bottom of their flasks and descended again to spiritualise the material into an essence or tincture. As the alchemists reworked these experiments over in their souls, they further drew parallels with the greater laboratory of Nature. They saw the work within their flasks as a kind of microcosm of macrocosmic Nature.  

of desire in his theories of the psyche, which do not resonate with me. They will not appear in this writing.

Books of Secrets
MS 115 identifies itself as a work of natural magic on its opening page, and Ferguson’s annotated bibliography of his book collection reveals this to be an established form of enclosure, with many other books of ‘natural magic’ noted in the section titled ‘Books of Secrets’. This does not include his collection of hand painted manuscripts unfortunately, and in Science and the Secrets of Nature, William Eamon (1946 –) notes that actually Ferguson, with his bibliography, was the first to note ‘Books of Secrets’ as a distinct genre.  

Opera Magiae Naturalis
Mirabilis Naturaethe Pneumo-cosmica penicillo Efformata.  
Per artem Naturae Simiam
Ad ipsum Naturaev universalis
Cahoticae Prototypon
in
Totidem ectypis adumbrita
attque
Ad perpetuum rei memoriam
Conservatam.  
Works of Natural Magic
Executed by/with the admirable brush of Pneumo-cosmic Nature
Through the craftsmanship of an ape of nature from the prototype of the whole of chaotic nature itself in as many portrayals (totidem ectypis adumbrita?) and for ever conserved in memory of the King.  

Books of Secrets were early attempts at a scientific literature, and they originated in Medieval compendiums of data about the world, a ‘secret’ being both a recipe (or receipt) and directions for an experiment or method, usually accompanied by a supporting testimony of success. They were collections of practical knowledge, domestic ‘how to’ or DIY books, often written in vernacular language by surgeons, metal workers, empirics in every field who sought to share knowledge gained through trial and error methods. They often focused on medicines, technical know-how in relation to agricultural and building machinery, metallurgy, botany, dyeing, making perfume and cosmetics, astronomy, as well as astrology, magic, and alchemy. In naming this genre, Ferguson brought together all the early literature he could find relevant to the history of chemistry. His collection is now defined as alchemical, but these books cover a much wider field of knowledge, as chemistry,
Alchemy, and other sciences were entwined fields of enquiry well into the eighteenth century. This broader genre slightly re-defines the way MS 115 might be approached, as Ferguson’s goal was to cast a wide net, and he was interested even in books he saw no particular value in. In the sixth lecture, he throws in that “there is always some old book coming forward which I did not know before” and that though he finds many of these books unintelligible they are also “seductive and suggestive.”

As collections of populist knowledge and folk custom, Books of Secrets were understood to contain ‘natural knowledge’ or that which is ‘known’ about nature (the world). Before the scientific discoveries of the Enlightenment allowed greater comprehension into how things worked, many manual/technical/artistic operations that specialists engaged in seemed wondrous, ‘magical,’ or like a secret revealed. That we no longer necessarily see a DIY manual as a revelation says something about how our world view has been transformed. Books of Secrets formed a vast field of popular early European literature, and one of the most famous is the Magia Naturalis, by Giambattista della Porta, from 1558. Although written in Latin for a learned readership, it ran to 20 editions re-printed over more than one hundred years.

Among much useful and practical information, the book contains, magnificently, the recipe for siring a rainbow coloured horse.

On the inside front cover of this centenary edition of Magia Naturalis, the image of chaos at the heart of the cosmos bears formal similarity to the structure of the manuscript, but the zodiac symbols, sun, moon and wind form an accessible agreed symbolism.

Another important and wide-spread publication was The Natural History of the Two Worlds, by Robert Fludd (1574 – 1637). These volumes are alternatively called early encyclopaedias and alchemical key works. As a Book of Secrets, they reveal the simultaneous value placed on spiritual understanding and...
knowledge of the material world that McLean emphasises. In a series of pages on the creation of the universe we again see a formal arrangement like the circles of the manuscript, the cloudy surrounding of the sky, rings of inner meaning, and in the centre the light of God or creation. Ghosts of these image leads to learning, and in which the messiness of conflict leads to discernment.” In the search brush in the manuscript reveals these processes centre stage, with figures left half formed, and some areas thickly over-painted with new decisions. Both Moran and Tara Nummedal (1970–) stress that alchemy was a recognised trade in early modern Europe. Alchemists are presumed to have lived at society’s margins, as con-men or dreamers, but, in Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire, Nummedal shows that both men and women were employed by patrons, built laboratories, and ordered supplies, as tradespeople, with all the everyday contingencies of any other job. Success depended on skill and ingenuity, and was one of the few trades open to women. While some alchemists were philosophers, others created practical technologies that addressed the economic needs of early modern states. Newton in England worked on metallurgical assays experiments while working for the Royal Mint, and many German alchemists worked alongside engineers in the mining industry, which occupied a central place in these state’s economies. Moran points out that even when their procedures and projects lacked success, the involvement with alchemical and chemical processes by numerous figures across the social spectrum had implications for further knowledge because, unless utterly accidental, to do and to know how to do were, and still are, connected. In an age before copyright, alchemists were often keen to encode their information, and the esoteric qualities of the work are what have come down to us today. Alchemy was also overtly used, however, as a cloak for messages of a quite different register, and Nummedal cites both Rudolph II of the Holy Roman Empire, and Landgrave Moritz of Hessen Kassel as rulers who embraced alchemy to reinforce other political agendas. For these princes, alchemy and the study of nature’s secrets could be many things: an expression of religious tolerance in the face of the tensions of reformation Europe; a type of symbolic political propaganda that equated control of the natural world with control of the human world, or a familiar language in which to couch more novel proposals, such as capitalist ventures.

So, the alchemical tradition was in many ways a practical one, and open to both men and women from across the class divides. This also means that women, even if they were not alchemists, might well have had access to the literature. This was a democratic tradition of knowledge sharing, and it involved the coalescing of word and image in meaning creation. It was also a meditative tradition, as a material expression of life’s unspeakable mysteries, those of internal experience. The anonymous manuscript reveals knowledge of this rich semiotic heritage, but re-worked, or perverted, for the artist’s own ends, or to use Nummedal’s phrase, using a familiar language in which to couch more novel proposals.”
The Paper
Glasgow University Library dates the manuscript to 1699–1799, but that looked like a guessestimate, and before I could go any further, I needed to look under the paintings, to the paper and the structure of the book. The hand sewn binding reveals 54 folios, brought together in groups of four (eight pages) except for the first two, which are single sheets. There is one extra folio, that with image 21 painted on it. Its conjugal leaf was cut, and this page inserted as a replacement. This suggests that the order of the images was important, and that the book was bound together before the paintings were made, and not the other way around.

Holding each page up to the light reveals both horizontal and vertical watermark lines as well as emblematic watermarks. Prior to around 1800, all paper was handmade by dipping a wooden framed screen, called a mold, into a watery pulp of cellulose fibres, lifting it out and draining off the water, leaving a matted layer that when dry, became paper. The screen itself was made up of fine horizontal wires ‘laid’ over thicker vertical wires, called chains. Wire designs (watermarks) were sewn onto this grid. The watery paper pulp would be thinner where it went over the wires, but its surface tension also meant that it would gather just to the side of the heavier chain lines, creating slightly thicker paper there. When held up to the light, this is visible as chain line ‘shadows’ on each side of the lighter watermark line. This sort of paper is known as ‘antique laid.’ Every page of MS Ferguson 715 reveals these shadows, and so the paper is likely to have been made before 1800.

In addition to chain line shadows, many pages also reveal parts of designed watermarks. These are all partially sewn into the binding, but there are four distinct marks. Edward Heawood (1863–1949), in Watermarks, mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries remarks that books from before 1800 often reveal a variety of watermarks, as paper merchants collected their supplies from scattered sources, and sold paper according to size and quality, not by mark. These mixed marks were then also compatible with a pre-1800 date. The first paper I tried to identify was one with a clear name marked on it, that of the famous Dutch papermakers D&C Blauw. In the late seventeenth century, several important papermaking companies developed in Holland, making first grey and blue, then finer quality, white, paper. Blauw, from Zaandland, north west of Amsterdam, would become one of the most important. The firm D&C Blauw started life in 1621 as De Oude Blauwe, a paper mill for blue packaging paper in Wormerveer. The company began making white paper in 1744, with the purchase of De Herder, a mill in Zaandijk. Dirk and Cornelis were father and son, and Dutch paper historian Henk Voorn (1921–2008) has established that the name of the company changed to D&C Blauw in 1750. This therefore becomes the earliest possible date for the painting of the manuscript, as there was no D&C Blauw paper before that.

Dirk Blauw died in 1782 and the firm became Blauw & Briel, however Voorn also mentions that at Blauw & Briel, “the writing paper remained marked with the name of D&C Blauw.” The just visible post horn on page 35 identifies this as writing paper, so the change in company name in 1782 does not, unfortunately, identify a not-after date of paper production, and the time period for the making of the book’s paper remains from 1750 until into the 1800’s.

The next mark I looked at was page 23, the only sheet marked C&J Honig. This also shows part of a post horn on a shield, so is also writing paper. The company of C&J Honig had a white paper mill in Zaandijk, near the Blauw mill, from 1733 to 1770, when the company name changed to C&J Honig Breet. In 1774 this changed again to become Jacob Honig & Zonen. Searching books on Dutch papermaking, and watermark collections I found ‘Honig Breet’ and ‘Honig & Zonen’ watermarks, but no information on whether they changed their watermarks when the company name changed. Voorn only mentions the anomaly of that not happening once in his remarkably detailed analysis of these mills however, when D&C Blauw kept their mark going, and did not change their watermarks, but no information on whether they changed their watermarks when the company name changed. This seems likely that this single piece of paper from C&J HONIG was made before 1770 and the company name change.

Most of the book’s pages are made from paper marked with a Pro Patria watermark, also known as the Maid of Dort (Dordtsche Maagd) and the Dutch Maid (Hollandse Maagd). The Dutch Maid, a helmeted Pallas Athene carrying a lance which balances a hat, is surrounded by a palisade, which marks her territory, or tuin (garden). This is a traditional and widely used symbol of Dutch freedom stemming from the 1400’s, and was often used as a watermark. The maid can be portrayed with or without a crowned lion brandishing a sword and arrows. By the second half of the eighteenth century the Pro Patria mark was so widely used across all Western Europe that it became identified with a level of quality rather than a specific paper maker. In addition to this generality, larger mills would have several molds with the same design in production at the same time, but as watermarks were made by hand, they would vary slightly in each mold. Molds also decayed with use, as wires broke and shapes distorted. They were sold at auction to other mills, and the designs of important makers copied by lesser mills. So, a wide distribution. Given this, it seems likely that this single piece of paper from C&J HONIG was made before 1770 and the company name change.

The mechanics for wove paper were invented by papermaker James Whatman in England in the early 1750’s, but took 50 years to spread throughout Europe and the wider world. See John Balston, The Invention and Development in Whatmans and Wove Paper: Its Search for Freedom, Farleigh, Kent, 1998.
Patrias in the manuscript are, in addition, only ever partly seen, as they are sewn into the binding.

Tracing such a mark, the most common in the book, therefore seemed to be an impossible task. This must also have been a problem for papermakers seeking to distinguish their product however, and reading Voorn further, I found out that between about 1775–1800, control of the Dutch paper making industry began to be consolidated into a small number of companies, and the huge diversity of watermarks seen in the first part of the century became more uniform. Commonly used marks such as Liberty and Pro Patria begin to be seen with a countermark, usually a letter. D & C Blauw began to insert a single B under their main mark. Blowing up my photographic documentation of a D & C Blauw Pro Patria page on screen, I began to detect just such a B within the watercolour paint of pages 6, 19, and 51, placed directly below the gate in the palisade. This identifies many of the Pro Patria pages. In other pages, it is the top half of the mark that is visible, and overlaying these, the head is quite identical, suggesting the Pro Patria papers are all one batch. Also finding the B identifies most of the paper in the book as being made by D & C Blauw, in Wormerveer, after about 1775. The paper date I now had was 1775–1800.

The consolidation period of 1775 to 1800 was a quarter century approximation by Voorn however, and so I dug deeper into the company’s history. In 1768, D & C Blauw created a new trademark of a coat of arms with a double cross on a shield and the letter B below, while continuing to use the post horn and Pro Patria to designate writing papers.

At the same time, “In 1768, at public auction, he [Dirk Blauw] bought the Zaandijk white paper mill De Herderin, for 15,700 florins, which was added to his enterprise.” This large mill greatly extended their production of quality white paper, and it was the same year they designed their new ‘company logo’ watermark with the double cross and B. It seems quite likely that this expansion and branding exercise was also the moment the B was added to existing marks they wished to continue. Adjusting to this more detailed information, the D & C Blauw Pro Patria paper in the manuscript now seemed most likely to have come from a single ream, made in Zaandijk between 1768 and 1800. This time span is supported by a sheet of paper positively identified as D & C Blauw, and held in the collection of the U. S. Library of Congress.

Not all of the palisade watermarks have the post-1768 B however. It is missing from the introductory page, suggesting it was made pre-1768. Thinking about Heawood’s comment that paper sellers would make up a batch from various sources however, it seems...
most likely that the manuscript's paper is mostly from a single ream of post-1768 D&C Blauw Pro Patria writing paper from a mill in Zaandijk, with a small number of older sheets, from D&C Blauw, C&H Honig, and a single unidentifiable Lion Rampant sheet making up the numbers.

So, the book was sewn together after 1768, but the not after date remained vague. The paper historian WA Churchill traced the use of Pro Patria in Dutch mills to between 1683 and 1799, but I was not able to find evidence for this, and Churchill does not supply any, so I looked at the more general history of papermaking technique at this time. Throughout the late 1700's, the use of wove papers, first introduced in England in 1757, was spreading throughout Europe. In wove paper, a screen of fine woven mesh was stretched evenly across the wooden frame and required no supporting chain lines. Watermark emblems were still sewn onto the wove surface, but paper made this way shows no lattice, and is easily identified. The MS papers are all laid paper, made using the more old-fashioned process. In 1807, a machine for the manufacture of wove paper was invented by James Cobb in England, and Voorn records that in that same year, the Zaanse paper mills all changed over to the making of wove paper for all but their most specialist papers. 1807 is then the end date for regular antique laid writing paper in the Zaanse mills. Heawood's watermark history adds another important detail when he writes that: "From 1794 on, the practice of watermarking the date of making became general." 5 A big mill like Blauw would not be behind on such a development, and as none of our papers has any hint of a date, they are likely to have been before 1794. That places paper production between 1768 and 1794.

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However, how long could we reasonably imagine paper would sit on a shelf in this period? The answer could be 100 years or more, but in an age when dampness in houses and offices would have affected any storage solution it is probably a lot less, especially for non-specialist writing paper. In a comparative study of 80 dated papers from the early nineteenth century Heawood establishes an average interval of about three years between making and using, but the examples that he traced are all of papers ordered for state use or by rich travellers, men in a position to efficiently order paper and use it as required. 60 The notebook was a more private visual exploration, and could easily have been sitting around for some time before being picked up. Indeed, Voorn suggests that in the eighteenth century up to seven years be allowed between manufacture and use for regular, non-specialized papers. 61 Most of the paper in the book was made by D&C Blauw between 1768 and 1794, but the company C&H Honig disappeared in 1770. If a paper merchant made up a ream within seven years of 1770, placing an old C&H Honig sheet in with newer paper to make up the numbers, then the paper used to make up the book is most likely to have come together between 1768 and 1777. It is all writing paper, and so the manuscript was created as a writing notebook, rather than a fine quality artist's sketch book. This is further underlined by a 'vat-man's tear' on one of the pages, created by a drip from the arm of the paper maker, as it inadvertently fell into the wet pulp and left a thinner area on drying out. 62 High quality artist's sketch paper would be checked on, and rejected if these tears were found, so this presence further confirms the everyday quality of these materials - Dutch writing paper from a mixed batch amassed between 1768 and about 1777–1780. The cutting out and replacing of page 21 further confirms that the book was bound together before the images were painted rather than after, confirming it as a writing notebook, a non-specialist item that would have been widely available. Finding the Jefferson letter reveals the geographic reach of Dutch paper exports in the late 1700's however. This notebook could have been painted pretty much anywhere in the known world.
The Dutch were Protestant in their beliefs, but Catholic in their choice of trading partners. A regular bound writing notebook would have been inexpensive and available to anyone from the middle or upper classes of any town in Europe or its colonies. Dating the paper had defined when this notebook was most likely to have been bound, (1768–1777), but it had telescoped my thinking on geography. To locate the work further, I turned to the paintings themselves.

After the Latin dedication page, the book contains only paintings, each on the right-hand, or recto side of the paper. These are between 110 and 130 mm in diameter and repeat a circle shape that floats centrally on an otherwise blank page. They are based on the cross-sections of trees, nature’s clock-face, but within each one we also see a magical world of clouds, figures, and animals. If there is a narrative structure, it is opaque. The imagery has roots in an emblematic and alchemical European tradition, but this section considers a quite different development of the image that was also happening in the eighteenth century.

Looking at the layers of paint in a slanting light, it is possible to see a painting process that begins with an outer circle, often set out with a pencil line. These outer growth rings of the tree are then drawn as they come in from the bark or ‘outer skin’ of the log. As these inscriptions of the tree’s ageing process progress towards the heart-wood, they begin to transform into imagined worlds. These modulate between pages related to contemporary Christian imagery, quietly violent scenes, and strange, almost abstract surfaces. Other pages can only be described as surreal. Studying these begins to raise a question about the relationship of the two parts. If the log is understood as a ‘one-liner’ framing device that is otherwise unconnected to these interior worlds, a quality of looking out, which had...
grounded my initial rapport with the book, disappears. I worried
at this for months until, walking through a wood one day, I saw
something. The park keepers had felled a tree and left it to
decompose. Leaking sap had turned to mould on the cut end
of the trunk. The clouds surrounding many of the notebook’s
interior worlds looked very like this. I realized that it had been
me who was not looking. The ‘log’ of my imagination was a
generic one, and it had not occurred to me to go out and look
at the specific bodies of actual logs. Over the next few months
I documented the felled trees in the wood, looking for
imperfections, stains, cut marks of a saw, rot and mould,
information that was unique to each piece of wood.

Clouds like those of page 14 can be linked to alchemical and
religious images, but the strangely specific shapes are not
generic code, and suggest close looking at leaked sap.

On page 3, God floats through an un-made world, an image
familiar to contemporaneous emblem books, but these clouds
also have a counterpoint in fungal growth patterns.

The head of a dog or baby goat at the top of page 15 can also
be found in the revealed growth marks of a cut tree.

Page 20 seems to depict the view from below deep water, with
air bubbles rising towards light dancing on the surface in the
centre of the log. When I placed a blue wash over a photo of
a newly cut tree it came very close.

I realized that the artist had pondered her material with a great
deal of attention. The artist’s record of rings of growth cut
through with the crack lines of age and drying, residues of
mould, fungus patterns, and rotted holes relate directly to
what happens to individual pieces of wood. Each of these
paintings had begun life in observations of the material world.
Slow contemplation and study had ‘effloresced’ the heart wood
images out of the observed. There is a release of conceptual
control inherent to this method of ‘looking out to look in,’
and this was my artistic connection with the paintings.

The artist develops metaphors of transformation that begin with
the transformations of the wood itself: the cracks, stains, and
holes that mark time. It is the process of looking and recording,
as well as the data found there, that leads to the imagined
imagery, much of which is also concerned with the cycles of
life, but which is entangled in the depiction of found material.
This entanglement is the discipline of the method, but having
observed these two separate methods (recording and
imaging), I now found it hard to focus on their entanglement.
My eyes switched between the logic of the imagined scene, or
that of the log, as if I was looking either into an old mirror, or

A year later, she was in Oslo,
talking about research alignments.
At one o’clock, they moved from
the school to a nearby restaurant.
She sat opposite the artist
guy and found herself watching
his eyeball. The iris was pale
blue-green, and floated like a
lifebelt on top of the black.
They seemed entirely separate: the
blue-green a definable shape,
the black impossible to bring to
focus. She only realized she was
staring when he flickered away, and
back. The work conversation floated
on, but as she spoke about vision
and protocol, she was still
wondering how he could see through
all the black.

It came to her that she should re-direct, but she didn’t. She was
too fascinated by the strangeness
of it. And then it was done, and
both their heads turned to the
others. Her eyes went down, to
the ring that indented his finger.
Rings and zones. She finished lunch
and paralleled her cutlery. His
forearm snapped towards her across
the table, and his hand almost
cupped her elbow.

“Coffee?”
The arm embraced as the question
announced escape. She thought
perhaps it was enough, and asked
for tea.
looking at an old mirror, and re-focussing on the scratches and peeling silver. This switching makes ghosts out of each unfocussed layer, which then impinge on the corners of vision.

The botanical layer is itself only the ghost of true botanical study however. Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) had begun publishing *Systema Naturae*, in 1735, marking a new age of botanical records created from painted observation. Linnaeus would not have recognised this artist as a pupil. There is a botanical record here, but if this was a study notebook, then for the study of what? This language is neither that of the alchemical flask nor the budding botanist. Each work begins with bark and ring data, but as the brush strokes inward, taking on elements of sap mould, cracks, and deep holes where soft heart wood has rotted, there is a switch, a step change to a different world.

**Clouds**

The clouds/mouldy sap that most often mark this step change reveal botanical roots, but they are also a more generic framing device found across emblematic and alchemical literature, where similar clouds, bounding a circular motif, are used to symbolically separate earth from heaven, or material experience from internal awareness, such as belief in the spiritual realm. In *A Theory of Clouds*, Hubert Damisch (1928–2017) argues that, from the Renaissance on, painters used clouds as a counterpoint to the rigours of linear perspective, allowing the creation of other types of pictorial space outside of the perspectival grid. The defined and definable space of the grid then enters a relationship with the nebulous, and Damisch points to this as the space of alterity, perhaps the celestial realm, or that which, more broadly, remains undefined by the dominant codes defining visualisation. The constant presence of the ouroboros, entwined with these framing clouds/sap, reveals an artist familiar with this tradition of the cloud as boundary marker, as well as with the stock imagery of the Christian version of the spiritual realm, with its angels and cherubs. The bishop’s mitre in the strange scenes of page 7 further confirm this book was painted within a (questioning) Christian context. Other pages however are hard to relate to any image structure from that time.

It is this movement between codes that led both McLean and Elkins to conclude that the notebook cannot have been painted as an alchemical script, despite the obvious semiotic markers of clouds, snakes, heaven and earth. The cloud sign bounding a nebulous inner world defines only a problematized use of these formulas, and the notebook seems to float between this and the different inward-looking gaze of the Romantic subject that was coming into being in certain parts of Germany at this time, further supporting the idea that the alchemical tradition was being used as an ‘empty vessel,’ of quotation for other purposes.
Perhaps it allowed the artist to search for ways to depict her own world view, a subjective experience she did not yet know how to depict, and did not see recorded in the work of others around her. The container of the circle, the botanical study used as auto-suggestion, the overlaying of image formulas specific to the depiction of the nebulous, could be understood as a serial process that allowed this undefined language to come forth. Artistic research theorist Estelle Barrett (d. o. b. unknown) writes about the way artistic practice can have a specific role in this sort of exploration when she states that the aesthetic image is ‘performative’; it emerges through sensory processes and gives rise to multiplicity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. Out of this, meanings that fall beyond the codes of a given sign system (visual or verbal) may be accessed.

To get closer to this indeterminacy, it is necessary to map out what other sorts of imagery might have been available to someone painting in a little notebook, somewhere in Europe or its colonies, in the years shortly after 1768. She is familiar with religious, alchemical, and emblematic semiotics, and has embedded them within the new codes of botanical study. None of this pointed particularly to the discipline of fine art however, and so I did not begin looking there, but where the artist had begun, with wood itself.

Looking at Wood

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had seen a huge expansion in the marketplaces for European goods, and shipping routes led to and from the Far East, Africa, and America. This growing ‘embarrassment of riches’ also created conflict between the European nations who controlled these routes, as monarchs and princes jostled for control of a new world of crystalline marvelousness that invisibly existed within a world of discovery was sufficiently disseminated into culture, the work of natural philosophers was not a secret and rarefied world, far from everyday experience. Even by the late 1600’s, this world of discovery was sufficiently disseminated into culture that it could be satirized on stage. The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis. and Schelling writing of the natural world as a form of giant organism, rejecting the more abstract, mechanical world view of British philosophers such as Newton and Locke, who saw it as more of a machine. Essential to both approaches was the developing field of optical lens technology, which improved the vision of all philosophers, and was key to unveiling the structural secrets of the material world. Transposing the new visual information that optics revealed into images that could be printed, copied, and shared, was fundamental to Enlightenment progress, bringing previously mysterious phenomena of the natural world into the rational light of day. Natural philosophers such as Hooke, Newton, Kepler, Boyle, and Lavoisier published their work in academic and scientific papers and periodicals, as did philosophers led by the thinking of Hume, Voltaire, and Locke. This was the age of paper, and the magazine and the periodical, along with book production, increasingly brought these scientific developments into ordinary homes, as popular culture. Optical instruments also entered the home as toys and entertainments, a point Barbara Stafford (1946–) makes in Body Criticism, Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine, with this illustration of Amusemens Microscopiques showing an array of popular domestic magnifying glasses. Stafford notes that this century of lens development separated, for the first time, what could be seen from what could be touched. This revelation, that a world exists right in front of us, but beyond the eyes, could not but have affected how people understood their own inner experience, and indeed this plays out across the cultural life of the times.

One of the most important early records of a previously invisible material world is Micrographia, by Robert Hooke (1635–1703). Hooke’s areas of interest were kaleidoscopic, but he devoted much of his life to optics. The Micrographia was the first ever publication to illustrate plants and insects through a microscope, and was a best seller right across Europe. The large and fabulous fold-out copper-plate etchings captured people’s imagination, as a new world literally unfolded before their eyes, a world of crystalline marvelousness that invisibly existed within their own frozen pee and in the corks that stopped their wine bottles. In London in 1665, Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) records in his diary that these revelations of the invisible world were surely in “the most ingenious book I have ever read in my life” and the 1676 London stage play The Virtuoso natural philosophers were even satirized on stage, with the hero’s wife berating her husband for “all this while studying spiders and glow worms, stinking fish and rotten wood.” So the work of natural philosophers was not a secret and rarefied world, far from everyday experience. Even in 1600’s, this world of discovery was sufficiently disseminated into culture that it could be satirized on stage.
Hooke’s majestic Micrographia emphasised on every page that it was a record of microscopic investigation, and not a work of the imagination. He repeats a form of the word on every title plate, and, also, as Janice Neri observes in Between Observation and Image, “Hooke often enclosed the objects he presented within a round frame, thus offering viewers an evocation of the experience of looking through the lens of a microscope.” Micrographia was published in 1665, however the lost plates were re-discovered in 1745, and re-printed that year as Micrographia Restaurata, so sharing his work, again to great European acclaim, with a new audience almost a hundred years later, and much closer to the time the notebook may have been painted.

Throughout the 1700’s, scholars increasingly published their work in their own languages, or in French, the language of international conversation across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was an ideological gesture, an Enlightenment interest in sharing over secluding knowledge, within Latin, which was only understood by a privileged, formally educated, minority. In the same period, steadily increasing literacy was creating a mass market for books, periodicals, and leaflets on contemporary thought and invention. Women would also have had access to household ‘books of secrets,’ and to other printed alchemical literature, because, as previously mentioned, alchemists were often women. The Micrographia and Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds reveal the way lens technology also allowed for new conceptual lenses with which to understand invisibilities as also a part of the material world. The Micrographia reveals a developing mind-set based on serial imagery, laid out to reveal underlying structures, which could then be understood as a set of abstractions. This had also been a goal of alchemists, but their attempts to find an underlying structure of the world (the secrets of the philosopher’s stone) were on the one hand, tightly bound up with an idea of the divine, and on the other, governed by secrecy in a world ruled by church censorship and control. The Enlightenment’s political principle of sharing over secluding also led to the sharing of knowledge and discovery across class and gender divides, and was a direct assault on ecclesiastic censorship. This was a way of ‘seeing’ that would eventually lead to revolution and the end of the pre-Modern world. The Latin inscription of the notebook, written sometime after 1700, was Bernard de Fontenelle’s (1657–1757) Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds (1686), a discussion on the cosmos and the ideas of Copernicus for a lay reader. Fontenelle specifically addresses women readers in his introduction. Such an appeal to the woman reader continued throughout the Enlightenment, especially in the burgeoning development of periodicals, and is an important indication that middle- and upper-class women at least, while rarely formally educated, were educating themselves at home, as they were clearly a recognised and accepted market for books and magazines on contemporary thought and invention. Women would also have had access to household ‘books of secrets,’ and to other printed alchemical literature, because, as previously mentioned, alchemists were often women.

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Lens-based visions of the invisibly small were counterpointed in the hundred years before the notebook by the simultaneous opening up of the invisibly vast, and another Baroque best seller was Bernard de Fontenelle’s (1657–1757) Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds (1686), a discussion on the cosmos and the ideas of Copernicus for a lay reader. Fontenelle specifically addresses women readers in his introduction. Such an appeal to the woman reader continued throughout the Enlightenment, especially in the burgeoning development of periodicals, and is an important indication that middle- and upper-class women at least, while rarely formally educated, were educating themselves at home, as they were clearly a recognised and accepted market for books and magazines on contemporary thought and invention. Women would also have had access to household ‘books of secrets,’ and to other printed alchemical literature, because, as previously mentioned, alchemists were often women.

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Class

The developing middle class and the peasantry would have handled logs every day of their lives. They were the basic fuel that went onto every fire and heated every meal. They would have been touched and smelt and brought from the outside world into the home, every day. The attention given to logs with every page of the notebook may have had its resonance
The timeless quality of the log has only disappeared in the West since WWII. My mother remembers going to the river with her grandfather in the 1930’s and 40’s to collect the driftwood that was her grandparents only source of fuel for heating, hot water, and cooking. This is not the progressive twentieth century that is written of in history books, but it would nevertheless have been the experience of many people across Europe.

in this everyday act of attending to a fire or a meal, a painterly re-visiting of a domestic ritual, with a haptic resonance I struggle to bring into my contemporary experience. I weakly imagine the joy of indoor plumbing but the fire would have been a hundred times more fundamental. Logs were the key that allowed a cycle of building, nourishment and warmth, intellectual growth through books, and trade and travel in boats and carts. The living and dying of the family are also reproduced in the cycle of growing a tree and chopping it down to give it new life in the fire. Logs are rarely seen in the paintings we now look at in museums, and yet they would have been ubiquitous, if individually temporary, household objects. To choose this as a fundamental subject matter says something about the artist. The questioning, strange images seem to rule out the painterly hand of a clergyman, and the aristocracy would have had a distant relationship with logs that other people sawed for them, moved into their homes, put on their fires, and used to cook their food. The notebook artist knew them intimately.

If she was not a member of the nobility, she would also have had limited access to the fine art that we now associate with the cultural life of this period. Our contemporary notions of art as being made for its own sake were an idea only coming into being during the late eighteenth century, along with the idea of the public museum. Fine art objects were still the playthings of the rich and powerful, and tied to other social functions than aesthetic pleasure alone (such as power, display, and the spreading of doctrine). The artist whose canvas was a notebook made from cheap writing paper may have had only a glancing acquaintance with contemporary oil or fresco painting, and been more familiar with a visual vocabulary gleaned from prints, magazines, and books. So wood was not a neutral choice of subject matter. To reveal such haptic knowledge of it is extremely unlikely to have been done to impress a rich client, and it is certainly not botanical research. Wood however, was fundamental to both people’s domestic lives, and to industry, and this was also what Peter Watson (1943-), in The German Genius, calls ‘the age of paper,’ when massive increases in the number of printed books and magazines allowed the sharing of all other information. For the many women who learned of the world from new informational magazines, wood was directly connected, not only to the daily rituals of the home, but to the liberations of knowledge.

Time

The importance of timber at this time led to the creation of wood libraries, or collections of ‘wooden books.’ These Xylotheques began to appear in the late seventeenth century, but some of the most complete were created in Sweden, the German states, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the later 1700’s, the same time as the notebook was painted. In some,
such as the Schildbach Xylotheque in Kassel, slices of example woods are cut into book shapes, but others contain whole cross sections of trees, preserved circular slices very reminiscent of the notebook’s log ends. Collecting wood, and recording information about it, were new tasks of this time. Finding pictures in it was an idea that had a history. Up until the mid 1700’s, natural figurations, such as images of faces or animals in wood of stone, were often thought of as omens and portents, or the work of nature as a sentient being, as an aspect of God. It was already widely accepted in 1768 that tree rings indicated age, but when early geologists put forward the idea that the images inside stones, which we know today as fossils, were the remains of animals and plants from thousands of years ago, they presented an idea that would fundamentally alter our understanding of time. 

It is hard to imagine today how upsetting to a religious world view such an understanding must have been, and it led to new ways of understanding the passage of time as a visual trace being constantly recorded in the materials of the world. This was poetically registered by Henri Bergson (1859–1941) in the early twentieth century, when he wrote that “Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed.” Bergson was thinking of the human body in terms of a durational archive, a place where time is inscribed, but the wider idea of life being understood in terms of duration, rather than presence, was a fundamental shift in understanding. Its roots are in these ideas of natural history, which re-wrote the world as no longer simply being eternally ‘present.’ Seeing meaningful images in wood was part of the old worldview, but painting them as a ‘log-book,’ a record of time passing, a record whose imagery is also a reflection on that time passing, was part of the new. This merger embodies an argument that ranged across Europe during these years, and encompassed the nature of time, physical matter, and the place of invisible experience. As a log-book, the notebook presents a stand-in for Bergson’s durational body, meditated out of daily connection with a fundamental material of life. Its pages trace hard to formulate, but sensed, questions about this changing way of seeing. The first few pages of the manuscript may even directly explore this question, as received imagery of the creation on pages two and three gives way, by page seven, to what seems to be a debate on piety, as figures in the distance peer over a ledge into the eternal fires of Hell. If the notebook is a form of diary, it may or may not be an artistic practice, but the drawings and paintings of scientists were definitely not. Our contemporary distinctions between art and science were still being established in the late 1700’s, but these early scientists were developing sign systems for readability and re-use, which were governed by different aesthetic criteria to either the notebook (though it partly echoes these formulas) or to fine art practices that were valued in this time. The
The sun clouded over as Jess opened her mouth to answer. Her sun had reached out with the very last of her mind, and she clung onto the old hands, Jess’s chest caved, and her mother tumbled away.

strangeness of the notebook is its movement between a quasi-scientific way of looking at rotting wood, a quasi-chemical depiction of nebulous ideas, and the quasi-fine art depiction of social scenes. None are completed to a professional standard, and all are entangled together. The difference between this and a contemporaneous recording of scientific discovery within established fine art practice can be seen by looking at two works by British artist Joseph Wright of Derby. The most obvious difference is in terms of technical skill, and I look at this later, but here I point to the way science was recorded in fine art, by looking at the way Wright concisely records the cultural movement of the times, in two almost contemporaneous works.

The images inserted here in the printed thesis are not available in the digital thesis.

In Two Boys Blowing a Bladder by Candlelight, Wright paints children wondering at the natural world, in the spirit of modern experiment. In counterpart, The Alchymist is depicted on his knees, awe struck at his accidental discovery of phosphorus from distilled urine, and in prayer, as in a religious painting. In this, the most obvious difference is in terms of technical skill, and I look at this later, but here I point to the way science was recorded in fine art, by looking at the way Wright concisely records the cultural movement of the times, in two almost contemporaneous works.

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and the turbaned figures that appear are not gods. A syncretic tendency can be read into these pages more in the way optics also appear, as a question addressed towards image formation itself. The blurring of image functions does not reveal an underlying syncretic clarity however, rather a pensive questioning of something else, held within botany, alchemy, fine art, and religious doctrine.

**Indeterminacy**

The entanglement of these different image systems throws up some truly strange pages that seem to stand outside of their time. Their sustained ambiguity suggests ‘pensive images’ as explored by Jacques Rancière (1940–). Rancière’s starting point is a person who is pensive, someone who is “full of thoughts but this does not mean that she is thinking them. In pensiveness the act of thinking seems to be encroached upon by a certain passivity.” Thinking but not thinking might be thought of as a sort of circling motion, reminiscent of a plane’s holding pattern, or, the repeated repainting of similar images. Could the holding and repeating of the manuscript be usefully thought of as ‘pensive’? Rancière continues that a pensive image, as opposed to a pensive person, contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which influences the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object. Pensiveness thus refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive.

This might be indeterminacy between a representation’s mimetic and aesthetic functions, but more than that “to speak of the pensive image is to signal the existence of a zone of [...] indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art.” There is a resistance to analysis in the notebook that speaks to this second idea of indeterminacy, which Rancière further defines as “a set of distances between several image functions present on the same surface.” He discusses this in relation to the bumpy reception of both photography and video into the realm of fine art in the twentieth century. This debate revealed an indeterminacy of reception in relation to these new mediums, which allowed certain works to entwine different registers of meaning creation. The indeterminate registers he focusses on are: indeterminacy of intention on the part of the artist—when we cannot know why a work was made; indeterminacy of time—when a work that we know to be of the past seems contemporary in some way; and indeterminacy of modes of representation—when various image functions seem to be present within each other. A pensive work might be found in this tangle of indeterminacies, and it will reveal a lack of clear readability. Our ignorance, according to Rancière, is not the
measure of the pensive image, it is a structural aspect of certain imagery.

Clarity and order were the clarion calls of the Enlightenment, not pensiveness and ambiguity. A Classical principle of unity was reflected in the requirement of unity in art work, a desire that led French academician Roger de Piles to demand, in his highly influential Principles of Painting of 1708, that correct pictorial composition control the viewer’s gaze according to the strict requirements of the artist’s intention, and allow him no “freedom to wander aimlessly.” Such clarity of composition was still the academic rulebook of Europe in the 1780’s. Using an analogy from the structural indeterminacy of the notebook, Dario Gamboni noted in 1993–2016 as noted as a crisis in this classical order. Eco defined the ‘open work’ as an early twentieth century function of Modernity, and related it to the contravention of established expressive forms, which in turn led to a high degree of ambiguity in fine art, music, and the notebook contextualist this didactic call for clarity, and points to what Umberto Eco (1932–2016) noted as a crisis in this classical order. Eco defined the ‘open work’ as an early twentieth century establishment and to the modern work of the notebook. Modern open work is therefore, for Eco, a contestation of a conventional world view. The Modern open work seeks to have utilized, can convey only conventional meanings, and conventional meanings are part of a conventional view of the world. The Modern open work is therefore, for Eco, a contestation of a conventional world view.

There is a question of how open a work can be however, before it loses its right to be called a ‘work,’ and becomes simply, say, a mess of innards. For Eco, evidence of artistic intentionality is key, and he evokes this as the oscillation of a “panduric dialectics” between “the suggestion of a plurality of worlds and undifferentiated chaos.” Controlled disorder is dependent on tw

Although Eco defines the open work as belonging to modernity, he understands its roots to lie in a crisis within the classical order that occurred in the years immediately preceding the revolutions in America (1775–1783) and then France (1789–1799). These are the years the notebook is most likely to have been painted, and its pages vibrate with the doubt that led to this revolutionary sensitivity, flickering, perhaps unknowingly, pensively, between various disciplines of the gaze and of image making. These flickering brush marks leave forms half completed, either in a process of transforming, or deserted in favour of new enquiry. The result is an ambiguity that rejects the univocal academic principle of unity in art work, and with that, the authority of control that they are founded upon.

The compositions of the notebook are defined by chance patterns given up by a found log. In Potential Images (2002), Dario Gamboni (1954–) merges this idea of chance with that of the open work and defines ‘potential images’ as purposefully employing change in some way, and the auto-referential desire to clearly define ‘how things are’ was an aspiration of the Enlightenment, which, while being part of a great advancement of thought on many fronts, did so with an insistence on certain world views. By replicating a world view within the formal terms of image construction, art reflects the social context in which it is made. The clarifying material study of the Enlightenment required a clear univocal approach to the image, in order to define and share new information about the world, but also as a rational dismissal of the nebulous ambiguities of a faith-based world view. A multi-vocal image, one that may have several readings, sits in opposition to univocal clarity. Eco traces its evolution as a formative intention, which is in turn a determining factor of the reception process. Eco proposes that the open work, through its formal properties, reflects a modern experience of the world, and is an epistemological metaphor that touches on twentieth century science and mathematics, but is also, importantly, analogous to the senselessness and feeling of discontinuity that modern life generates. The open work seeks a new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being laboriously sketched out. Although Eco defines the open work as belonging to modernity, he understands its roots to lie in a crisis within the classical order that occurred in the years immediately preceding the revolutions in America (1775–1783) and then France (1789–1799). These are the years the notebook is most likely to have been painted, and its pages vibrate with the doubt that led to this revolutionary sensitivity, flickering, perhaps unknowingly, pensively, between various disciplines of the gaze and of image making. These flickering brush marks leave forms half completed, either in a process of transforming, or deserted in favour of new enquiry. The result is an ambiguity that rejects the univocal academic principles of the time, and with that, the authority of control that they are founded upon. The compositions of the notebook are defined by chance patterns given up by a found log. In Potential Images (2002), Dario Gamboni (1954–) merges this idea of chance with that of the open work and defines ‘potential images’ as purposefully employing change in some way, and the auto-referential desire to clearly define ‘how things are’ was an aspiration of the Enlightenment, which, while being part of a great advancement of thought on many fronts, did so with an insistence on certain world views. By replicating a world view within the formal terms of image construction, art reflects the social context in which it is made. The clarifying material study of the Enlightenment required a clear univocal approach to the image, in order to define and share new information about the world, but also as a rational dismissal of the nebulous ambiguities of a faith-based world view. A multi-vocal image, one that may have several readings, sits in opposition to univocal clarity. Eco traces its evolution as a formative intention, which is in turn a determining factor of the reception process. Eco proposes that the open work, through its formal properties, reflects a modern experience of the world, and is an epistemological metaphor that touches on twentieth century science and mathematics, but is also, importantly, analogous to the senselessness and feeling of discontinuity that modern life generates. The open work seeks a new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being laboriously sketched out.
space give way to a yellow line just left, at the centre of the scene; a bare, almost form into which I am able to project the giant foetus of 2001 A Space Odyssey. I am ‘reading-in’ from my now, but this is Eco’s ‘pendular dialectics.’ There should be some reading of this part of the image, but in its inherent ambiguity, it is left open to me to finalise what that is, or could be. This partial interchangeability between artist and viewer can be understood to introduce a democratic ideal to the experience of a work, a point Gamboni makes when he states that potential images correspond to the democratic ideal in the political order and address themselves (in Mallarmé’s words) ‘to the newcomers of tomorrow, of which each one will consent to be an unknown unit in the mighty numbers of a universal suffrage.’

Mallarmé’s revolutionary aspirations did not totally play out in the twentieth century, and Gamboni goes on to acknowledge that the space between this ambition for the work of culture, and its realization, defines the limits of that democratic project.

The conditions of a free exchange between equals that it [democracy] formally guarantees is made void by the distribution of wealth and power. But the project itself proposes [...] a ‘sharing of authority’ in relation to contemporary art. In the way it activates, reveals and makes us conscious of the processes of perception and cognition, it offers the opportunity to put freedom of interpretation into practice and to experience the construction of an unknown reality.

If the screen of images that make up our cultural worlds are open to interpretation, rather than being the univocal dictates of a few on ‘how things are,’ then more people have the possibility to see themselves reflected in, and therefore as part of, that culture. This is the basic principle of cultural inclusion, but the open work, or interpretable image, is also an epistemological model of a world in flux, a world in which things could be another way, so a future oriented mode of seeing. This places responsibility as also with the viewer, making them an active participant in the creation of meaning in that future world, rather than a passive consumer of ‘how things are.’

The artist’s contemplation of her logs as a form of visual study that might lead to a ‘wild and free inner space’ has offered up this interpretation of her work in terms of pensive and ambiguous imagery. Discovering the detailed study of individual log patterns has revealed the merger of an older world view represented by alchemical emblems, with the new one of botanical study, while also nodding to another older understanding, of fossilized ‘pictures in nature.’ This syncretic merger has left us with doubtful, pensive images, a ‘holding pattern’ of world views being tested out in fifty-two floating
worlds, which, through their overlapping formal languages, deliquesce simple scenes into an ambiguous flux that thwarts semiotic logic. Testing and searching brushwork has produced serial openness, and this political dimension of the notebook means it sits both in and out of its time, and can be understood to function as a record of the artwork as a site for the possibility of change.

In choosing to consider the notebook as an art work, and exploring it through these twentieth century ideas, I am imposing my twenty-first century criteria. However, with no lived knowledge of the 1770’s, my intellectual and sensuous present is where I do my looking from. This is the point cultural theorist Mieke Bal (1946–) makes in *Quoting Caravaggio*, when she explores how historical objects, while created within the gaze of their times, exist for us in the gaze of our time. We cannot do other than impose our contemporary vision onto our objects of study. Bal coins the term ‘re-visioning’ for this process, and makes an additional point in relation to genealogies, that art is always engaged with what came before it, both in its making, and the interpretation of it.

That engagement is an active reworking. It specifies how and what our eye sees. Hence the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead.

There is no historically objective viewpoint, there is only our limited and subjective ‘now’ from which to view anything, and in this way, past and present illuminate each other. Historical art works exist now within an art historical framework that did not exist in their own time of making. Our imagination of these artists is therefore entirely ours, and in Bal’s words, an artist such as Caravaggio “could have had no knowledge of, or agency upon, what we see him to be now; an irreversible new old master.”

The influence of Caravaggio’s paintings can be traced in the art history that came after him, and is still being made, but the situation of the notebook is different. It is not known to have influenced anything until now. Its historical trace is itself, the fact that it was kept. The non-academic brushwork means it is unlikely to have been considered an artistic object in its time, and yet it has been silently preserved, as a voice wrapped in silence. The lost voice of Anon. The university library defines its pages as revealing ‘the emergence of form out of chaos.’ With *The Ghost Artist* I am re-visioning it as an archival survivor linked to an unwritten past. I see this new old work as that of a non-professionally trained, and yet knowledgeable, artist from a sufficiently humble position in life to have an intimate relationship with the logs for her fire. An artist cloaking a personally confusing enquiry in an out-of-date alchemical semiotics, but using the ideas of transformation inherent to
this to ask barely formed questions about her time and life, and the possibility of having a voice.

The alchemical cloak she used is possibly the work’s historical life-belt, but these aesthetics are being read differently by me than they would have been in its time of making. By naming it as an art work, and, in future chapters, laying out where I see a woman’s voice, and placing this in a genealogy of women’s artistic practice, I seek to give new cultural value to this outsider voice. History has voids, voices unvalued by its writers. The notebook is one of these voids, and in re-visioning it as an approach to visual self-definition, to portrayal, I hope, in feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz’s (1952-) words, to demonstrate the contingency and transformability of what is given [...] there needs to be not only the production of alternatives to patriarchal [...] knowledges but more urgently [...] a freedom to [...] transform existing concepts by exploring their limits of toleration, so that we may invent new ways of addressing and opening up the real, new types of subjectivity, and new relations between subjects and objects.

Women have historically walked a difficult path between subjecthood and objecthood, and their voices have historically been either undervalued or erased. I believe the unnamed ghost that haunts these painted pages is one of these women. I found her notebook while looking for a way to come to terms with my own experience of time passing. I could find precious few vibrant images of older women, and ended up exploring an historic vat of witches and crones that eventually led to emblem studies. But Elizabeth Grosz asks what it is worth to seek recognition as a valued subject, in a culture that prefers to refuse this, and she proposes that the feminist project might more usefully focus on making something, inventing something, which will enable us to recognise ourselves, or more interestingly, to eschew recognition altogether. I am not what others see in me, but what I do, what I make.

This emphasis on materiality as an expression of life, over epistemological argument, resonated with my own empirical methodology, called painting one’s way out of a corner. Did the notebook artist also try to do this? Do these paintings reveal the will to self-definition, hermetically hidden within other possible readings, the work of an artist unsure if this was either possible or permissible? The possibility haunts these pages. As I build a context for these paintings however, it is notable that the artist herself did not. Her world floats within pages otherwise left quite blank.
I first saw it on a cloudless day of early July. We had started at
dawn, crossed Cairngorm about nine o’clock, and made our way
by the Saddle to the lower end of the loch. Then we idled up the
side, facing the gaunt corrie, and at last, when the noonday sun
penetrated directly into the water, we stripped and bathed. The
clear water was at our knees, then at our thighs. How clear it was
only this walking into it could reveal. To look through it was to
discover its own properties. What we saw under water had a
sharper clarity than what we saw through air. We waded on into
the brightness, and the width of the water increased, as it always
does when one is on or in it, so that the loch no longer seemed
narrow, but the far side was a long way off. Then I looked down;
and at my feet there opened a gulf of brightness so profound that
the mind stopped. We were standing on the edge of a shelf that
ran some yards into the loch before plunging down to the pit that
is the true bottom. And through that inordinate clearness we saw
to the depth of the pit. So limpid was it that every stone was clear.

I motioned to my companion, who was a step behind, and she came,
and glanced as I had down the submerged precipice. Then we looked
into each other’s eyes, and again into the pit. I waded slowly back
into shallower water. There was nothing that seemed worth saying.
My spirit was a naked as my body. It was one of the most defenceless
moments of my life.

Scottish poet Nan Shepherd (1893–1981) wrote The Living
Mountain, a non-fiction work
on walking in the Scottish
Highlands, in the closing
years of the second world
war, but it only found a
publisher in 1977, when she
was eighty-four years old.

Nan Shepherd, The Living
Mountain, Canongate, 

I first saw it on a cloudless day of early July. We had started at
dawn, crossed Cairngorm about nine o’clock, and made our way
by the Saddle to the lower end of the loch. Then we idled up the
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moments of my life. 
Strange baubles of life float on the otherwise blank pages of a modest pre-bound writing notebook, made from Dutch paper produced between 1768 and 1777—a object of indeterminate semiotic layers more secretive than Ferguson might have imagined. Pensive, repeating attempts at world-making blur the univocal ideology of its times, with imagery that at first glance registers an already old alchemical world view, but which, on closer looking, reverberates with Modernist ideas that reflect the uncertainties of pre-revolutionary Europe and the great upheavals about to come. It does this despite the notable absence of any of the technologies that helped bring about those changes. The only contemporary details are of some clothes, and in this chapter, I look at these.

Most of the figures are loosely sketched, but there is one couple who stand out in sharp pen. This is the most nervously wrought page in the whole book, the artist seemingly determined to get things ‘right.’

**Page 32: A Couple in Fashionable Attire.** Free of the soft looping brushwork that characterizes most pages, this couple are scratched into the paper with hard, taught pen lines. There is no swirling together of the log and its people here—their central position fails to involve any of the visual involutions of other pages. It’s just about the clothes, and rendering them appears to have been a laborious process. The extreme aesthetic detachment even made me wonder if this drawing was a later addition. Another visit to the library with a magnifying glass failed to reveal touching up however, or an under-painted image coming through on the back of the page. It seems the artist was just approaching this image with a different frame of mind to the others. Formal dress and an emphasis on appearance, how one looks to the world, seem to make her nervous.
Changes in Enlightenment fashions across Europe were dictated by the courts of France and England, and, just like scientific innovation, this news was dispersed through periodicals and news sheets, and by travelling tailors. Upper class and court dress were particularly disciplined, and, according to Aileen Ribiera (1944–) in Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe, “Clothes played the most vital role in defining man and his part in society, to an extent which we cannot contemplate today.” 109 (This is a literal statement related to sumptuary law, which I address later.) This French men’s outfit from 1715 shows the dominant silhouette at the end of the Baroque, a coat with a wide skirt pleated into the waist, loose sleeves, and wide cuffs. 110 Coats like this were designed to be buttoned at the waist, to reveal a large silk neck tie and to flair out below. This is not what image 32 depicts. Ribiera writes that by “the 1760’s the side flare of the coat had virtually disappeared and [...] men (were) increasingly reluctant to fasten the buttons of their coats.” 111 In this French men’s suit from 1780 the silhouette has completely changed. This suit defines daywear for the middle and upper ranks across Europe (and with a slight delay, North America). 112 and the coat now ties across the breast and curves away to each side. The waistcoat, which would have been the same length as the coat in 1700, is now on the hips and cut almost straight across. According to the V&A, this movement up the leg happened during the 1770’s, reaching the top of the thigh (in high fashion circles) by the late 1770’s. 113 This is the ensemble of page 32 and the rising waistcoat quite specifically dates the painting to 1778–1780 at the earliest. This is supported by the small cuffs and modest collar that went along with the thigh level waistcoat.
The man’s hat was difficult to make out, but it is just possible to see a tricorne hat. It is a bit out of proportion, but it is possible to see the waving brim line. Going back to Ribiera, the three-cornered style [...] was the form of the formal hat through the eighteenth century [...] Those wearing uncocked hats were either travelling in bad weather, or were members of the lower classes. 114

So, this is a well-dressed middle- or upper-class European man, who is also clean shaven. An Enlightenment interest in immaculate and smooth surfaces made the beard unfashionable throughout this century. This satirical sketch from 1767, for example, Englishman at Paris, shows a middle-class man in a tricorn hat with working class men from several walks of life, all wearing headwear appropriate to their functions. 115 None have a beard. The presence of beards throughout the notebook is an anomaly.

Englishman at Paris 1767.
Lettered with title and
“Mr. Bunbury del. / Jd. Bretherton f. / Publish’d 23d Febry. 1782” Collection of
The British Museum, London.

Moving to the woman’s outfit, I hoped to find an even more sharply honed fashion eye. The dress shows the dilated hips of all formal dresses throughout the century, but the panniers are not huge. Flattened hoops, or panniers, appeared in the French court in the 1720’s and in court dress their width became ludicrous, with dresses up to four metres recorded mid-century. This seems to be a more modest middle-class version of the style, but still reveals a tightly corseted waist, a triangular ‘stomacher,’ a parted robe revealing an underskirt, and elbow length sleeves finished with lace. These details are datable to between 1750 and the 1780’s, a Robe à la Française. 116 Dresses like this had a long shelf life. The fabric required to make them would have cost much more than any of the commissioned paintings in which we see them today. The Robe à la Française, with minor adjustments of sleeve and back not visible in our drawing, was the key look for over thirty years. There is no sign, however, of the 3-D decorations of the later Rococo, or of the

The changes that the revolution brought shuddered through all of Europe, and were clearly reflected in dress. The memoirist Nathaniel Wraxall, writing in London in 1815, remembered London in 1776 as a period “which is now so distant, and the manners, as well as the inhabitants of the Metropolis have undergone since that time so total a change, that they no longer preserve any similarity.” 117 For the English Wraxall, the pivotal moment was 1793, the year the French monarchy were executed and Jacobinism brought in its wake women who cut their hair short and, he continues, wore “drapery more suited to the climate of Greece or of Italy than the temperature of an island situated in the fifty-first degree of latitude.” This was political change directly resonating in dress codes and its effects were felt in even the remotest parts of Europe. So, by 1793 or so, the dress on page 32 would have been a rare sight, and certainly no longer aspired to. Indeed, the revolutionary sentiment that drove this change was already being expressed through clothing much earlier. In Goethe’s The Sorrow of the Young Werther, published in Leipzig in 1774, the hero is deliberately described in plain dress of the English fashion, in contrast to aristocrats wearing what Goethe calls their ‘gothic dress’ which “made a still greater contrast to our modern coats.” 118 The artist has gone to some pains to depict these socially telling details, but they are not part of the world she is conjuring. The fluidity and brevity with which she executes the dress of peasants and workers reveal this to be a depiction of Goethe’s aristocrats, and they may well have been copied from a periodical, which would account for the hard, flat drawing compared to that of other figures in the book. The anonymous manuscript was probably painted sometime after 1778, and it now appeared to be a sort of fugue from the last days of the ancien regime and a feudal system whose brutal end was about to usher in a new system of the world.

Page 37: The Two Kings. This page shows two bearded men wearing crowns. The combination of beard and crown is, as previously mentioned, difficult from the point of view of the late Enlightenment, but I could still not find a toehold on the beard problem. Kings and Queens are standard alchemical figures, often understood to depict qualities of the sun and moon, but the king on the right of this image seemed to be wearing quite a specific style of jacket, and I wondered if there might be a worldlier connection. The jacket closes straight at the bottom, and has a waist sash. Looking for similar styles in portraiture of the time, I found it in several paintings of Frederick the Great, such as this one by Anna Dorothea Theresbusch (1721–1782) from 1772.
This style of overcoat is a Waffenrock, a Germanic military overcoat, and was worn by Frederick the Great in almost all his portraits. This was a man who spent his reign building his army and his territories, and was famously disinterested in fashionable clothing. I wondered if this style of coat was also worn by leaders of other mid European states, but it was not. Their portraits tended more to either civic pomp, or to slightly militarized versions of men’s day wear. I could find no other state leader of this time portrayed in a Waffenrock. This is the coat of a Prussian general, and with the addition of the crown, it seems very likely that it depicts Frederick the Great.

Frederick II was King of Prussia from 1740 – 1786. He supported the Enlightenment throughout his life, hosting artists and thinkers in his men-only palace of Sans Soucci, in Potsdam. Biographer Tim Blanning (1942 – ) reveals this radicality when he quotes a letter sent to Voltaire in 1738: “I think it better to keep a profound silence on the Christian fables, which are canonized by their antiquity and the credulity of absurd and insipid people.”

Frederick was raised a Pietist Protestant and did not declare his atheism publicly, but this upbringing contributed to a sense of public duty, and his powerfully progressive views led to the first universal primary education provision, and previously unheard of tolerance for any and all religious beliefs. He was, however, also an aggressive and expansionist leader, with a dedication to his army that led one of his ministers to remark that “Prussia was not a country with an army, but an army with a country.” If this is Frederick, and on the dedication page we can read that the whole book is dedicated to ‘the memory of the King’ then the notebook was painted after 1786, when Frederick died, and it was painted by someone who saw him as their king, so a Prussian subject. This moves the finalisation of the book, the writing of the dedication page at least, to after 1786. By this time the ‘gothic dress’ of page 32 was old fashioned, and it completely disappeared in most European countries after the beginning of the Terror in France in 1793.

Page 46: Rape or Rescue. This page is one of the most brutal in the book. A soldier is depicted standing over a woman who is prone on the ground and in a state of undress. The man’s left

Anna Dorothea Therbusch, Portrait of Frederick the Great, 1772. Oil on canvas, 258 x 176 cm, collection of Museo Palacio, Versailles.

Ribiera records that when Frederick the Great died in 1786 his wardrobe consisted of only fur-lined cloaks, old uniforms, and 13 shirts. See Ribiera, op. cit., p. 59


Watson, op. cit., pp. 45 – 47

This was minister Friedrich von Schrötter. See: David Blackbourn, History of Germany, 1780 – 1918: The Long Nineteenth Century. Blackwell publishing, 2002, p. 544

Prussian Cuirassiers 1740 – 1926 showing the style of 1763, second from left.

See link 18 for full address.

The figure on the left of the illustration closely resembles the figure in the manuscript.
In the 1780's there were three squadrons. For information on the history of the Corps, see: kuerassierregimenter.de, see link 19 for full address.

Foot is between her legs, and his sword is drawn, though directed away. It is impossible to establish if this is a rape or a rescue, and the painting is tiny, but the detailed brush work is specific. The artist did it this way, and not another. The soldier's uniform is painted as being light in colour, with a darker covering breast plate, which stops at the waist — so is a cuirass. The hat, which at first glance looks like a bearskin, is in fact drawn as two parts, with a semi-circular front and a plume coming out of the top centre of this. Looking through army uniforms of the period, I found that this ensemble most closely aligned with that of an officer of the Garde du Corps of the Prussian army, the elite regiment established by Frederick the Great as his personal bodyguard when he came to power in 1740. Designed to be a model to other regiments, numbers were kept small, and soldiers taken almost entirely from the Prussian nobility.

Their uniform consisted of white leggings and jacket with a metal cuirass. An officer's hat was a black tricorne but flattened on front to look semi-circular. It would have had a white or black plume extending from top middle. The depiction of a uniformed soldier of Frederick's personal guard made it even more likely that the crowned figure wearing a German military overcoat on page 37 was indeed Frederick.

Page 17: The Lion. When I was looking at portraits of Frederick the Great, I came across one in which he is shown with a Lion. This post 1778 painting was apparently of the Lion of Bavaria. When I then started sifting through 'Lion of Bavaria' imagery, to find out more about this lion, I realised that the padded crown in the painting would not have been its most common depiction at the time. An oil painting is a single object, and unless chosen as the source for populist engravings, would have been known only to a small coterie of the privileged. Looking online, it also seemed that the Bavarian lion was an idea, and its specific representation could vary considerably. One image that would be fairly consistent however, and be repeated throughout Bavaria, would be the coat of arms of the state. In the official coat of arms from 1777–1799 the lion is repeated five times, three times with exactly the same design of crown as image 17—a profile of three points, widening from the tips, then reversing sharply in to join the base of the crown. So image 17 did not necessarily depict the alchemical lion I had supposed, it was becoming equally likely that this was actually the Lion of Bavaria.

Frederick with a lion is held by the Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte (House of Bavarian History), and the archival notes suggest this painting was not commissioned by Frederick himself, but is a re-working of an earlier portrait of the King in order to place him beside the Bavarian Lion, who is seen to offer him documents which read: “Documents of the Land owners, Inheritors, and of the succession of Bavaria/The (unclear word)
In 1778, Elector Maximilian Joseph of Bavaria died without heirs, ending 30 years of relative peace. A European scramble ensued over who should legitimately inherit the right to rule Bavaria. Emperor Joseph II of the Holy Roman Empire wanted it to further his interests in the West, and the next in line to Bavarian power, Charles IV Theodore, was willing to align himself with Joseph in a complex deal over territory. Frederick the Great was not prepared to allow this Austrian expansion to the west, and a war ensued. This ‘War of the Bavarian Succession’ of 1778–1779 is what is being referred to in the oil painting. It lasted less than a year and ended in victory for Frederick in 1779. This painting seems to have been created during the unrest, and to record a plea from some of the people of Bavaria for Frederick’s assistance in defending their realm.

A diplomatic peace was agreed in 1779, when Catherine the Great of Russia threatened to support Frederick’s invading army with an extra 50,000 troops. 121 The short conflict was known historically as the plums and potatoes war, a diplomatic war fought between non-engaging armies, whose main tactic was to cut off each other’s food supplies during a year of encampments. This passive action nevertheless killed thousands of troops, and civilian support, as starvation and dysentery raged through the camps. 122 The war-without-battles was not, however, fought on Bavarian soil. The armies camped out in Northern Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, east of the Elbe. 123 Patriotics Bavarians won their conflict without having to endure its being fought out on their own lands, and Frederick’s actions led to him being called a saviour by many patriots. The website of the Haus der Austriert hat es damals leicht kein Haus in Münchener gesehen; in dem nicht das im Kopier- gestochene Porträt des Königs von Preußen aufgehängt war. [My translation] The coat of arms of Bavaria 1777–1799, with enlarged detail

The images inserted here in the printed thesis are not available in the digital thesis.
Historian Vernon Stauffer (1875–1925) blamed this squarely on religious shoulders, seeing

a land where sacerdotalism reigned supreme. Religious houses flourished in abundance; the number of priests and nuns was incredibly large [...] superstitious practices made the popular religion little better than gross fetishism. So-called ‘miraculous’ images were commonly paraded through the streets; innumerable statues and sacred relics were exposed to the gaze of crowds of the faithful; the patronage of the saints was assiduously solicited. Among the educated there was a widespread conviction that the piety of the people was ignorant and that their trustful attitude made them the prey of many imposters.

This was not a centre of progress and innovation then. Die Aufklärung was underway in neighbouring states, and Frederick’s educational reforms, along with the increase in printed literature, were leading to the formation of a standardized German language. The most progressive literature of the Enlightenment was either banned or difficult to find in Catholic Bavaria however, and a tradition of miraculous or pareidolic images, often observed in stones, vegetables, perhaps wood, was widespread. The methods of the notebook had precedent.

The Jesuit order had been dissolved due to corruption in 1773, but continued to extend influence, especially within education. Faced with a political impasse, Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830) a professor of Canon Law at the University of Ingolstadt, created a short-lived secret society, which, between 1776 and 1785, studied and disseminated banned Enlightenment texts. His society of the Illuminati “was a short lived movement of republican free thought [whose] aim was to replace Christianity with a religion of reason.” The Illuminati have gone on to haunt conspiracy theories and block buster fiction ever since, but they were originally a small group of free thinkers who, for nine short years, worked throughout the southern German states to counter the secret influence of the Catholic church in the ordering of public life. Bavaria was the battleground for an intellectual war that marked the furthest reaches of the age of reason.

Images of light shining through darkness litter the manuscript, but pages 20 and 21 are particularly claustrophobic views from under water, or from the bottom of a well, with bubbles of air carefully painted as rising from the depths. Is this the return of a pareidolic image as one of suffocation and drowning, far from the light? Historian Richard van Dülmen (1937–2004) traces the work of the Illuminati, whose aim was to influence a fundamental rethinking of social order and the abuse of power and “to put an end to the machinations of the purveyors of injustice.”

“Weishaupt wrote that ‘Of all Illumination which human reason
Voltaire lived as Frederick the Great’s guest at his palace of Sans Soucci, near Berlin, for years. Frederick was one of Europe’s strongest supporters of Enlightenment thought and its dissemination through education. He is not thought to have been a member of the Illuminati, but is known to have been a Mason.

a desire for self-understanding freed from church doctrine, and coming out of political texts that were freely available in other parts of the Prussian Empire, but banned in Bavaria, including those of Locke and Voltaire. They also published anonymous political pamphlets and used their professional roles to influence political and academic life. The society was not quite progressive enough to include women, but their successful dissemination of Enlightenment ideals through the higher echelons of Bavarian society filtered into Ladies salons. The war of succession also led to increased liberalization, but under the weak leadership of Charles Theodor, church repression returned. The educated classes looked to the illuminati and their influence spread rapidly, attracting the attention of Goethe and other intellectuals working in Switzerland and other German states. This rapid expansion led to more open expressions of anti-monarchical thought, and in 1785, all secret societies were banned in Bavaria and brutally put down. The existence of the Illuminati had become semi-public knowledge and its members, including Weishaupt (aka Spartacus), were forced to flee. The same year, Charles Theodor again tried to make a deal with the Holy Roman Empire, and to trade Bavaria for leadership of another territory he found more favourable. He was once again stopped by Frederick, this time diplomatically. His disdain for his people was clear however, and when Bavaria was finally over-run by French revolutionaries in 1792, its troops found a society and institutions closer to those of the middle ages than the Enlightenment. It is within this turmoil that I think the notebook artist was working, taking ideas from a street use of images, merging them with scientific approaches, engaging in a form of private self-education perhaps encouraged by secret reading of Illuminati texts. The likely depiction of Frederick the Great, soldiers from his Corps, the Lion of Bavaria, of drowning in mud but seeing light, all point to this work as a visual log-book of someone struggling to articulate a voice whose right to exist was being fought out in the streets around her. Seen in this light, the notebook becomes a visual record of a dawning idea of the modern subject. The revolutionary work of the Illuminati was a moment of possibility that was, in the end, not taken up by Bavarians, but by the French. The Bavarian battle of ideas was won by the Catholic church and state, but when the French Jesuit Abbé Barruel published his Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism in 1797, he blamed the Illuminati and societies like it for planning and executing the French Revolution. It was with Barruel that the conspiracy theories so loved by contemporary fiction began.

Abbé Barruel, Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, trans. Robert Clifford, Hudson & Goodwin for C. Dears, New York, 1799. Archived 28.10.2017. The actual work of the Bavarian Illuminati has not yet been clearly historicised. Some of their names are known, but the extent of their network and what they achieved remains — secret.

In the years before the revolution, many forces vied for control over how the world might be seen, and the role of God within that vision. Pansophism incorporated scientific discoveries into new images of God; Syncretism looked for the underlying
aspects of all religions; Voltaire, in Deism, removed God to the position of an abstract higher being, and Hobbes and Hume, along with Frederick the Great, were probably atheists. What now looks like a clear progression towards contemporary thought was at the time a chaotic struggle for dominance. The Reformation and its openness to scientific discovery, combined with enlightened tolerance of otherness and rejection of violent control over people’s beliefs, had destabilized Catholicism but in Bavaria at least, it maintained strong control of the official narrative of the spirit. Potentially revolutionary ideas had to be expressed in ‘occulted’ forms, through anonymity and secrecy, behind closed doors and in hidden pamphlets. This had been going on since the ‘Rosicrucian Enlightenment’ and Kevin Hateley points out the importance of Athanasius Kirchner (1602–1680) in this developing thought. His pre-Enlightenment vision took light as a metaphor for God, suggesting reason to be divine rather than solely the work of man. Conflating a scientific understanding of light as energy with a new interpretation of the divine is a half-way house to the later separation of reason from belief. A theology of electricity and magnetism took up this idea and it raged through the Enlightenment, as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke points out, in The Esoteric Uses of Electricity,

The discovery of magnetism and electricity supplied a new metaphor for the presence of divine power in the world from the seventeenth century onwards. The invisible power of magnetism and electricity, the attraction of opposite poles, and its dramatic manifestation in the form of lightning suggested a mysterious, powerful and awesome symbol for God. The battle for control of the narrative, and therefore of power and resources, between the intellectual forces of democracy and the Catholic church had been going on in southern Germany for a hundred and fifty years before the manuscript was painted. In a pre-Darwinian, pre-Freudian world, the lack of any other narrative that allowed an interpretation of powerful feelings, the invisible electricity of lived experience, created a void that religion rushed to fill, and images with social resonance in their time, such as those of electricity, were used for this. Alchemical imagery, which was not necessarily tied to religious belief, had a role to play in maintaining distance between this acknowledgement of inner forces, and the doctrines of the church. Returning to McLean’s understanding of the work of alchemists, they “used events in their experiments as seed images for meditations, forming visual mantras from the logic of abstract thought and the necessarily ambiguous nature of images, expressed by Barbara Stafford as

The potential for ethical betrayal still haunts our enjoyment of the visual arts, but as Ferguson pointed out in his Bibliotheca Chemica, “It is an illustration of the persistence of an idea that all through the eighteenth century [...] when entirely new theories were advanced, the controversy as to the reality of transmutation — as a fact and as a theory — was still sustained.” It was sustained because it touched a need. Transmutation, as the action of changing, or the state of being changed into another form, lay at the heart of both alchemy and Christianity, but transformation was also the goal of revolutionary thought. Our dry chemist pinpointed this transforming as an underlying human desire, one we can summon today by thinking of 3 am studies of our bedroom ceilings, and the stabbing work of the question ‘Is this it?’ Is there a point in life when we accept the world’s definition of who and what we are, or do we maintain a belief in transmutation against all odds, in the possibility for yet another inner change, and yet another experience of the new?
While battles for hearts and minds raged in Bavaria, a little mirror drifted through gentler moments of Enlightenment culture. It was both a new technology, and a nostalgia machine, as it reflected the present in an image more reminiscent of a century before. This marvel of forwards and backwards was the Claude Glass, created to transform any landscape into a vision approaching the academic ideals of Baroque artist Claude Lorraine. The Glass was a smoke-blackened convex mirror, most commonly round or oval, and about the size of a hand. They were popular, inexpensive, and sold in opticians, stationers, art suppliers, and at tourist destinations. People kept them in their pockets or handbags.

Did the notebook artist have a Claude Glass? Artists used them as compositional tools, and in most European countries, tourists could stop at proscribed ‘viewing stations,’ buy a Glass if they did not already have one, and, turning their backs to the view, savour a transformed, framed image of the scene behind them, in an earlier enactment of the selfie-taker today. This pre-photographic tool for framing, distorting, and tinting a view, the same way every time, created a generic image that was in keeping with contemporary ideals of the picturesque. A key theorist of this movement, William Gilpin (1724–1804), describes watching a Claude Glass attached to his carriage.

A succession of highly coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye [...] like visions [...] or the brilliant landscapes of a dream [...] if the transient glance of a good composition happens to unite them, we should give any price to fix, and appropriate the scene.
golden-brown colours in the anonymous manuscript, the seriality, the framing, all suggest familiarity with this contemporary aesthetic, and pages 28 and 40 are painted as lens or mirror-based views. If the darkness of the Glass hovers over these pages, then so do its inherent problems of definition, and the distorted, and therefore corrupted, image that it creates.

In The Female Thermometer, Terry Castle (1953) makes the point that the mirror began to be a regular household item in the late middle ages, and its everyday use may have influenced the development of European middle-class individualism more than any political development or philosophy. As intimate domestic life wrapped itself around a new technology, this created a growing awareness of one’s ‘self’ as also being an object in the world. The structural suggestion of a dark mirror or a lens in the notebook, in contrast to the Gainsborough sketch, brings out this growing ‘self’ awareness as a possible subject. The Claude Glass was a dark mirror in more than its smokiness. You could hold it up in front of your face and see a distorted self. It is the possibilities of this, as a move away from the appropriate and the clear, that the notebook may be interrogating.

In a discipline orientated eighteenth century, the appropriate and the clear image came under the authority of the art academy, whose expansion, in place of the studio system and court support, also related to a developing mercantile bourgeoisie. As with fashion, Paris and London dominated, and their academy’s teachings on image ideals disciplined what it was possible to imagine, make, and have accepted for exhibition. In a letter to a potential client, Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) reveals the dominance of this idealist tradition. He had been asked to paint a view of the client’s estate, and replied that with regard to real views from nature in this country, he has never seen any place that affords a subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gasper or Claude [...] if his Lordship wishes to have anything tolerable of the name of Gainsborough, the subject altogether, as well as the figures etc. must be of his own brain.

Landscape painting as a record of what is actually there was not yet an idea, they were constructed settings for other concepts or actions. The first painting of the notebook is a constructed landscape, and is used only once—to set the scene. On the page before, the dedication page, she seems to contradict this idea however, by defining herself as an ‘ape of nature’ (Per artem Naturae Simiam). This was a common contemporary description of an artist and is traceable to a Renaissance idea of truthful depiction that had by the seventeenth century degenerated into a notion of unimaginative imitation. It was this meaning that Charles Le Brun intended in his widely distributed 1688
The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.

When she showed up at work later, her assistant asked if she was okay. She realized she must still look blown, but the question begged an answer about split mir or broken hues, not about how she had misunderstood love and obedience so completely that she felt broken on a wheel of her own making and that now it might be too late. She spiralled outward far enough to tell a story of public transport, and then reversed into work.

The black mirror takes us off-plan and into a world governed by desire. The black mirrors of logs are not the smooth surfaces of oil and obsidian however. They are mirrors of worn blackness, the longer one gazes into it, the threshold to the mind, and come to answers that escaped rational thought, was an acceptable social practice a hundred years before the technology that may have helped her with that journey is the mirroring Claude Glass, with its distorting lens and its enactment of looking back to the past while actually looking into the present. All mirrors act as mediums, returning our bodies to us as images, but the darkening, distorting, mirror that turns today’s world into an image of the past also opens the door to the phantoms of that past. The black or scrying mirror takes that idea further, and was also a technology in common use. Polished stones like that belonging to John Dee have remained prized occult objects since their arrival from Aztec South America after first European contact. However, a similar surface could be achieved with oil in a bowl or in the hand, or with circles of paper or wood blackened by charcoal. Such practices were often associated with demonism, but in The Claude Glass, Mallet Arnaud (1689–) quotes the memoirs of a trader in the French East Indies in the 1670s, who, with no way to confer with his superiors in Paris on a tricky problem, gave detailed instructions to local diviners to prepare oil in a bowl for him, which allowed him to be ‘spirited’, a process he claimed highly useful to his affairs and in no way preventing him from being devout. It is clear that this was a familiar work practice, and that he was not indulging in a local exoticism. This story makes clear that looking into a suggestive material density to focus the mind, and come to answers that escaped rational thought, was an acceptable social practice a hundred years before the notebook artist began peering at log ends, and that it was not necessarily related to either alchemical mysticism or witchcraft. As with mid twentieth century Rorschach blots, ‘what might this be?’ is the question, and the answer is the spectral knowledge that flickers and hides from our rational minds.

In his last published writing, Truman Capote (1924–1984), whose work swung wide on the pendulum between forensic analysis and creative projection, recalls an encounter with a black mirror. The blackness, the longer one gazes into it, ceases to be black, but becomes a queer silver-blue, the threshold to secret vision; like Alice, I feel on the edge of a voyage through a looking-glass, one I’m hesitant to take [...] but once more my eyes seek its depths. Strange where our passions carry us, floggingly pursue us, a tightening upon us unwanted dreams, unwelcome destinies. Otherwise defined the empirical eighteenth century, and into an exploration of an unconscious that had not yet been named. The technology that may have helped her with that journey is the mirroring Claude Glass, with its distorting lens and its enactment of looking back to the past while actually looking at the present.

She woke up with a start, and clasped out of bed and into the liberation of day. The early light felt clean on linens that had escaped tarnishing sheets, and she was both warm and cold at the same time. She grabbed the coffee pot together, she knew the steps. She stood, watching nothing, hearing hot water chortle through its pipe. A few minutes later she was back at her desk with her white china mug, and she clicked open the SIE. Was the missing body really from A few minutes later she was back at her desk with her white china mug, and she clicked open the SIE. Was the missing body really from its pipe. She woke up with a start, and clasped out of bed and into the liberation of day. The early light felt clean on linens that had escaped tarnishing sheets, and she was both warm and cold at the same time. She grabbed the coffee pot together, she knew the steps. She stood, watching nothing, hearing hot water chortle through its pipe. A few minutes later she was back at her desk with her white china mug, and she clicked open the SIE. Was the missing body really from its pipe. She woke up with a start, and clasped out of bed and into the liberation of day. The early light felt clean on linens that had escaped tarnishing sheets, and she was both warm and cold at the same time. She grabbed the coffee pot together, she knew the steps. She stood, watching nothing, hearing hot water chortle through its pipe. A few minutes later she was back at her desk with her white china mug, and she clicked open the SIE. Was the missing body really from its pipe.
glass, but always accounts for its material body. The artist hovers pendulum-like between the realisation of an interior world seeking to escape its own self-consciousness, and the persistence of bodily presence. One occludes the other, comes back, goes away, in a ghostly narrative of the sensual present, the spectral past, and perhaps the imagined future.
Hovering in the present, looking back to the past; perhaps Walter Benjamin’s angel of history is a part of all of us, eyes staring, wings spread in horror at the wreckage of what has gone before. 159 And yet, still ‘our passions carry us,’ into imagining futures, and imagining the things we cannot see when we look.

Endless looking for an interior beneath the surface of the bodies and images with which we are forever ensnared is the catastrophe of living (in)skin. Skinned alive, our bodies are sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths. The promise of that constantly-deferred final sentence, exuberant sky writing, why’s own writing, is what keeps us performing repeated acts of looking, repeated acts of loving. They must be repeated because they cannot be sustained. The radical formlessness and apparent endlessness of our vision, of our sexuality, of our dying, makes it impossible to still these things and declare them ‘still lives’.

Peggy Phelan (1959–) was writing about a Caravaggio painting of Doubting Thomas searching the bloodless wound of a transformed Christ. 160 She interprets Christ’s bloodless interiority as an expression of the vessel we all still seek, one that mirrors our own inner formlessness, our sensation of being alive; a vessel with which we might touch the unbounded feelings of interior experience, and which might still exist within art practice. 161 Fifty-two paintings raised from the decaying ends of fire logs may have been an artist taking this measure, moving instinctively away from a religious cultural imaginary, and, just like Doubting Thomas, needing to test a material present for its capacity to hold her own moving towards and away from dying. Finding pictures in nature like this was a familiar practice, and there are received images of angels and kings in the notebook, but the artist goes further, pressing into…
the material body of the log with fingers and eyes, and finding forms that do not come from any repertoire, so must have come from her life. The containing epidermis of bark, with fleshy inner layers of growth and ageing becomes entangled with these inner emblems, in a relationship modulated by the ouroboros, and the cloud, that classic marker between mimetic representation and some other way of seeing. The artist may have battled to paint this personal vision, as culturally received images of matters interior, angels and burning bushes, keep coming back, but where she moves away, we see a woman looking, and her individual record of the ‘catastrophe of living (in) skin.’

The theorization of men’s looking, as a gendered cultural event, was named by cinema theorist Laura Mulvey (1941–) in 1975. Mulvey used the term ‘the male gaze’ to theorise the voyeuristic fetishism of a cinematic world view generated by recording the entwined gaze of male characters, writers, cinematographers and directors, all taking pleasure in the attention they uniformly accorded women, as objects of their looking. This collected ‘gaze’ denied women the possibility of returning their look, and so unable to enter the economy of gazing as fully human subjects. Although not universal, Mulvey pointed out its cultural domination in film, which helped reveal its wider aspect within a Western history of fine art—the commissioning and creation of paintings, sculptures, and museums also being historically controlled by the visual preferences of a white male heterosexual world view, in a mirror of the wider economy. A discourse on the possibilities of a female gaze grew out of this, also mostly in relation to cinema, with film makers Catherine Breillat (1948–) and Zoe Dirse (1960–) among others, making important intersectional contributions and attempt to positively address what a female gaze might see. Mulvey’s principal point, of highlighting control of the view as the exercise of power, remains. Revealing and contesting it with fine art practice became the work of several feminist artists in the years following, with Barbara Kruger (1945–) and Jo Spence (1934–1992) among others, making important contributions and some other way of seeing. The artist may have battled to paint this personal vision, as culturally received images of matters interior, angels and burning bushes, keep coming back, but where she moves away, we see a woman looking, and her individual record of the ‘catastrophe of living (in) skin.’

The Male Glance

In her 2008 essay, The Male Glance, cultural critic Lili Loufbourow (1979–) quotes this double standard to make a point, not about beauty, but about a gendered criticality in relation to women’s cultural production that also stops dismissively at the skin, this time of the practice. She extends the principle of the gendered gaze, a product of cultural conditioning absorbed by us all, to that of the dismissing gendered ‘glance.’ Loufbourow’s suggestion is that we all, having absorbed this way of looking in relation to women’s skins, perpetuate it when we encounter women’s artistic and cultural production. This critical, rather than Sontag’s cosmetic, summating, is located in ‘the male glance,’ which we all employ.

The male glance is the opposite of the male gaze. Rather than linger lovingly on the parts it wants most to penetrate, it looks, assumes, and walks on. It is, above all else, quick. Under its influence we rejoice in our distant diagnostic speed […] This is the male glance’s sub-rosa work, and it feeds an inchoate, almost erotic hunger to know without attending—to omnisciently not-attend, to reject without taking the trouble of analytic labor because our intuition is so searingly accurate it doesn’t require it […] we point and classify.

We are all familiar with this superficial, judging self. Loufbourow’s essay is an analysis of recent critique of contemporary women’s writing, but the male glance also functions unconsciously as a way of dismissing anonymous cultural objects that do not conform to dominant aesthetic value systems.

In researching the anonymous notebook, I lost count of the people whose glancing eyes suffered only a few pages of feigned interest unless I prepared the frame with my ghost story. While this theorization is recent and ongoing, the painting of women looking does have a history. Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch, the Prussian portrait painter of Frederick the Great, was working only a little earlier in the eighteenth century to the notebook artist. She painted several self-portraits, often looking straight out at the viewer through the technology of the lens. Looking back at a painting like The Male Glance, from our contemporary focus, reveals a still underwritten history of such looks.
Page 9: A woman’s head in the mouth of a bear. There is a woman looking on page nine, the first time someone looks directly out as us from the book. It is from the jaws of a bear. If this was a scene of violent death, we might expect more agitation, but this woman is acceptant of her lot. As women don’t often look straight out at the viewer in late eighteenth century art, this is in itself a forceful indication of authorship, but what to make of the bear? In my general research on Bavarian history, I looked at some of the art that was taken from the country during the Thirty Years War, and came across a similar bear, also with a head in its mouth. In this manuscript page from 1424, a demon of desire seizes upon human bodily weakness, grabbing men (and only men) in its jaws and claws. The depiction of the lower left head is strikingly similar to page nine. The demon can be found in a famous manuscript on human vice and virtue that left Bavaria in 1623, but the influence of such images permeated church teaching long after. If our page nine is a demon of desire, the woman has given herself up to being eaten alive by it.

Close study of the paint layers on page nine reveal the locked heads at the centre were one of the last details to have been painted, perhaps a coming to the point. As a self-portrait, it is a bold statement of interest. Previous pages record heaven and the making of the world, leading up to page seven, the strange religious debate page. Page eight introduces a tie between a woman and a man, and then there is this page, which takes a religious semiotics and transforms its power dynamics by placing a woman openly engaging with desire. She is not ‘lost,’ but her body, the log body, is become a swirling, tumbling mass that streams from the hands and feet of a small running figure directly above her head. This sensual abstract brushwork fills almost all of the log-body, except for the bottom right, where there is an indistinct couple, arms out towards each other. Lines of hatching suggest the artist was undecided about how close she should paint them. The outer bark is completely sealed in a golden ring.

Page 12: The Ghost and the Toad. On page twelve light shining from the heart of the log shoots out through the enclosing bark like sun through leaves. It is three pages since the declaration of desire and two figures float in golden light. Neither are clearly gendered, and one is only just coalescing as a shimmering atmosphere of smiling dots. A memory, a wish? Rising behind the darker figure is the snake that on other pages is the ouroboros, alchemical eternity. Here it seems more biological, painted as growing out of the body of the log, and folding around the figure; time become more urgently real perhaps. All three are looking down at a toad lying belly up on the ground between them. The toad also has an alchemical register. Animal symbols were often used to represent stages of material change.
Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450 – 1516), Garden of Earthly Delights, 1490 – 1510, Museo del Prado, Madrid

in the flask, and a black toad was an expression of wet matter in transformation. It is never alchemically drawn as belly up and vulnerable like this however, as an actor in a mimetic, rather than a symbolic, narrative. The naturalism of this playful, canine expression of subjugation is a performative, aesthetic, use of the symbol for transforming wetness. This does have a history in painting. It is a commonly used symbol of women's sexuality, or, from a judgemental perspective, debauchery. Bosch presents it as such in his Garden of Earthly Delights, on the right panel, latched onto a woman's breast. It is also often seen in moralising nature studies. The cultural persistence of such a sexual reading can be seen in Austrian painter Maria Lassnig's (1919 – 2014) self-portrait, where the artist depicts herself engaging with her own ageing sexuality through communion with a frog.

The notebook toad presents female sexuality as relaxed and tummy revealing, and in perfect balance between the dark painted snake on the left, and the smiling evanescence on the right. The lightness of touch works around Lassnig's more literal statement, and is far away from the pornographic aides painted by a contemporary like, say, Boucher. This is female sexuality from the inside, not out.

Pages 30 & 44: At the Theatre. These two pages repeat the same view of a theatrical performance. The first one, page 30, is dark with burnt umber reworkings that ended up with a sort of proscenium cave entrance, framing a lit 'stage' with three figures. We share the view of this with a painted audience of three women. Once again, there are men with swords and clubs. The one on the right is wearing a winged cap, a winged right shoe, and carrying a caduceus, so is a portrayal of Hermes, messenger of the gods. Hermes was also the god of trade, thieves, travellers, of boundaries and transitions, both literal and figurative, and the guiding deity of alchemists—the closed circulation of liquids in a pelican jar would be 'hermetically' sealed, or bounded. In the middle a well-built man is about to strike down with his club. This could be Zeus, king of the gods, who always carried his thunderbolt in his right hand. The remaining figure is down on the ground, oppressed by the stage back drop, which he is pushing against. A stage back drop is the world for its actors, which would make this the Titan Atlas, struggling to hold up the world. Atlas carried the weight of the heavens on his shoulders as a punishment bestowed on him by Zeus, in retribution for leading the Titans into battle against the gods. This Atlas looks more like a pudgy young boy though, and he appears to have an erection. Lewd humour was part of the eighteenth-century satirical world, but this is its first appearance in the notebook. A stage would be an appropriate place for that however, and our classical heroes, the Lords of the Universe, are depicted as infants play-acting at war, kingship, and diplomacy, and getting an erection while doing so.
The cultural magazine Die Horen was famous for its support of and inclusion of women writers. Der Teutsche Merkur, began in 1772 in Weimar, was a huge success across all German states. Its editor, Wieland, believed in the value of the theatre as a political public forum, and their coverage of this led to almost constant opposition from the church. This painting therefore not only reveals a feminine gaze, but also suggests a politicised one, asserting itself in opposition to the dominance of the church in Bavaria. See Watson, op. cit., p. 78.

Watching the performance are three naked grown women, sitting at the mouth of a cave. While many of the figures in the notebook are sexually ambiguous, there is no doubt here. Are they laughing at the spectacle our heroes perform? In the German speaking world of the 1780’s, Weimar Classicism was busy synthesising the rational ideas of the Enlightenment with new Romantic interests of feeling and the body, and not only within an elite. These ideas were widely disseminated in cultural magazines such as Die Horen and Der Teutsche Merkur. There is a position to be read here, and it is one of the clearest hints that we are sharing in the world view of a woman. When I looked at this page in reproduction, the lower legs of the women appeared to be goat-like, and suggesting witches, but when I went back to the library with my magnifying glass, these spindly lower legs, most visible in the middle figure, were revealed to be flat shadows meant to indicate light coming from the stage, also the reason for the silhouette.

Thirteen pages later we are back at the same theatre. The women still sit at the entrance to the cave, but the world of the stage has deliquesced into a scintillation of sherbet blues, pink and lemon. Small dots fill the air with a pointillist hum. Perhaps it is evening. The three heroes are still there, but they are small, indistinct, and no longer pudgy children. Their attributes have become bow and arrow, sword, and wings. Are they now in heaven? The women have not changed, and continue to watch from the mouth of their cave.

The brush marks of deprivation

Over and above these specific pages indicating that we are sharing in a women’s-eye view of the world, there is a more general reading of cultural deprivation that also suggests a woman’s voice. Everything points to an artist working in Bavaria sometime between 1778 and 1792, when it was invaded by French revolutionary troops. There is no hint of the changes to everyday dress that the revolution brought, and the troops portrayed are Prussian, not French. Bavaria’s remoteness from Enlightenment modernity also accounts for the artist’s tense relationship with fashionable dress, but perhaps more importantly, the anomalous presence of beards on many of the male figures. No-one of noble eighteenth century European birth is recorded with a beard, including Frederick the Great. However, if the notebook was painted somewhere quite remote, in a village rather than a city, perhaps beards were still part of everyday experience. Women rarely travelled, and medieval sumptuary laws, the legal enforcement of dress codes, remained in place in Bavaria until the middle of the century, and in neighbouring Switzerland until the mid 1800s. These laws were designed, in Ribiera’s words, “to keep the lower classes, and particularly women, in their subservient place; the clothing worn was therefore kept far behind current fashion.” As were ideas.
about appropriate facial hair. The laws visually defined, and therefore affected, all strata of society, in ways we can understand more easily today by thinking with Mulvey’s male gaze. Sumptuary laws were no longer enforced by the 1780’s, but their cultural shadow, the social approbation they encouraged, would have lingered much longer in a country dominated by conservative ideals.

Most of the pages with clothes are in the second half of the notebook, as images of solitude give way to the depiction of discursive groups. And most of these groups wear sketchy non-specific dress. Ribiera notes that at any given time [in the C18th] one would find society built upon layers, consisting of the most recent fashions imported from France or England, middle class versions with local adaptations demanded by custom and law, and the virtually static traditional dress in the more remote areas, where custom varied from village to village, so tightly knotted were the small communities. 171

Peasant families would have mostly spun and stitched their own clothes, designed to fulfill functional needs. Our artist, when she gets around to depicting a social world, was most comfortable among the ‘common people.’ The one clear depiction of the upper classes came out nervy and hard. The use of Latin on the opening page makes it unlikely she was herself a peasant, but domestic isolation and external control were facts of almost all women’s lives at this time, and she may have lived remotely, and educated herself, like most women of the time, with magazines and books. 122 For middle and upper class women in cities, salons were also an increasingly important social forum, as they brought the possibility of intellectual debate, and a small number of those women also found it possible to flourish in the public realm. If not upper class, these women usually had some agency, and she looks through technology at the viewer, who is temporarily held within a rare depiction of a magnified female look. Choosing such a frank portrayal was a courageous act, also as her age was against her professionally, which she already knew from an experience with the French Academy ten years before. In 1767, she had dared to send in a mythological painting, at a time when women artists were bound by social convention to portraiture and other genre forms. Jupiter Transforms himself in Pan to Surprise the Sleeping Antiope was rejected as obscene by an academic commission that, ironically, included François Boucher, who had himself successfully exhibited Odalisque in 1749. The charge, however, was not necessarily focussed on the painting itself. A rival Prussian painter in Paris, Daniel Chodowieki (1726–1801), wrote of the incident that it was especially when she had the notion to arouse voluptuous ideas that she was insufferable, particularly when I reflected that this was an old woman who wished to arouse these ideas in order to earn money. 176

Denis Diderot (1713–1784), with whom Lisiewska-Therbusch had a complex personal relationship, remarked about this event that “it was not talent that she lacked in order to create a big sensation in this country […] it was youth, it was beauty, it was modesty, it was coquetry.” 127 The jibe about modesty may relate to looking straight out, magnified, but there was also criticism of her rejected painting, that she could no longer get work in Paris, and had to leave these ambitions behind the New art-scene. 177

Alice Neel, Self-Porttrait, 1980, oil on canvas, 133.5 x 101 x 2.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. 200 years later, a similar working position to Therbusch is recorded by Nivel, the portrait painter to the New York art scene of the 1860’s and 70’s. This is the artist’s first self-portrait, painted when she was 75. Her spectacles, as a working tool, are further emphasised as they are the only thing she wears. Her look, through them, creates a visual reminder of the active mind held within the self-objectified, objectifying ageing body. The softness of the white hair is repeated in the short white nap, again linking the work of documenting with the process of time on the body. 178


Control over the images a society makes, is also control over who is permitted reproduction as a visible member of that society, a point Judith Butler (1956-) makes.
There is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time. By ‘intelligibility’ I include ‘readability in social space and time’ and so an implicit relation to others (and to possibilities of marginalization, abjection, and exclusion) that is conditioned and mediated by social norms. 178

It was as a ‘body in time and space’ that Diderot thought Therbusch failed, not as an artist. She got as far as she did because she trained herself in the visual ‘intelligibility’ that defined picture making in her time, but the image that was her own body could not be accepted by this same culture. If she was not young and potentially sexually available, a coquette, she had no right to ‘represent’ sexuality. To go further and bring bodies visually coded with poverty (her peasant models) into the academy, was altogether too much. Stepping back to the notebook, it becomes easier to see that the tentative explorations of sensuality it explores, and its grounding in peasant life, must have crossed right over the borders of what was socially permissible, and these beautiful paintings may have been made with an audience of one, or perhaps two, in mind.

Wonderful as its pages often are, the artist who painted them did not possess the professional skills of a Lisiewska-Therbusch. Page fifty-two reveals only an embattled grasp of human anatomy. These are paintings created by someone with no training, only a ten-year-old writing notepad to paint in, and what was probably a limited supply of watercolours, as there is notably sparse use of more expensive reds and blues. This is the ‘reproduction of the social world’ of a woman whose aesthetic vision has been deprived of learnable norms.

The public museum did not exist before the French Revolution, and while academy exhibitions were theoretically public, they existed only in large cities, and only if you were deemed sufficiently middle or upper class. For those without access to exhibitions or education, images were to be found in church and in print: a widely distributed etching of Frederick the Great; popular Books of Secrets that people kept in their homes; printed illustrations in scientific and literary periodicals, fashion magazines, possibly a few other books. The paintings that we now understand as art history were viewed, in their time, by a tiny elite. The iconography that the notebook artist drew from comes from the other, domestic world of popular edition and household print, it is not the privileged visual language of fine art that Lisiewska-Therbusch managed to access because of her father. The ‘view from the mouth of the cave’ that I am unfolding may have been unintelligible to these academic eyes. This may also be what has saved the notebook for us today, that it was never considered more than a strange oddity in an alchemical...
collection to which it does not quite belong. 138 If it is, instead, the log-book of a solitary middle-aged woman, experimentally recording her innermost experiences by transforming pictures she has seen in magazines and prints into a sort of visual diary of inner life, this reading has not been part of its history. However, as Judith Butler goes on to note:

...norms are made and re-made, and sometimes they enter into crisis in the remaking; they are vectors of power and of history. There are those who have limited access to ‘intelligibility’ and there are others who epitomize its symbolic iconography, so the reproduction of gender norms within ordinary life is always, in some ways, a negotiation with forms of power that condition whose lives will be more liveable, and whose lives will be less so, if not fully un-liveable. 139

I believe the artist who painted this book was doing it to make her life more liveable. She did not know how to make grand paintings, and evidence of this lack, in the face of creative need, can be understood as a form of deprivation— the withholding, by those who can, of what they consider to be their private rights to knowledge and skill. We can see it in every careful brush mark, as she tries her hardest to model the forms she needs to see. These brush marks of deprivation reveal a vision wavering uncertainly in a shadowy, unauthorised visual world. The artist’s lack of access has also been her freedom however, and it has left us today with an alternative ‘symbolic iconography’ of her time, one that resists engagement with the gender norms of the public arena that destroyed Lisiewska-Therbusch’s Parisian career.

In A Room of One’s Own, written in 1929, Virginia Woolf records being locked out of an Oxbridge Library because she was not a man, “I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and then I thought how it is worse perhaps, to be locked in.” 140 It was Woolf’s intersectional privilege in other areas that allowed her to get even this close, but importantly, she points to the freedoms that may exist outside of the dominant view. It is in this shadowy wilderness that the notebook artist worked. She was clearly using logs as the black mirror of Capote’s ‘threshold to secret vision’, but the formula of inner and outer that is repeated throughout, can be more specifically defined. I believe she was painting her own body each time she painted a log, creating a stand-in for herself that might reflect an inner sensed life, a psychic body that did not yet have a name. The bark stands in for the skin, the meeting point of this body with the world, and moving inwards towards the heart wood, the image at some point changes to ‘intelligibility’ and there are others who epitomize its symbolic iconography, so the reproduction of gender norms within ordinary life is always, in some ways, a negotiation with forms of power that condition whose lives will be more liveable, and whose lives will be less so, if not fully un-liveable.

Was Peggy Phelan’s 1997 essay, op. cit., p. 42

Page 31: The Wrapped Child. In one of its most beautiful pages, a swaddled child is painted as straddling the thick brown outer layers of the log and the ‘Damischean’ cloud ring found in moulding sap, the area of transition between mimetic representation and some other way of seeing. The child is on the threshold of the visible. Perhaps this is an image of pregnancy, a there-but-not-there child pressing on the representational field. The burnt umber holding body of the log cradles the child’s head as it also falls around it and into the interior, flowing across the log’s interiority in light, frothing waves. This liquid field, perhaps an expression of the sensation of amniotic fluid, in turn cradles another head, a more fantastic, pensive bear, the central core of this stand-in. We are twenty-two pages (weeks?) on from page 9 and the ‘bear of desire.’ Could this be a mother’s image of pregnancy? Could this be a mother’s image of pregnancy?
Page 33: The Painting and the Herm. Three pages after his theatre appearance, Hermes returns as a herm, an ancient Greek boundary marker made up of a bearded man’s head on a pillar that would traditionally have an erect phallus carved on, or in, it. The stand-in body of a herm boundary marker could also reference the conceptually liminal, the edges of the known and accepted. Below the herm two turbaned men discuss an unrolled portrait, announcing this more broadly as a subject of discussion. Turbans mark these men as non-dominant voices within a Bavarian social context, but, as we will see in the following pages, the artist reveals only positive identifications with turbaned men, and the herm seems to mark the conceptually liminal, and not the exoticisms of a foreign land. A line draws down to it like a noose from the enclosing body of the log. This is drawn as darkly circling forces, marked, uniquely, by white breasts that spill out and claim this body as female. Do the woman and child inside this sensuously female body seek to destroy, play with, or embrace the phallic fence post that marks the limits of possible discussion of the portrait? This is the place where experiments happen and rules fail, and more than anywhere else in the notebook, this painting suggests the artist to be knowingly experimenting with the approaches to self-portrayal that I am putting forward.

This page is also perhaps the most Rococo of the notebook, and reminiscent of Watteau’s Fêtes Galante. These mysterious paintings often also play with social structures, the boundaries of sexual permissiveness being played out around a (female) herm in his early work Return to the Love Isle of Cythera (1717), for example.

On page 34 the encircling log-body performs sensation and movement as it twists round a central splintering blue reminiscent of both a map and our internal nerve trees.

On page 35 a naked woman sits with her legs apart, but this is not the sexually provocative pose of a Boucher painting. She simply has no clothes on, but between her legs she dangles a winged infant with an arrow. This is Cupid, and she is holding his hand. There is no snake and there are no clouds. The outer body is thick, calm and completely enclosing. This is how it is.

On page 36, a tree grows where the drying cracks of the log meet. The tree holds a man and radiates light that reflects red on the surrounding cloud ring. This seems to be the religious miracle of God revealed in the burning bush, the moment when Moses learns of his task to rescue his people from bondage. Thinking with the logic of the log-body, this could be the depiction of an inner miracle of revelation, an inner burning light that does not burn.
Page 37 is the painting of the two kings, one of whom may be Frederick the Great. There are traces of the ouroboros under the heavily painted outer rings, but in the end the artist removed this performer from the scene.

Page 38: A Man in Ottoman Dress. The borders of the Ottoman Empire in the 1780’s were much further west and north than those of Turkey today. The empire included present day Greece, Serbia, Bosnia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and shared a border with the great powers of the Holy Roman Empire and Russia. It was by the 1780’s in military decline, but still an important foe, with an active diplomatic corps in every court in Europe. Although a closed country for much of its history, Ottoman troops served on various sides during the Seven Years’ war, which violently re-drew the map of Europe and its colonies between 1756–1763. They were therefore a limited, but visible, part of European society at various social strata.

They were also part of the European imagination. The Ottoman empire was slowly opening up to travellers during this time, and this open-but-closed quality made the empire’s styles and habits fascinatingly exotic all over Europe. They were recorded in popular prints and fashion magazines, and a ‘Sultane’ was a popular, informal, at-home gown based on a caftan. Dressing à la Turque was to be seen at public masquerades in larger cities, and was a popular theme of both commissioned portraits and travel sketches. This exoticizing fashion does not account for page 38 however. There are none of the discontinuities that ‘dressing up’ always somehow reveals, and this is more likely to be simply a portrait of a man, either remembered or imagined. His heavy cloak can be seen in portraits of Ottoman diplomats, and was traditionally tied at the neck with two large metal circles linked by a chain, one of which can be seen here. Ottoman head coverings were specific to rank and function, but this fez with a cloth wrapper, as with all the others in the notebook, is not identifiable. This lack of detail, compared to the drawing of Western headwear, suggests a lack of precise cultural knowledge. The artist was not a Turk.

The white circle of the clasp is repeated as snowfall in nighttime and the man’s clean-shaven face suggests a formal role, perhaps a diplomat or translator. Whoever he was, or was imagined to be, this night image is the most intimate of the book, and the only one painted entirely in black and white. The smiling man looks up towards the two heads of a pulsing curvaceous ouroboros, eternity here surging up each side of the log, and instead of eating its tail, locking tongues with itself. Throughout the notebook, the emblem of the ouroboros exchanges places with cloud markers, alternatively suggesting the movement from either countable time (the rings of the log, the days of a life) to the eternal time of the memory, or the
movement from definable space to the formless space of internal experience. On page thirty-eight the sensing body propping up the inner portrait is kissing and sensual. Did she have a night visitor from the East? It is an enchanting idea. The border was relatively close.

The images inserted here in the printed thesis are not available in the digital thesis.

Page 39. On the very next page, violence returns in what could be an allegory of rape. In a secluded area, perhaps a wood, seven men in Western hats push a pole up the ass of a seated animal, a cow or a mule, both stand-in words commonly used to degrade women. The sensuous delights of the previous page have completely collapsed. The ouroboros has no flick in its curves now, it lies immobile and deathly pale at the bottom of the page.

Page 40. The social order returns. Queen and King sit on a cloud radiating what you would expect to be light, but it is actually the darkness that is painted. This could be a version of a common alchemical image, the moon and sun in Heaven, or the combining of female and male energies in a totality. No longer encircled by boundary markers of either clouds or an ouroboros, these figures are held within a clear white circle, marked to suggest the reflective surface of a curved lens. The dark mirror here reflects the social order, and the previously sensuous body has become a flat brown ring. Is this a picture of lens adjustment, and the return of the socially disciplined body? Are these last two pages an attempt to come to terms with an enforced ‘negotiation with forms of power,’ to quote Butler again? Is this imagery made by a woman using painting to try to make her life condition ‘more liveable’? It is a picture of the received order reversed to radiate darkness not light, a suggestion that this life was one that was less liveable “if not fully un-liveable.”
And the figure from page 38 is back. Far away in the blue yonder, but reaching out to help a figure prostrate on the ground. The enclosing body once more vibrates with life, and the dead rings of the previous page become quivering elver-like gestures excitedly circling the sky. These flickering lines take the place of the single ouroboros of time. Where they rise out of the delicate lemony bark body they are lightly placed but they thrum with more insistence as they move inwards, and completely lose their order in the final inner framing of the exchange at the heart of the blue. Are we looking at a memory? A wish?

The log body that quivered with life only one page before has become a thick crust of cracked earth. Shadows under the heart shaped hole in the middle suggest a cutting out, an inner absence from where we view talking with three men: a bearded, slightly hunched man who may be wearing a turban, it is not clear; a younger man with a lyre, another in a working man’s cap. The painting of the angel has caused the artist some trouble, with repeated overworking and what appears to be an extra arm falling away from its back. The holding body is clear but the absent heart reveals a social world that is not.

This portrait page is out of synch with all the others. The holding body is barely rendered at all, entirely displaced by what looks like an observed study of a man in Western dress. The figure of Frederick the Great was also a sort of portrait, but really a symbol created by coat and crown. This sketch seems to have been almost stamped onto the imaginative heart of this log, whose encompassing body has been rapidly, carelessly, marked in and almost disappears at its outer, worldly, edge. There is no entwining of the mind and the flesh here, only the efficient depiction of one whose image epitomizes the ‘symbolic iconography’ of the times.

This intense series is bookended by the second visit to the theatre, where the three women watching from the mouth of the cave look out at their classical heroes, still on stage, still with weapons of war, possibly in heaven.

Women twice look on at men dressed as gods, but depicted as children; a woman gives herself up to the beast of passion, looking calmly at the viewer while she does so; a sensual portrait of an Ottoman is immediately followed by Western men violently attacking a domestic animal; an outdated, but subtly reversed, depiction of an alchemical totality, a distant return of a joyous image, and then an imposed Western male gaze. A log body revealing breasts and a baby; entwining itself with the symbolically liminal and linking this to a discussion of portraiture, or excitedly framing the turbaned man. A log-body that entangles with imagined worlds to perform sensuous, curling
engagement, or to lie in pallor and slackness, or to almost disappear entirely.

There are more passages like this in the notebook, but in looking closely at these pages I have been conjuring this log-book as a record of a woman's internal battle with the erasure of disciplining social structures. This is the real battle that these pages depict, in all their violence and joy. In creating this marginal history out of an anonymous object, I am presenting the notebook as a previously unnoticed record of a life that is only one example of all the women's lives that have been excluded or erased, simply not noticed, in the writing of our histories.

The intensities of this battle can also be understood by thinking with the coming and going of an object in Sigmund Freud's *fort-da* game. In *fort-da*, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) speculates that the infant game of 'now you see it, no you don't,' is a way of allowing a child to come to terms with the terrifying idea of an absent mother, and an important staging post towards an independent self. Transposed to my reading of the notebook, we may be seeing an artist testing out conflicting visions of the world, those she desires to be, and those that are imposed upon her, drawn as a narrative of repeated returns. This struggle of coming and going haunts what at first glance appears to be formulaic religious and alchemic imagery with a fugitive voice. If this is understood as a completely conscious encoding, then this could be simply a more occluded alchemical text, but I believe this process was only partially conscious. Neither alchemical nor rationalist, the flickering voice straining to picture itself is more suggestive of the questions that would go on to occupy the Romantic world view, the *naturphilosophie* of Goethe and Schelling, before being taken up by twentieth century psychoanalysis. There it might be understood as a partial expression of the subject, whose eternal ambiguity is a primary psychoanalytic tenet, as the subject resides in the unconscious. This partial expression has been found by a woman daring to see herself in the partial black mirrors of her fire logs. The inner world revealed by this process is one marked by isolation and deprivation, a reading compounded by the formal lack of context for this stand-in body. These worlds float on blank white pages. They are informed by a religious upbringing, folk practices, and illustrations in printed books and magazines, but they find no context. To live in such a near vacuum, unable to see yourself as part of representable world, would not have been unusual for a woman at this time, but finding a way to record such deprivation was most unusual. In contemporary terms, this is the work of an 'outsider artist,' but for a society that excluded almost all women from cultural participation, it is more interesting to consider Avery Gordon's observation that

Walking through Boston station on her way to the next place, she saw a red news banner flash across the screen on the wall. It was telling the world the lawyer was dead. She panicked and turned. It was American sport. She read it wrong. But she had been married to the lawyer, and now she felt the shocking resolution of holding on to a life as it seeped through her hands.

On the train to New York, and walking long pavements, it all unravelled. If James was dead, the others would also die, falling out of her mind like playing card princes.
To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows. These pages are fragile and experimental, unsure of their negotiation with this shadowy world. Forms are left half done, others fall back into received religious and alchemical symbolism, the given languages of interiority at the time. And yet a ghostly ‘dialectics of visibility and invisibility’ surfaces nevertheless, an identity only now being negotiated into visibility with a twenty-first century vision.

Pain ripped through her body like acid on fire. She was on her hands and knees and spots of red on the sheet below her face said her nose was bleeding from her screams. Five minutes before, her Oxy high had said that she could make it to the loo unaided. Such chemical deceit had left her sprawled forwards over slip-resist floor tiles. Her ripped palms now stained her grip as someone else’s visitor ran for help, and orderlies somehow got her back on the metal bed. She was an animal in an invisible trap and screamed in vertical red stripes. On a distant shore, a needle nipped her arm as more blood stopped her throat. Coughing it out, she felt her back snap in two, and pee warmed her leg. When she came round there was wind and lights. A woman smiled and asked her to count. There would be a knife.
She felt her scalp tingle.
PART TWO: LOVE AND RAGE
The speculative interiority that this artist effloresced out of rotting logs in a wood pile in Bavaria in the 1780’s was a radical experiment in Self portrayal. It reveals an idea of a body made visible in fifty-two parts, but unified by the body of the book itself. The painted circles inside, perhaps signifying a year of time, stack up like vertebrae within the scarred leathery skin of its boards. It becomes a body of two spines, the material one made of its binding propping up the psychic spine of imagined images, in a repetition of the double body construct of each individual painting. The tracing of time in the conceptual, or psychic, spine, brings its passage to this still object, and is underlined by the need to turn pages. This is not a form of portrayal we can absorb in a single glance. To more fully explore this, and a possible genealogy for the notebook in more recent women’s art practices, this chapter looks at key twentieth century ideas of Self formation, and their trace in women’s art works chosen to follow the eye’s movement to, and then away from, the mirror made of glass.

Rare self-portraits of older women from the eighteenth century, like the one by Lisiewska-Therbusch, are an important part of the slim record of women’s lives in this time, but the anonymous notebook is an imaginative exploration of the inside of a life, brought about by an artist’s eye falling away from the actual mirror, in search of a different sort of self-definition. This is what the revenant Earnest Search-er of the introduction was pointing to, when she came back to mind alongside my discovery of notebook. For this anonymous artist to paint her own face would not have answered her need to show her experience to herself, as the social disciplining of her body, as an object, denied any relevance for her inner life. To explore the conceptual figure that I believe underlies the artist’s movement way from the emptiness of such literal mirroring, and allows for the teasing apart of portrayal and mimesis through meditative study of
our touchable world, I go back to Freud and Lacan. Thinking with their ideas of self building also opens up the ways in which the notebook meaningfully connects with our contemporary world.

The Aggression of the Screen
Freud’s thinking on infant Self development was further theorised by Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) with his idea of the mirror stage, which understands the infant’s developing self-image, its ‘I’, to be created in relation to an understanding of itself as an entity, and in relationship with others. This is a development of an earlier self-image created only by partial inner experiences, a fragmentary self-image of ‘bits and pieces’, which can only become unified when the developing subject sees herself reflected, by the mirror of the social world, as a singular subject with a border. This self-recognition is consolidated by seeing other infants, and by being seen by the mother. Lacan uses the language of the visual to describe this development, and so this first mirrored image is ‘seen’ to be perfect in its wholeness, and our subjectivity is formed by the simultaneous emergence of self-love (wonderful complete image) and self-loss (it is an ‘Other’, not part of my intimate, experiencing me). Lacan holds that the separation of this perfect image from our interiority is experienced as a fundamentally alienating process, as loss, or self-alienation, even if it forms the condition necessary for empathy and relation to others.

There is a gap between the mirrored imago and bodily experience. These remain separate, while mutually dependent, in the development of the Self. The ‘picture’ of identity (wonderful complete image) will be that from which the subject will always judge herself, consequently experiencing herself as always imperfect. Lacan writes of the mirror stage as functional “to establish a relationship between an organism and its images... bearing ‘the marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze.’” Our own identity is not personal history. It is formed by looking outward and being reflected back, is, for anyone, an internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world. The absence of a recognisable internal world in the cultural field of the image, is not something Phelan believes can be directly represented within that same culture, being experienced as lack, as an increase in the fundamental self-alienation of Lacan’s Self formation, however she searches for a spectral shadow of it in Unmarked with the notion of the after-image. This is the battle that I believe the notebook records, the attempt to define cultural absence with the borrowed terms of someone else’s language and to take the function of the screen as the internalised image of perfect womanhood, produced by us, which we try on before we fully assimilate, to see how it fits. This metaphor is taken from the non-visible, the blank of a missing realisation of oneself in culture. Until one can accept one’s internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world, the external other [as an internal experience] will always bear the marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze.

The internalised image of perfect womanhood, produced by the dominant gaze that is not that of women herself, hurts all women. The marks and scars with which it borders Phelan’s unmarked only increase as women age, and take on the function of being a relational point of reference. Phelan notes that this specular emphasis then becomes the dominant cultural aesthetic, and that this, in the West, still favours the looking done by white men. Phelan takes this position as the basis for her call for a more self-seeing inward cultural gaze, which, if we accept that the Self is partially formed by looking out and being reflected back, is, for anyone other than the owners of the dominant aesthetic, a look towards the non-visible, the blank of a missing realisation of oneself in culture. Until

He stretched his wing feathers in the darkness of the bar, showing them; honour, integrity, honesty. It worked, it made her care, and she stretched back, warning to it, and spreading the irredeemable tips of a little personal history. She handed them with a laugh and a shiver ran between them. He laughed back. She could not tell him, she thought he felt it. He could not tell her. Did a thing exist that could not be told?

Silverman (1947–) calls the dominant cultural screen within the social field, that “culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality.” This is for the most part, as a ‘specular body.’ Peggy Phelan has noted that this specular emphasis then becomes the dominant cultural aesthetic, and that this, in the West, still favours the looking done by white men. Phelan takes this position as the basis for her call for a more self-seeing inward cultural gaze, which, if we accept that the Self is partially formed by looking out and being reflected back, is, for anyone other than the owners of the dominant aesthetic, a look towards the non-visible, the blank of a missing realisation of oneself in culture. Until

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mimicry, of repeatedly staining oneself with a false self. This idea was explored by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1883–1962) in Womanliness as a Masquerade, but it has also been considered by artists. 

Sherman’s mirror

The artist perhaps most famous for her work on women’s masquerading attempts to perform womanliness is Cindy Sherman (1954–), and indeed Silverman analyses how the now famous Untitled Stills (1977–1980) do this. Unlike the notebook artist, or the Earnest Search-er with her mirror of blood, Sherman’s oeuvre is entirely focussed on the external dressing of the body. This chapter will trace a path away from that marked and scarred, masquerading, body-object, and towards Phelan’s call for a more self-seeing inward cultural gaze, but it begins with the ways a 62-year-old Sherman has worked with images of her now ageing self.

In Untitled #566 the artist revisits the Hollywood still, this time exploring the aesthetic language of a (slightly) older Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo from the Thirties and Forties. This 2016 series was shot in front of a green screen and the backgrounds Photoshopped in later, much as a painter might work, and in a contemporary re-creation of the 1920’s studio photographer’s backdrop. This nostalgic nod is revealed as an empty possibility however, as these self-portraits-of-the-artist-as-another cannot, as we cannot, go back in time. The photographs re-open the cultural gap revealed in the previous series between the construction of an idealized image of womanhood (this time the successful older woman, silk clothes and cut’n’coloured) and a woman’s lived life, by revealing the same ‘good enough’ theatrically constructed picture of a body, and, by going back so far in time for an aesthetic vocabulary, the poverty of contemporary imagery of this time in women’s lives.

In an interview about these hollow constructions of worldly success, with their desirable backdrops of downtown skylines, glamorous holiday views, the garden of a palazzo, Sherman speaks about this poverty, and how much she admired the determination of the then 61-year-old academic Mary Beard, and it to be filmed on television looking her age. Sherman goes on to say that “of course you don’t actually see that many portraits of older women or old women in fashion and film. So that’s part of it.” And there is a positivity to these photographs, they do present us with woman + age = financial success, but they also resonate with mortality. The shadowy lighting and muted colour palettes all highlight an unsmiling pallor of painted-doll faces that already suggest the cadaver to come. The artist also mentions that the heroines of this series were the direct outcome of her surprise at her own mortality. Like the older

series however, these photos work with the window/mirror work of the social screen we all inhabit, and Sherman says that I want there to be hints of narrative everywhere in the image so that people can make up their own stories about them, but I don’t want to have my own narrative and force it on to them. And it shouldn’t seem so real that it looks like it was shot in a studio today. I want it to transcend time somehow.

Artworks always reveal their culture and time. Even the images of our inner archives are renewed, as we look anew at the world every day. Sherman works with this border to the inner image, blurring its function with ‘just good enough’ constructs that highlight our unending search for ourselves. In Untitled #566, this is underlined by the double take, which looks at first like a reflection caught in a double-glazed window, but is not. It is two shots from a camera working through time and emphasising the transience of the figure caught between the digital screen of the camera, or viewers, eye and the digital stand-in locale. Nothing here is quite what it is presented to be, and this doubling of every aspect of the image reveals Lacan’s staining quality of the possible imago—that this image-cloak is not a good fit.

The images inserted here in the printed thesis are not available in the digital thesis.

One of the most striking aspects of the 2016 series however, is its contrast with work from around 2000. This earlier series was created before the artist had to face her own mortality, and it takes on the aggression of the screen with much less sympathetic portraits of the masquerade with which older women fight against social exclusion and dismissal. Together, these examples define the view from either side of the screen, and an action that age theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1941–) calls being “aged by culture,” a process received “along with Cable News Network, Coca Cola and Visa credit cards.”

Judith Butler refers to this as our reception of ‘the frame’ and suggests that to resist, or to call the frame into question, as Sherman does with her blurring
is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determines precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. The woman blurrily present beneath Sherman’s masquerades is in some ways comparable to the woman peeping through the religious and alchemical masks of the notebook’s worlds. Neither cloak quite covers the ghostly shadow of this less recognisable life, that of Phelan’s cultural blank. Sherman’s calm masquerading brutally reveals how far ‘outside’ the frame this ghosted woman is, and the notebook artist marks her erasure with the choice to enter representation as a log, floating in space.

**Lassnig’s Skin**

The paintings of Maria Lassnig (1919–2014), are quite different to Sherman’s photographs, but her shape-shifting self-portraits also record a battle played out with Self immolation in the screen. In *Das Gesetz (The Law)* 2010, the artist painted, aged 91, a realistic representation of a smiling young man lying in a field, a stand-in for the natural world, or ‘the given.’ He luxuriates in revealing a body he confidently expects to be both readable and desirable to the gaze of the world. Beside him, doing the work of looking, is a ghost. This ambiguous presence, the same colour as the unpainted pictorial ground behind it, is outlined in blood red, but only eyes and mouth define it as residually human. This is the artist, chewing reflectively on a painted line as she considers the ‘natural’ young man. Chewing the red line suggests it to be a blade of grass, and so the field of the world, but it is red and comes out of her ghosted body, so it is also a blood vessel, a sign of her own interior nature. The artist has portrayed herself as both literally and metaphorically ‘chewing’ on the nature of her body, presented as a spectre in comparison to the hyper-visible young man’s. She is chewing on the law that blanks out her visualisation as a natural body, while the young man’s can be depicted so easily he need not even open his eyes to check. In this devastating critique of the work of the screen, the artist is connected to the man by the cutting blade of a double-edged saw. Is it her mature invisibility that gives her the power to see how things are? If Sherman’s photographs of the cloaks of ageing attempt to shake the brutality of culture’s norms, then by calling her work *The Law*, Lassnig reminds us of the still overwhelming power of these forces.

In her sixties, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) reflected on the disappearance of her reflection from her life, when she wrote that...
Now I mind little about my physical appearance: I take care of it out of consideration for those around me [...] Like everyone else, I am incapable of an inner experience of it [ageing]; age is one of the things that cannot be realized [...] I am sixty-three: and this truth remains foreign to me.  

De Beauvoir's response to the distortions of the screen is to disdain it, even as she acknowledges that 'truth' is constructed there. With *The Law*, Lassnig's blunt representation of erasure reminds us of the pain inherent to the void opened up by de Beauvoir's 'foreign truth.' In *Instant Repulsion,* Kathleen Woodward (1944–) proposes that with age, our ongoing mirroring interaction with the world in fact enters a reversal. Whereas in infancy, Lacan's 'bits and pieces' of a fractured self-image—partial relationships with breast, face, faeces, experienced as hunger, sensual pleasure or other sensations—are brought into a pleasing gestalt by our self-recognition in 'wonderful complete image,' this process is reversed as we age, because

the harmonious whole [already] resides within the subject, and the imago prefigures disintegration and nursing dependence. If the infant holds his mirror stage in an amorous gaze, the elderly person resists it. The narcissistic impulse remains—it imposes itself upon all our desires—but it is directed against the mirror image.  

The alienating forces within the essential ego function of narcissism become stronger as an ageing person increasingly finds only signs of their coming disintegration and what this may come to mean for their experience in the world. De Beauvoir resisted this reminder, which Lacan describes in terms of the screen becoming denser with age, as a socially accepted body. Wishing to become more of "a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown-off in order to cover the frame of a shield," Jules Sturm (1974–) describes this distancing action as the subject losing "her body-image through the sheer overload of stereotypical, discriminatory, youth-glorifying, and gender dividing images" and continues that when "the subject starts dis-identifying with her imaginary self in the mirror, the elderly person’s look in the mirror becomes equivalent to the child’s fantasy of a body in bits and pieces."  

In these three Lassnig paintings, completed when the artist was between 67 and 73, it is possible to trace the artist perhaps working out her changing relationship with this marker screen, and how she attended to this particularity in Sturm’s ageing fantasies of a body in bits and pieces. In *Transparent Self-portrait,* 1987, the artist’s eyes are covered by a transparent sheet, and the eyeballs are painted as rolling inwards, Phelan’s more ‘self-seeing gaze.’ While it can be seen into, the screen is the same colour as the body. It is merging with it, and both are painted with horizontal lines reminiscent of a flickering, malfunctioning analogue TV. This damaged psychic merger seems to overpower the natural body, which is flattened backwards, its arms, the tools the artist uses to define her world, becoming useless pincers that are being held down by almost invisible beings hiding behind this remnant of the depictable.

In *Inside Out,* 1992, the same screen returns, but it now completely obscures and becomes the eyes. The organic body has been replaced by a machine cloak. In becoming object, the artist has fully merged with the viewpoint of the screen, and sees with this, instead of her own eyes. The battle being played out in *Transparent Self-portrait* is over. If the screen of the world has flung a damaging envelope, the artist has bitten down and is using it as a shield. This body has plugged in and found power. The bruised pink-green-yellow skin of five years before is upright and fighting back, but it is the flayed red of being skinned alive. There is no mouth but *Inside Out* is a scream.

The sensing traffic between seeing and being seen define Lassnig’s life’s work, and the animated electrical appliance frequently returns in her later years, as the question of what sort of energised object she was, in the eyes of the world and in her own eyes, increasingly pre-occupied her. Lassnig’s final position on this is clearly articulated in *The Law,* but in these earlier negotiations with the frame and how she might imagine a self-aware return of her objectification, or ghosting, many paintings combine the organic body with everyday objects, in the creation of bodies of bits and pieces that extend her self-image into the materiality of her everyday life. Bar fires, kitchen equipment, the TV, all became tools of definition. In *Rose Electricity,* 1993, the flayed object of body image becomes harder to trace and the screen becomes more of "a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown-off in order to cover the frame of a shield.”  

Thanks to Maria Lassnig, the Pen is the Sister of the Brush, *Diaries 1943–1987,* edited by Miriam Urech-Otter, published by Steidl Hauser & Wirth, London, 2019, for the artist’s extended thoughts on this and other aspects of her practice.
sexually gaping parts are all connected by what Lassnig calls her ‘nerve lines,’ the literal lines of feeling running through us. In this series and others, the canvas is asked to take on the role of holding body, in a construction like the notebook’s bound form. This surface, or skin, is often brought forward by being left unpainted.

Lassnig’s life-long search for a visual language of our sensate interiority depended on her utilizing her own body, her only research resource for such work. In her published diaries she writes about the difficulties inherent to this, and her struggle to paint beyond the security of the real, into uncharted territory – a physical feeling that is difficult to define visually, where does it begin, where does it end [...] is like trying to fence in clouds [...] I almost have to apologise for the fact that concrete bodies arose from an enterprise that sounds more like research than like art. The inability to ignore my knowledge of actual distances between forehead and nose, neck and chest is to blame.

Lassnig’s research was not an expression of Cartesian mind/body dualism. At no point does she write of her work in terms of the ‘spirit,’ and her painting never suggests this. In The Hospital of the Body: Maria Lassnig’s Body Ego Portraits, critic Donald Kuspit (1935–) nevertheless manages to identify this work as the artist’s “failure to objectify” her own body, and the Feminism that might be read into this becoming instead “a subjective fantasy of wholeness of being not an activist critique of patriarchal society,” a gesture that he sees as leaving the artist “stuck in a narcissistic plight.”

Donald Kuspit, The Hospital of the Body: Maria Lassnig’s Body Ego Portraits, in Signs of the Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 216

I would argue that it is a mistake to see a simple autobiographic extension in a woman artist choosing to use her body as a site. Objectivity is the subjectivity of those in charge of the view, and Lassnig is asserting her ‘subjectivity’ as actually the only position from which any of us come. Kuspit’s placing of her bodies of bits and pieces in ‘the hospital of the body’ reveals how strongly his own position depends on his aesthetic imaginary of a feminine ideal, the very notion Lassnig spent her life seeking to dislodge, employing her particularity to do so.

Sturm’s proposal in Bodies We Fail is that a specular body ideal such as Kuspit’s might usefully be re-imagined, by and for those hurt by the dynamics of the screen, as a speculative, uncertain, or multiple body instead. These speculations might originate as a willed act of the imagination, a fantasy de-scripting of the culturally received body, the one ‘aged by culture’ for example, and that this action is a necessary political act of re-scripting what it is possible to see. This is the visual language Lassnig strove to find, as she sought out visual forms for experiences of life that have no given semiotics in painting history. As Butler clearly states, “the [new] image surely lands in new contexts, The images inserted here in the printed thesis are not available in the digital thesis.
Butler, 2004, op. cit., p. 9. Butler was specifically talking about mass-produced images of war and their afterlife in culture, but all images have such an uncontrolled after-life one way or another.

Butler, 2004, op. cit., p. 167

Sturm, op. cit., p. 181, my italics

Thinking of the floating baubles of the notebook in a genealogical relationship to these more recent women artists helps to open up how its serial log forms can also be experienced as a record of partial sensations, mirrored back through a conceptual move away from a received imago. When the traditional mirror’s scope is extended to the potentially black mirrors of the wood-pile, the leathery skin of the book’s boards, like the raw canvas grounds of Lassnig’s paintings, are asked to be the holding vessel for a ‘new form of self-seeing.’

Inner eyesight

I have touched on Cindy Sherman’s work to destabilise the brutalising power of culturally received image ideals, and on Maria Lassnig’s attempted re-scripting of this disciplining and objectifying gaze, by focussing her eye inwards, towards the sensation of her skin from the inside, and her body as one made up of parts. This is an attempt to find a path for Phelan’s political call for ‘a more inward-looking gaze.’ Before considering the ways that artists Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) took on this other approach to looking, in defiance of objectification and its insistence on surface, and to be able to link their practices to that of the notebook artist, I now look more at the pathways of seeing and imagining as they bounce within and between us.

The Ghosts of Play

The work of imagining differently holds both the power and the problems of the alternative view. The children’s book The Little Prince opens with a nice example of this, when the narrator explains that he is a pilot, and has just crashed his plane in the desert. Stranded, he begins to think about his childhood, his first experience of drawing, and why he decided to become a pilot.

After some work with a coloured pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing. My drawing Number One […]
Reality, Routledge Classics, Playing and Reality

I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them. But they answered: ‘Frightened? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?’ My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. 217

The narrator goes on to say that this lack of success soon put him off art and that by the age of six he made the early decision to give it up and become a pilot. This story is one of our adult loss of faith in the utility of the imaginative life of childhood, and our acceptance of the law of the screen. In the notebook, we see an artist persisting with boa constrictors and elephants, even while doubt resurfaces in every return to received imagery. In every page that defies this reception however, the fabulous was a choice for freedom. If the screen of the world has become too dense to find oneself in any more, then this choice is a survival. If such choices can find a public and be shared, then the screen itself becomes, as Sturm suggests, a little bit changed. This is the important work of fantasy, of imagining otherwise.

In Playing and Reality, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896–1971) observes how infants manage the first objects of their lives, in his theory of transitional objects. He then explores how our adult experience of culture is located in a similar space to this early environment, which he calls “potential space.” 218 This potential space is established in our early life experience by the movement of ‘transitional objects’ between the auto-erotic space of me-extensions and the not-me space of objective objects, so the space between intimacy and the mirror, or the specular field. This space between the human and the thing is observed to begin around the same time as the mirror stage, and is a more generalised coming to terms with the object world. Infants begin to place objects outside of the area of their total control, and in doing this, learn to perceive of objects as external phenomena, entities in their own right. During this process the baby also tries to destroy the newly external object (spitting the dummy from the pram), and the objects that survive these attempts at destruction are the ones that will be valued, or ‘cathected to.’ This double process of loving while trying to destroy enacts, for Winnicott, the birth of fantasy in a child’s development, and so allows objects to be used, because the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties [...] this is a position that can be arrived at by the individual in early stages of emotional growth only through the actual survival of cathected objects that are at the time in the process of becoming destroyed because real, becoming real because destroyed. 219

Destruction is therefore a core aspect of creating reality, where survival, in Winnicott’s terms, means ‘does not retaliate.’ This is very like the process of continual destruction and re-making that is painting. I call it trying, and trying again, but in effect, it is also destroying, and destroying again. If the object (paint) in the end ‘wins,’ then the artist has lost, and the painting is not a success. However, if the object, or painting, survives its ongoing destruction (re-painting), and becomes an artwork in the end, it will have moved outside of the area of the artist’s “projective mental mechanisms. In this way a world of shared reality is created which the subject [artist] can use and which can feed back other-than-me substance into the subject [artist].” 220 The painting no longer exists only in the artist’s head, but as an independent object in the world. For the viewer, the ‘potential space’ that exists between the artist and their valued object, now also opens to them, if their imagination engages with the object, and they find themselves giving it personal value. The ‘potential space’ is the space of interplay between all our intimate, imagined worlds and a world of objects and phenomena remote from our experience, whether as makers or viewers. It is the space where we all find meaning and build value, some more easily than others, but through the same process of cathexis that is instigated by our earliest transitional objects. This is the ghost space that I refer to in the introduction, the reason certain artworks seem alive to us when others do not exceed their mute materiality.

A fundamental difference between our early creation of fantasy space, and that space in adult life, is, however, the altered roles of trust and anxiety. Winnicott states that the essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena is “the paradox and the acceptance of the paradox: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object.” This same process happens when we suddenly come across an artwork that we find ourselves responding to, where we perhaps see a reality that we can recognise as our own. Important to early play however, and an essential difference to the way we place value in our adult lives, is that as babies we have not yet been socialized, and our super ego has not yet developed the policing role it takes in adult life. Winnicott emphasises the importance of trust in the developmental process of accepting the paradox, a situation that is possible because “everything in the play has been done before, has been felt before, has been smelt before.” 221 Thinking about this play space in adult life, he states that “the potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust.” 222 You cannot cathect to a world that you experience as scarring and marking. As critics of capitalism from Marx on have pointed out, our wish to cathect, to find object stand-ins for that which our desire seeks, is fed by an endless river of options in contemporary consumerism. We become socialised into a looping relationship


218 Ibid., p. 127

219 Ibid., p. 121

220 Ibid., p. 127

221 Ibid., p. 136

222 Ibid., p. 139
with the object world, which Judith Butler identifies when she states that “If what I‘ want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of ‘my own‘ desire turns out to be something of a misnomer.” 223 The possibilities of adult cathexis and meaning creation in relation to the objects of our lives are therefore as deeply tied to the tension producing forces of anxiety as the liberating forces of joy, and the free ranging play of desire in infant life becomes sublimated, through these repressive functions of socialization, into a more complex emotional territory where meaning creation is stymied by a fetishistic relationship to objects. Guy Debord (1931–1994), also following Lacan, names this as the Spectacle, “not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” 224 Debord’s ‘social relation’ is however, the Mobius other of Winnicott’s individual ‘potential space.’ In this shared adult space, our desiring flow is halted, through anxiety in relation to ‘what is wanted from me,’ what I am supposed to desire in order to be perceived in a certain way. This confusion of desire with insecurity and fear creates fetish objects, which, as Giorgio Agamben (1942–) points out, tend to be stand-ins for something that we believe we are not allowed, that is considered taboo. Agamben suggests that this fetishistic quality within our adult experience of culture is one in which “metaphor substitutes one thing for another, not so much in order to reach the second, as to escape from the first.” 225

Debord’s objection to the cultural images created to entertain our gaze, to the image as spectacle, is the estrangement that contemporary culture produces in us, as it overpowers our ability to negotiate these images within our own life experience. Using the example of affecting images of need, Debord states that the more he [the spectator] identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectator’s estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. 226

And so, the screen overpowers our intimate experience of ourselves. In Debord’s world, even though culture can exist only in relation to its spectators, we are no longer in negotiation. The agency of all is pacified by the disciplining totality of the Society of the Spectacle. Debord’s spectator can only take pleasure in art or theatre while ignoring the reality the cultural object conceals, and in so doing, betraying art’s possible political efficacy and contributing to his own alienation. This is the fetishistic stopping point, that the metaphors and metonyms of cultural production only dazzle and blind, halting rather than easing negotiation with the world. In The Emancipated Spectator, Jacques Rancière seeks possible disentanglement from this anxiety producing dumbness by questioning the ‘logic of straight,
as an element of knowledge if, on the one hand, it [...] does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if [...] it does not possess [...] the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational. 230

Separating Rancière's dis-identification from Capital's seemingly endless power to create new fetishes is where these ideas become difficult, but it was the mirroring recognition of fantasizing method, of dis-identification with a received world view, that led to my 'cathexis' with the notebook. Although the artist uses forms and gestures resonant of her time, they de-scripts them in her unique, amateur way, and they no longer conform to an aesthetic rule book that had no time for ambiguity of method, form, or meaning. Art's role was to mirror the order deigned to be of value by an elite and not to be ambiguous about this. The notebook reveals nothing but ambiguity, and simply to have painted it was probably, as with Lassnig's co-productions between body parts, domestic objects, and the body of the canvas itself, while marvellous distortions of the idealised body, remain fundamentally attached to the specular body, but pulls it apart and returns it as a willed, speculative, uncertain, and multiple body of bits and pieces. This amazing de-scripting of a received world view still resonates with women's needs today.

It also resonates with Lassnig's bodies of bits and pieces, but Lassnig's co-productions between body parts, domestic objects, and the body of the canvas itself, while marvellous distortions of the idealised body, remain fundamentally attached to the specular body, but pulls it apart and returns it as a willed, speculative, uncertain, and multiple body of bits and pieces. This amazing de-scripting of a received world view still resonates with women's needs today.

The images of art do not provide weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated. 231

This re-visiting of Eco's open work, "requires spectators play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators." 232

My translation of the notebook is of and for today, but it is extremely unlikely that the artist, working in Bavaria in the 1780’s, before even the key ideas of Romanticism had been articulated, would have thought about her work in quite this light. However, Rancière continues, "To know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in." 233 It is when we reify our cultural objects that they become fetish objects, and we are rendered dumb by their spectacular recognition of them that only seemed to address the need. This is the core work of a great deal of commentary in popular culture. To understand how a fine art object might, despite this overwhelming aesthetic field, offer itself as a nurturing environment for the future, we end up performing as these, even if they are badly fitting masks. The works of Debord's spectacle do the opposite, in their attempts to insert themselves in this imagin-ation, tearing the spectator's capacity for creativity away from them, and numbing them with inserted fantasies.

When alienating pictures of our experience are all there are, we end up performing as these, even if they are badly fitting masquerades that scar and mark us. This scarred socialization, once the joyous place of infant play, numbers us with the ability to use images in ways that help us to live, and Rancière calls for us to leave our social anxieties behind, and to use our cultural objects in whatever way we like. There was no-one to tell me what the notebook was, and I have created a speculative story for it that has meaning today. As our museums and archives stack up with the material residues of meaning creation, these objects all wait for us to re-animate their dead bodies with our renewed image needs; the endogenous images we carry in our heads continuously relating anew to the exogenous images in which we search for mirrors.
Jardine's Ghost of the Subject

The images in our heads, and in the world, both have a medium, one is the body, the other a physical material. Both these mediums own and contain the physical absence of what is represented however, as 'it' is not there, only the memory or the picture is there. This paradox of the image—that the medium, which is all that is present, nevertheless contains and symbolises the absence of that which is represented, is a ghostly reality of images made ever more present to us by the silvered screens of internet life. If the medium that holds an image already performs absence, then the purpose of a portrait is to put a name to this absence, as a form of survival of the mortal body and its moment in time. The right to transform life energy into aesthetic energy is the 'right of portrayal' and it is an expression of power in the present. Every Selfie taker is aware of this, as they search for the perfect backdrop from which to say 'I was there.' The right to have this absence, or previous presence, marked in the cultural archive, and how this is done, defines the culture from which this portrayal has sprung, and how this is done, consists of the presence or absence of that which is represented however, as 'it' is not there, only the memory or the picture is there. This paradox of the image in the silvered screens of internet life. If the medium that holds an image already performs absence, then the purpose of a portrait is to put a name to this absence, as a form of survival of the mortal body and its moment in time. The right to transform life energy into aesthetic energy is the 'right of portrayal' and it is an expression of power in the present. Every Selfie taker is aware of this, as they search for the perfect backdrop from which to say 'I was there.' The right to have this absence, or previous presence, marked in the cultural archive, and how this is done, defines the culture from which this portrayal has sprung, and how this is done, consists of the presence or absence of that which is represented. Jardine carefully selected examples of two specific classes of objects within the museum's collection: portraits of 'Victorian gentlemen,' which she selected without regard for sitter or artist, and 'ceramics,' which she selected only for their wiggly names and sayings or the way the relationship between artists and the work they produce is, and has been, mediated through the notion of 'signature' as an intervening pre-condition or necessary component, and how we experience artworks when not coded by signature. The anonymous notebook is not coded by signature, and the conceptual figure I am searching for within the Lacanian screen, they would have found examples of such activities in the existing screen of the world, and sought to replicate themselves within these established norms. The essay then introduces one of the hotly debated ideas of this time, one that was debated across Europe, the fashionably nineteenth century 'science' of physiognomy. This took Darwin's new evolutionary theory and distorted it to the point that it was being translated across Europe, and the rich world of visual imagery which it flourished in Paisley in the nineteenth century. Clubs like The Trogloidy Club, one of the many drinking and debating clubs that flourished in Paisley in the nineteenth century. Clubs like these brought middle class men together to keep abreast of current developments in science, philosophy, the arts, and the law, and to agree how their joint influence would determine these in future. The men of these clubs would have commissioned and built Paisley Museum at the same time as they commissioned their portraits. The imaginations of such men, imagining their museum, their portraits, is key to Jardine's project. They claimed the right to portray their likenesses and store them in the public record, which meant a museum, what is the world? As she smoothed the expense away from her eyes, she felt annoyance leak from the small cut left by her universalising self-love, a power she recognised might still be able to lock her out. She was back in Scotland, and her hung-over mind conjured a gralloched brain in a tea-pot, a boiling stream of knowledge pouring onto its bloody surface as brown fluid chugged from the spout onto a placard with a map of the world.

In 2011, design theorist and artist Fiona Jardine (d.o.b. unknown) created the exhibition Trogloidytes at Paisley Museum in Scotland. This show highlighted how the frame, or the laws of the image, can alter over time, and questioned normative notions of portrayal as the most effective carriers of a new absent subjectivity. Jardine carefully selected examples of two specific classes of objects within the museum's collection: portraits of 'Victorian gentlemen,' which she selected without regard for sitter or artist, and 'ceramics,' which she selected only for their wiggly names and sayings or the way the relationship between artists and the work they produce is, and has been, mediated through the notion of 'signature' as an intervening pre-condition or necessary component, and how we experience artworks when not coded by signature. The anonymous notebook is not coded by signature, and the conceptual figure I am searching for within the Lacanian screen, they would have found examples of such activities in the existing screen of the world, and sought to replicate themselves within these established norms. The essay then introduces one of the hotly debated ideas of this time, one that was debated across Europe, the fashionably nineteenth century 'science' of physiognomy. This took Darwin's new evolutionary theory and distorted it to the point that it was being translated across Europe, and the rich world of visual imagery which it flourished in Paisley in the nineteenth century. Clubs like The Trogloidy Club, one of the many drinking and debating clubs that flourished in Paisley in the nineteenth century. Clubs like these brought middle class men together to keep abreast of current developments in science, philosophy, the arts, and the law, and to agree how their joint influence would determine these in future. The men of these clubs would have commissioned and built Paisley Museum at the same time as they commissioned their portraits. The imaginations of such men, imagining their museum, their portraits, is key to Jardine's project. They claimed the right to portray their likenesses and store them in the public record, which meant a museum, what is the world? As she smoothed the expense away from her eyes, she felt annoyance leak from the small cut left by her universalising self-love, a power she recognised might still be able to lock her out. She was back in Scotland, and her hung-over mind conjured a gralloched brain in a tea-pot, a boiling stream of knowledge pouring onto its bloody surface as brown fluid chugged from the spout onto a placard with a map of the world.
representation. The subjectivities the portraits strained to place in history flowed into pots that became funeral urns for the physiognomic ideal. Jardine is a design theorist, and this is not quite the point she was making with this research, but it is the point I am taking from it. My experience of this spectacle was given personal meaning by creating speculative bodies out of the ceramics and connecting these to a space ‘in-between’ mimesis and embodiment. This is the ‘no-place space’ of boa constrictors and elephants, but it has an adult purpose in the way it extends the mirror to other objects.

The ‘right of portrayal’ did not always take a mimetic form. The emblems of a Medieval coat of arms were an identifying ‘body sign’ that was distinct from a ‘body image,’ and visually encoded and legitimized whoever carried them as belonging to a family or territory, as a body belonging to a social estate. Today’s descendant of this might be the criminal tattoo that identifies someone as part of a group or family, literally superimposing the sign of group allegiance onto the individual body, its opposite is the biometric measurement used in passports. Both the shield and the tattoo are signs rather than mimetic representations, mediatizations of a certain idea of a person, which we now see, in the criminal tattoo, as an eradication of subjectivity. Hans Belting (1935-) has suggested however, that the face is also a sort of heraldic device, that of a contemporary Self caught in the muteness and individual biography from its idiocy. By asserting individual biography only in relation to non-mimetic pots,

d-e-identified and defined in terms of the size of a bodily attribute, their subjective absence is mimetically present, but also erased. Removed of linguistic supports, these portraits become blurred into multiplicity, and individual pillars of the community become a de-individualized multitude tattooed by their beards. What remains is their ‘right to portrayal,’ the power that this ‘gang’ possessed when these works were made. If we try to imagine this project with Victorian women’s portraits instead of men’s, perhaps hung in relation to the size of their breasts, the power within the right of portrayal becomes even clearer. Beard-objectification is only humorous because these men’s previous, individualised, power remains emblemsatically inscribed. By asserting individual biography only in relation to non-mimetic pots, Troglydotes revealed something of the fragility of Belting’s ‘tense union’ of body description with subject description, without suggesting a direct move towards ‘the psychological portrait.’ The presence of absence, already inscribed in the medium of representation, is still somehow ways to fantasise her individual story into a form that retains an affective force today. In refusing to conform to the image disciplines of her time, I hope she was emancipating herself, even if only for the time she spent painting, from the ways of

In The Use of Bodies, Agamben writes that

It is as if each of us obscurely felt that precisely the opacity of our clandestine life held within it a genuinely political element, as such shareable par excellence – and yet, if one attempts to share it, it stubbornly eludes capture and leaves behind it only a ridiculous and incomunicable remainder [...]. It is only if thought is able to find the political element that has been hidden in the secrecy of singular existence, only if, beyond the split between public and private, political and geographical, zoe and bios, it is possible to delineate the contours of a form-of-life and of a common use of bodies, will politics be able to escape from its muteness and individual biography from its idiocy. This is again an in-between space, this time between the political organism of the social and the individual organic self. Insisting on the irreducibility of individual experience has been an important tool of recognition for many subaltern subjects, but in our Instagramming time of ‘the cult of the body double,’ perhaps the element of ‘common use’ within cultural objects is worth re-visiting.

In the deeply personal ‘bios’ of the analytic process, the analysand explores internal imagery from their past in a discursive and embodied relationship with the analyst. The stories told are understood to be giving conscious expression to aspects of their past that the analysand cannot bring directly to consciousness, but which might become partially visible through the spiralling repetition of actions and objects that stand-in, like ‘ghost stories,’ for what is consciously invisible. By repeatedly bringing these ghosts into the analytic fold, it is hoped that their underlying histories may eventually be placed in the socialised realm of the ego, and hopefully, eventually, to an acceptable resting place within the symbolic order of the conscious mind (the sanctified ground of popular ghost literature).

Analytic stand-ins are the opposite of Agamben’s fetishistic substitutes, as, through analytic work, they help move the analysand towards what could not be thought, rather than away from it. Such a spiralling process of representation is, as the notebook artist’s repeated attention to the body of her logs. Age rings that reveal nature’s clock face transform into the repeating ouroboros, symbol of eternity, and create a place between time and no-time. The bodily space of fifty-two stories told are understood to be giving conscious expression to aspects of their past that the analysand cannot bring directly to consciousness, but which might become partially visible through the spiralling repetition of actions and objects that stand-in, like ‘ghost stories,’ for what is consciously invisible. By repeatedly bringing these ghosts into the analytic fold, it is hoped that their underlying histories may eventually be placed in the socialised realm of the ego, and hopefully, eventually, to an acceptable resting place within the symbolic order of the conscious mind (the sanctified ground of popular ghost literature).

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thinking and being that her social world would have decreed. This form of escape is an imagining forward, a tentative reaching towards the possibility of another form of life. The conceptual figure that underlies this, which floats within the structures of the log, is one that grasps hold of the ghostly blank that the artist's mimetic self-portrayal would have presented to the world, and forcefully returns this as a body self-consciously insisting on a new form of presence that both takes on, and utterly rejects, its cultural erasure. This was the conceptual figure I had recognised when I first saw these paintings, and so it could not be unique to this work. If indeed 'there is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time,' then this conceptual figure of erasure, returned as aesthetic insistence on presence despite and within this very erasure, was one I had seen before, and not just in my own work. This is a model that takes on the silencing power of objectification, and in the next two chapters I trace it in the work of Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois, who also worked with the decoy of the stand-in, and who were working one and two centuries after the notebook artist.
I cannot dance upon my toes—
No Man instructed me—
But oftentimes, among my mind,
A glee possesseth me.
At the age of 43, Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) took a break from making the academic paintings and illustrations on which she had built a twenty-year career, and after some time off, launched herself into The Paintings for the Temple, an astonishing cycle of 193 works that were radically different to both her previous output, and to any other paintings the artist might have seen. Completed between 1906 and 1915, but never publicly exhibited in the artist’s lifetime, these paintings are what Af Klint is known for today. The story she herself told about this change in direction is that the voices of guiding spirits proposed she make the paintings, and she then followed their instructions. Hilma af Klint was a Lutheran her whole life, but was also committed to a Theosophical world view, in which disembodied spirits can speak directly to devotees, through the meditative practice of the séance. The Paintings for the Temple have mostly been approached through the lens of these beliefs, but as an artist, I felt a lack of material relationship with the world within these interpretations. Something in the paintings was slipping past—a more everyday ghost, one who ate cookies and laughed with her friends. By looking closely at the paintings in relation to such a life, to the artist’s childhood experience and friend groups, I have found a new conceptual figure rising out of the Temple cycle. There is a haunting presence within these paintings, and the meditative focus of the séance allowed it to be realised, but the séance was used as an artistic method. The visceral and joyful body that arises from this new reading seizes the ghost in the darkened room as a concept, one that might hold all it was not possible to paint of a woman’s life at this time.

By removing the representational portrait from her imagery, Af Klint was able to create another sort of body, one that incorporates, and grows from, the material ‘body’ of the canvas itself, painted and drawn upon. The canvas is a body that is
invisible in plain sight, just as women, as creative, independent, sexual, and equally experiencing bodies, were. Such a reality could not be portrayed with a fine art vocabulary designed around the opposite suppositions. The Paintings for the Temple take this impossible lack as the very structure upon which a new body is built, one that deconstructs and revitalises the image, not of what a woman looked like at this time, but of what she herself saw and touched and experienced.

Looking specifically at The Ten Largest, an early series within the larger cycle, I explore how these key works merge Af Klint’s Spiritualist interests with an idea of the body taken from maps drawn by her grandfather. By tracing a previously undocumented friendship, I then explore how this structural embodiment takes on the political concerns of the Swedish Life Reform movement. From these two key axis lines, a politically radical spectre emerges: a woman’s embodiment stripped not of clothes, but of direct representation, named in subtitles such as Youth and Old Age, but indirectly reconstructed, as a joyful cartography of lived experience. This is the body that haunts The Paintings for the Temple, a shimmering representation of that which it is still impossible to fully portray; of a life.

The Paintings for the Temple were created in groups, first Primordial Chaos, in 1906–1907, and then the key works of The Ten Largest, in 1907. By the end of 1908, the artist had completed the first 111 paintings and stopped for four years, before completing the final works of the cycle between 1912–1915. The paintings unfold as series and sub-series, a single body-of-work, designed so the viewer walks from painting to painting in a set choreography of seeing in time. The dancing patterns of colours and lines, which I will show directly reference the artist’s life, can then be experienced as building towards the concept of a single, white, body-of-light, and I explore the ways this seriality can be read as an embodiment of Nordic Romanticism’s wider cultural investment in the psychological qualities of the white light of midsummer, here diffracted back to us as flowing rainbows of patterns and colours, the many bodies-of-light within one body-of-work.

Re-interpreting the Spiritual

In the ten years leading up to 1906, Hilma af Klint was experimenting with multi-authored automatic drawings, created with a group of four friends with whom she regularly held Spiritualist séances. Spiritualism was a massively popular interest at the turn of the twentieth century, and spirit drawing an established practice. Traces of the drawings that Hilma and her friends made are clearest in the first part of the Temple cycle, Primordial Chaos, and in some of the motifs that followed, but these experimental drawings alone cannot account for the majestic outburst of creativity that would follow them. In the
The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.
The artist often took illustrating commissions, including the 1901 commission to record the dissection of a horse at the Stockholm Veterinary Institute, which was completed with her friend Anna Cassel.

Tessel M. Bauduin, Seeing and Depicting the Invisible, Nummedal, op. cit., p. 9

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Dreams in 1900. The Interpretation of Dreams was published in 1900.

The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.

If we discount the literal possibility of the ghost at the séance, however, then what other influences might have led a Swedish woman artist, working within a progressive cultural community in Stockholm at the turn of the twentieth century, to create these astonishingly original paintings? Could her own actions have been the source of the visions, voices, and sensations that she experienced, and wrote about as her inspirations? Could the new visual language that the artist thought was being suggested by external voices, be revisited today as a creative urge that she knew was culturally unacceptable, but was nonetheless the one she needed to record her own experience of life as a social, acting, subject? Could we understand these strange paintings as seeking a vessel for the invisible body of her self-experience, for Emily Dickinson’s ‘glee’? Our bodies are continually...
processing external stimuli in relation to our internal sensations, and the thoughts that come to us as ghostly voices and images, that lead to sudden decisions to ‘paint it red,’ or ‘make it big,’ are created within this Möbius-like experiential flow, some of it wholly conscious, some of it not. So, what was the artist looking at in the key years leading up to 1907 and the creation of The Ten Largest? These paintings have no parallel within the fine art of their time, but Af Klint, like the notebook artist before her, was looking elsewhere for inspiration, away from an aesthetic vocabulary dominated by a masculine world-view. This middle-aged woman, suddenly possessed by an apparently overpowering need to create something completely different to her previous work, did not look to the disciplines of her field, but back to her childhood, and to the political interests of the people she hung out with.

Maps
Hilma Af Klint was the daughter of a naval officer, and born within the walls of Karlberg Palace, the Swedish naval academy in Karlskrona, where she lived until she was 10 years old. Her grandfather, Admiral Gustav af Klint, had been ennobled for the maps he drew of the seas around Sweden, and her father wrote important triangulation tables that assisted the reading of them. Sea maps would have been among the first images that Hilma ever saw, and they were emotionally entwined in both her family’s history, and their continued livelihood and safety. Sea maps make beautiful pictures, but they are also guides – the correct interpretation of them determining the life or death of people that the young Hilma knew and loved. Her earliest experience of images was therefore that they were embedded with layers of coding, the experience of which might be aesthetic, linguistic, and numeric, but was, over all these qualities, vital. Maps, dry and orderly as they might seem, ran with emotion.

A sea map is a different order of image to a painted seascape. It retains spatial contiguity, but its lines, numbers, and shapes do not mimetically represent what we see. It is also different to a map of the land, as much of the knowledge it encodes is underwater, invisible to the eye. While geological maps also define what lies beneath the surface, the sea map specifically records a physical body, the sea, that is in itself indefinable. In
the 1980s, Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Felix Guattari (1930–1992) explored this cartographic idea of the sea as an example of a ‘smooth space’ that we define, or socialize, with the striations of order that are implied by the numbers, words, and lines that flow across the smooth (therefore indefinable) sea-body in a single graphic containment of currents, depths, winds, and shipping routes. 241 The body of the sea itself has no shape, no skin with which it can be seen. If we try to touch the surface of the sea, our hands go straight through it, and this mirage of surface is usually represented on a map by either blank paper, or flat areas of colour. The body of the sea is an energy that moves in time, the lacy surf of its unconscious. Such a connection would not need to have been philosophically demanded at all. But the mapped flows of energy, the indirect representation as mapped flows of energy, the precise figure that Af Klint takes on in The Ten Largest.

The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and [...] I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict. 243 we could understand her to have been expressing exactly such an artistic, material, generation of new knowledge through practice. Maps of the sea, an essential metaphor of the unconscious, seem to have offered the artist an aesthetic entry point to the depiction of her own interior sensations. It would appear that Hilma af Klint began her journey towards The Painting for the Temple when she was a child in Karlsborg palace, gazing at her grandfather’s maps. She was trained in the academic, representational methods of late nineteenth century fine art, but only after she met with the fluctuating, structure-less, sea-bodies that underlay her family’s history. This skinless body was a structuring reality of the artist’s early emotional life, imprinted as a map, a visualisation of the world that permeated her childhood mind before she could ever conceptualise it. The permeable, partial, visibility of the sea, its indirect representation as mapped flows of energy, the landscape and portraits that Af Klint painted before 1906 conformed to the cultural norms that governed women’s artistic production at the time, but when the artist came to ‘draw up’ this new body of work she stepped away from her easel and her oil paints, and rolled large strips of paper out on the floor. This was the same cheap paper The Five used for drawing experiments. She then picked up the tempera paints of the map maker, adjusted the scale to super-large, and mapped it out, just as her grandfather had mapped out the sea, on large unrolled sheets of paper, each revealing only a part. The movement from painting on a vertical plane, at a relatively modest scale, to painting on the floor, at a massive scale, was not only demanded a quite different bodily engagement, and so mind-set, from the artist. 244 This could have been an intentional decision, a way to rid herself of the mental discipline of her academic training in how the ‘world’ sees life, but whether it happened knowingly or not, it happened, and this painting experience would also have been quite different to any work she had previously done. The brushwork of The Ten Largest reveals the hasty bones of images rushed onto paper. In Af Klint’s notebook record of the time, she writes “I was told I become a useful metaphor for our own interior sensed bodies, the

This ghostly body of a mapped sea, present but essentially indefinable, is striated by invisible trade routes and currents that come to define it, and whose flows place the navigator between the past and the future. This map body is further tattooed with hidden geographies and the marked ship-wrecks of past human activity. And yet all these body markings are as invisible to the eye as the wrecks of our own pasts, and the underlying currents that will guide us into our futures. Thinking with this idea of the sea as an oscillating body without form, an uncontainable body of time into its ghostly body, traceable only through a choreography of movements and actions. If we overlay this choreographic mapping, of a body that escapes direct representation, onto the aesthetic lines and flows of The Ten Largest, the key early production within The Paintings for the Temple, a reading of each painting as already a body opens up. The artist’s subtitles directly imply readings of a body-in-time. Af Klint’s knowledge of her grandfather’s maps make it possible to see the flat, single coloured grounds of The Ten Largest as Deleuze and Guattari’s smooth and striated space, the mapped body of the sea becoming an artistic Body without Organs, 242 given form, or social structure, by the painted striations that are conforming to the cultural norms that governed women’s artistic production at the time, but when the artist came to ‘draw up’ this new body of work she stepped away from her easel and her oil paints, and rolled large strips of paper out on the floor. This was the same cheap paper The Five used for drawing experiments. She then picked up the tempera paints of the map maker, adjusted the scale to super-large, and mapped it out, just as her grandfather had mapped out the sea, on large unrolled sheets of paper, each revealing only a part. The movement from painting on a vertical plane, at a relatively modest scale, to painting on the floor, at a massive scale, was not only demanded a quite different bodily engagement, and so mind-set, from the artist. 244 This could have been an intentional decision, a way to rid herself of the mental discipline of her academic training in how the ‘world’ sees life, but whether it happened knowingly or not, it happened, and this painting experience would also have been quite different to any work she had previously done. The brushwork of The Ten Largest reveals the hasty bones of images rushed onto paper. In Af Klint’s notebook record of the time, she writes “I was told I
of paper, were not quite as new to the artist as they seem to be to us, as viewers of her work a hundred years later.

The strangeness of the project in relation to its times, however, only becomes more pronounced. The titles reveal a narrative impulse to depict a body in time, and viewing these huge paintings also takes time, and your own bodily engagement, moving up close then further away, a dance made of viewer and work, of parts of a whole, a body-of-work viewable only in bits and pieces. This indirect representation of a body in parts, through a suggestion of flows, returns us to another aspect of the map. The pull of magnetic North permeates all life on earth, and knowledge of it is what allows the sailor to literally move past the wrecks of the past, and follow the currents that lead to the future. Its indivisible presence is mapped by a sign: a line, an arrow, or a compass star. Tracing its invisible force ties a map to its territory, and turns a decorative picture into a tool of life and death. Such an invisible all-permeating force field is also a conception of God. For an artist with deep religious faith, the conflation of magnetic North with belief in both an all-encompassing God, and the Theosophical astral plane, may well have been the movement within which the visual processing that resulted in *The Ten Largest* was possible, brought together through the sign that unlocks navigation within this invisible, skinless body. The permeating force of magnetism, and its metaphorical connection with religious ideas of spirit, is an amalgam of the physical and the psychic in terms that were available to the artist at that time. In *The Ten Largest* this striated, mapped body of the canvas becomes visible as a representation of such an energy field, of being alive in the world.

This suggestion of Af Klint’s painted bodies-without-form as melting away the physical body as a unified object, and revealing it as a skinless cartography of sensations and energy flows, utilizes the Deleuzian concept of the Body without Organs. There is an interplay of the smooth and the striated, in a series made of parts, which understands embodied experience as ‘pure surface.’ This visual idea originated with Freud, in his descriptions of the libidinal intensities with which we experience ourselves in relation to the social world, an idea he developed as an alternative to the body as a passive and unified anatomy. Freud’s model understands a body that is mapped in this way to be a permeable form, but one having two sides, inner and outer. The Deleuzian map that is the Body without Organs, the part-body of constantly becoming sensations, is, however, a single flippable surface without interior. It is an abstract model for an aspiring engagement with the non-organic bodies of the world, in which parts of ourselves are in constant fluctuating connection with our social worlds, creating new energy bodies made up of the connection itself, or the planes of flow; these
energy-flows might be our linkages with any stratum of the world. It is an idea that does away with interiority, understanding only pure surface, and the body as aspiring to this vibrant, reversible, mobile mapping of itself while being constantly inscribed with the social functions that relate to its experience of society, of the law, economy, medicine. This is an abstract body, a single surface mapping aliveness as an energy connecting parts.

With this model, each of The Ten Largest could be understood in terms of viewer engagement with a painterly body that is not representative of skin and hair, but of fluctuating energy fields that we engage with in multiple viewing relations. However, while such a radical mapping of experience opens up the energy inherent to these paintings, the Deleuzian body of pure surface is a neutral non-gendered body, and that is not a model that is really available to women, now or then. Breaking down gendered stereotypes was an idea of interest to both Af Klint and Theosophy but to re-imagine women's lives only within an idea of abstract planes and flows, as cartographies, does not acknowledge that the cultural position of non-gendered neutrality implied by this has always been occupied by men. The specific inscriptions of the social that women face become dissolved by this model in ways that Feminist Alice Jardine (1951–) questions when she asks whether this becoming body of abstract intensities might not in fact expand the possibilities of women's lives being further ghosted within the social realm. Jardine wonders whether, for a woman, such a ‘pure surface’ might actually ‘reveal only her simulacrum: a female figure caught in a whirling sea of male configurations. A silent, mutable, headless, desireless spatial surface necessary only for her metamorphosis.” So to understand the Temple paintings as a cartography of sensed experience opens up a reading of women's lives being further ghosted within the social realm. Jardine's anxiously defined simulacrum, may also be present. In Volatile Bodies, Elizabeth Grosz acknowledged this problem of the cartographic body and looked for a way to create more of a framework which acknowledges both the psychical or interior dimension of subjectivity and the surface corporeal exposures of the subject to social inscription and training; a model which [...] insists on (at least) two surfaces which cannot be collapsed into one and which do not always harmoniously blend with and support each other; a model where the join, the interaction of the two surfaces, is always a question of power.

Grosz employs Lacan’s geometric model of a mobius flow of energy between these two surfaces as a way to re-consider the undissolvable particularity of individual bodies and the Lacanian cloak of the social, with its potentially scarring inner surfaces. Is there then a reading within The Ten Largest that more fully opens up the subject of a woman's lived experience?

Art School and The Swedish Life Reform Movement

Hilma af Klint's studies took her first to the Stockholm Technical School and then to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, from 1882–1887. The academy began accepting women students in the 1860's and this journey, through craft school and on, was, by the 1880's, being replicated by a small but distinct group of progressive young women from middle- and upper-class Swedish families. Nearly all of those who would become important to Af Klint's later artistic life went through the academy in the 1980's. After graduation, many of these artist's works to them to the Konstnärshuset (Artist House) a cultural building in central Stockholm where all the key forces of Swedish Modernism were coming together. This was the meeting place of The Opponents - a breakaway group of plein-air painters influenced by developments in France, of New Idun - an early Feminist group, and from 1910, of the Swedish Women's Artists association. It also housed Blanch's Gallery, which exhibited these artist's works. Af Klint was awarded a subsidised studio in this building upon graduation, and worked there with artists Ottilia Adelborg and Anna Cassel until 1908, selling her paintings and accepting commercial commissions.

During the same time period, Stockholm was undergoing a catalyzed, late wave of industrialization. The city's infrastructure became unable to support its rapid population growth, and extreme and visible deprivation had begun to focus middle class minds. A Life Reform movement grew up, led by feminist social activist Ellen Key (1849–1926) and seeking positive ways to address changing social needs. Ellen Key was a prolific writer and orator who believed that creative work, design, and pedagogy were the keys to improved living conditions for the general populace. She campaigned for social change through the aesthetic improvement of everyday life experience, seeing this as central to a more integrated and happier society. In 1898, she wrote of the need for a “religion of beauty” that would begin in the home, and be defined by that which was useful, informed by its purpose, and expressive of the inner life of either its maker or user. It was from this more pleasurable experience of home life, in every home, that personal lives, and so society, might be transformed. Key wrote that this new aesthetics, to be made affordable by nineteenth century industrial innovation, would be brought into the world mostly by women, because of what she understood as their primary role in home-making and
bringing up children, and the respect for an object’s utility that this work brought. In 1885, she kick-started this project by bringing together a group of twelve upper class professional women, called The Twelve, who organised educational social events on craft, home-making, and child-care for urban working- class than a communist approach to the alienations of life itself should be lived as a work of art. Friedrich Nietzsche, (1844–1900) The Birth of Tragedy, 1872

Ellen Key, The Beauty of Everyday Life, essay, in Frankfurt, op. cit.

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Swedish Life Reform saw answers to compelling social problems in a more unified approach to art and life, and sought to re-invent aesthetic value as an essential everyday experience for all. It was an idea that life itself should be lived as a work of art. Friedrich Nietzsche, (1844–1900) The Birth of Tragedy, 1872

Ellen Key, The Beauty of Everyday Life, essay, in Frankfurt, op. cit.

Both women also had a sister actively involved with The Opponents, Ottilia Adelborg, who was Hilma af Klint’s closest friend and an artist member of The Five. She supported Af Klint both emotionally and financially throughout her life. She was also an artistic collaborator. The extent of Cassel’s influence on Af Klint’s career has not yet been studied, but it is notable that when her asthma led her to a sanatorium for most of 1908–1909, both existence work and Af Klint’s painting stopped.

Sources: Ottilia Adelborg website and hilmaafklint.se

There is a biography of Arthur Hazelius (1833–1901) in the Stockholm campaign for women’s rights. By 1904, when Af Klint’s inner voices were beginning to suggest her future paintings, Adelborg was already a famous children’s illustrator, and a follower of Ellen Key’s Life Reform movement. Entranced by a visit to the Dalarna region north west of Stockholm, Af Klint had created at Skansen. That her voice is so clearly to be heard in the development of the visual representation of national identity, that these agrarian communities however, was that they were run 

Key had been a collector for historian and ethnographer Artur Hazelius and had created at Skansen. Hilma af Klint’s inner voices were beginning to suggest her future paintings, Adelborg was already a famous children’s illustrator, and a follower of Ellen Key’s Life Reform movement. By 1904, when Af Klint’s inner voices were beginning to suggest her future paintings, Adelborg was already a famous children’s illustrator, and a follower of Ellen Key’s Life Reform movement.
and as the nineteenth century progressed, men left the farms in search of paid work for longer and longer periods. Women did the farming and ran their communities. Creating cash within such a structure was difficult, and Adelborg’s first action in Gagnef was to set up a lace-making school and workshop. This would both save a local tradition, and increase these independent women’s earning capacity. Alongside this, she collected historic examples of local lace and embroidery, in a classic expression of Life Reform’s ‘looking back’ to regenerate the future. Her diaries go on to record that early in 1904, only a few months into her new project, her friend Hilma af Klint visited for a ten-day shared painting trip.

January 28, 1904: Hilma Klint arrived.
February 1, 1904: We enjoy being together and we are not overworked. We met the warden of the church and he said ‘it is excellent to have your good friend for company and to paint with.’
February 7, 1904: Today Hilma Klint left. She brought a lot of good companionship. We managed to work together very well. She talked a lot about Theosophy and Spiritualism, and some parts of that I do like, but I don’t believe in the voices.

This was a key early moment in the conceptualisation of both The Ten Largest, and Ottilia’s own project. Both women were preparing something new. The practical Ottilia did not believe in Hilma’s interpretations of her séance experiences, but her diaries go on to record that in 1912, when Hilma had only just started back to work on the Paintings for the Temple after a painful four year break, she had nevertheless “Visited Hilma af Klint and her strange paintings – pure and true to herself is what she is.”

The women were clearly very close, as the 1905 photograph already suggests. They had shared a studio in the 1890’s, and when her friend moved to Gagnef, to support the continuation of a historic example of a women’s community, her friend Hilma visited, to work with her and to talk. The Gagnef textile collection, still maintained by the Ottilia Adelborg Museum, reveals that Hilma also looked very closely at the objects her friend was collecting.

The first sign of this is in a poster design from 1903. Af Klint took commissions for illustration work, and comparing this 1903 children’s Christmas gift print (Julklappan) with one shown in a photo of the artist from 1895, it is possible to see that in 1895 the artist depicted a child in a contemporar y city outfit, but by 1903, the child is dressed in a traditional costume from Dalarna. Each image is framed by flowers, the earlier one with lilies, a motif the artist has repeatedly recorded in her notebooks as ‘male,’ and then with (Christmas) roses, Af Klint’s recorded motif for ‘female.’ So, from the first moments of Ottilia’s engagement with Dalarna, Hilma is also recording its traditions, and merging them with a symbolic image language she was in the process of developing. Lilies and roses would go on to become the key motif of the first of The Ten Largest, Childhood, No. 1, painted as the head garlands traditionally worn by children on festive occasions, a subject often also painted, in more cloying form, by Life Reform artist Carl Larsson.

The earlier automatic drawing is also from 1903, created during a séance. It is hard to imagine the tension that must have been created by pursuing such different creative approaches to image making at the same time. What is also notable in the séance drawing however, is the double coil. This is not necessarily an abstract shape in the Swedish context, as it also resembles a traditional St Lucia saffron bun. The single coil of the ubiquitous cinnamon bun is also repeated many times in other works, and is radiantly present in The Ten Largest, Youth, No. 3. It may seem prosaic to reduce paintings to such everyday sensualities, but the unconscious does not have the same algorithmic attention to cultural value that our social self does. Given the trance source of the artist’s imagery, it seems quite possible she was reaching into such a sensual experience, perhaps in a way not dissimilar to the manuscript artist reaching for her logs. These motifs of St Lucia curl and cinnamon spiral were two of the key motifs that the artist laid out in a sort of aesthetic trig. table that was part of the very first paintings of the cycle, Primordial Chaos. Af Klint wrote about receiving her imagery during the séance, but a table like this reveals her desire to share the logic of her production. This is the opposite of esoteric mystification, and in this further evidence of the importance of her family’s navigational history to her construction of her own visual language.
The Ten Largest, Youth, No. 3
It is with this painting that the degree of the artist's attention to the Gagnef textile collection also becomes clear. The tangerine ground of this painting, and its freely spiralling lines next to floating flower-like forms, some made of layered circles, appear to directly quote the tangerine silk bonnets worn by Gagnef's young girls at party celebrations. The museum has three of these nineteenth century bonnets in its collection today, all sewn with similar orange silk, and only slight variations in motif. Af Klint was quoting a teenage girl's party cap.

Silk bonnet, Ottilia
Adelborg Museum.

The Ten Largest, Youth, No. 4
In The Ten Largest, Four, Youth, the patterns women used to decorate their neckerchiefs rise out in the floating star form with extensions, and in the vertical rods. Similar rods appear across The Ten Largest, and they repeat on all Dalarna neckerchief designs. The one on this painting is also reminiscent of a kurbits, a sort of flower-tower imagined by Gagnef women as a stand-in for a Jerusalem flower, mentioned in the bible, but which no one in this northern community had ever seen. These imagined flowers were often painted on large sheets of paper that people hung on the wooden walls of their log cabins on special occasions. Such wall hangings were also perhaps an inspiration for the huge scale of The Ten Largest, and for the use of paper. They were widely used in Gagnef and this photo shows a version painted on sack cloth, which has been whitewashed into the plaster lining the log cabin of Gagnef's Minnestuga (memory house).
Proof that Af Klint was working with metaphors of baking and the decorative world of Dalarna’s women comes from a diary entry from October 1906. A large St Lucia curl can be seen on the reverse page, and a small pile of spirals nestle together. Immediately below the horizontal pencil line are the words

Surdegens fält (Sourdough’s field)
Kurbitsens fält (Kurbits field)
Andens fält (Spirit field)

In a page on image-making, the artist uses the metaphor of a field as a stand-in for a painting, and then moves through a field of rising dough to a field of the imagined flowers of the mind, in a literal form, the kurbits, to a field of the spirit. This use of metaphorical baking (a very everyday alchemy of women’s lives) is already mentioned in January of the same year, when the artist writes ‘the sourdough is thoroughly fermented’ in a statement on the developing work of The Five. The transformations of baking are an apt material metaphor of the inchoate processes of material creativity, and they return in a drawing from 1908, this time entwined with both coils and double curls.

The Ten Largest, Adulthood, No. 6

In this painting, the sea map returns, with choreographic routings covering the smooth surface of the ground colour in a semblance of islands, shipping channels, currents. The large black shape however, is also reminiscent of a pattern used on the back of women’s wrist warmers. Such a focus on traditional pattern making seems odder to us today than it would have at the time. There was a frenzied interest in historic textiles in Stockholm that was part of the success of Skansen Outdoor Museum, and a scrapbook of textile design drawings that has recently come to light further supports the idea that it interested Af Klint. It is believed to have belonged to the artist, and to have been purchased in 1942, from an antiquarian bookseller in Stockholm.
These traditional birch bark patterns are stencils that were used to cut out the patchwork for women’s purses. These curling shapes of sun, tree, antler, had specific positions within traditional designs, but seen in a loose pile on a friend’s table, these tools of women’s handicraft become an artist’s compositional aids, ways to work with the spirals already finding their place in the notebooks, and ready-made deconstructions of the social formulas that guided their original use.

The Ten Largest, Old Age, No. 10

In The Ten Largest, Ten, Old Age, the scrolling St Lucia curl, also a design on men’s leather trousers, is overlaid with tables of blue and yellow, colours the artist defined as masculine and feminine, and tables painted bloody red, and underscored with the mathematical sign for infinity. Is there a suggestion here that our blood all runs red, in the end of the day?

When Af Klint came to map her séance experiences, she seems to have gone back to the first images she ever saw, maps of the skinless body of the sea. To create the visual language that would trace social life across this smooth surface, the artist looked to the decorative traditions of a working woman’s life, motifs she and her friend found in a community defined by women’s self-reliance. In doing this, she incorporated into fine art practice the unsigned language of endless Swedish women before her, designing and colouring their lives, caring and baking for their families. The swirling compositions of The Ten Largest do not record what these women looked like to an outside eye, as Adelborg’s paintings do, but are an ingestion of the everyday beauty with which they chose to pattern these lives.

The translation of these maps, textiles, and baking into an art practice may have been made possible through Theosophy’s conflation of scientific discoveries such as magnetism with religious ideas of God, allowing the artist’s experience of mapping to become a ghostly conceptual figure of a visible while invisible painterly body, a skinless representation arising from the skinless sea-body revealed by the map. This potentially neutral body is then tattooed with social markings that define a women’s experience, the traditional patterns of clothes and food. The whole complex process, which Af Klint wrote that she did not really understand, made conceivable with a metaphor of rising dough. What Af Klint’s did with The Ten largest was to embed women’s invisible working lives within a new aesthetic language of painting, one that turned women’s cultural invisibility inside out, and in this act was an artistic embedding of the Suffragette goals of her friends in Swedish Life Reform.

Af Klint was clearly close to reformist Ottilia Adelborg, but it is possible she got artistic inspiration from the work of another close friend of Adelborg’s, Karin Bergöö Larsson (1859–1928).
Karin met the impecunious Carl Larsson when she visited the Swedish artist colony at Grez-sur-Loing in 1882. They married in 1883 and Karin inherited Lilla Hyttnäs, in Sundborn, a few years later. The couple overhauled and rebuilt the small traditional wooden house, finding affordable ways to modernise old furniture, decorate with light and colour, and lay out space. Their colour palette was influenced by traditional reds and greens, or blue and white, of regional dress.

Carl Larsson, Ett Hem (A Home), Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm, 1899

Skönhet för Alla (Beauty for All), Stockholm, 1904 [1899], cover design by Carl Larsson.

Ottilia and Karin had been students together, but after her marriage, Karin’s artistic interest mutated into the textiles she produced for her family home in Dalarna. Inspired by Key’s ideas on the aesthetics of everyday life, she and her artist husband Carl Larsson re-designed this home to be a living art work, with affordable, artistic gestures that have since made this modern looking, light-filled house a museum to the couple’s work and ideas, and to early Swedish Modernism. The house was immortalised in its own time by the popular watercolours Carl made of their family life. These saccharin idealizations were fundamentally expressions of Swedish Life Reform beliefs, reproduced in a series of best-selling books that were enthusiastically reviewed by Ellen Key. In one of these, Ett Hem, Larsson acknowledges that his paintings were a ‘manifesto’ aimed at reforming ‘taste and family life’ rather than true to life depictions, a position further underlined by Key in her most widely read publication, Beauty for All. These paintings have come to define this house, but Karin’s textiles are of a completely different order, lie closer to the heart of Key’s ideals of art as a practice of everyday life, and to Af Klint’s Temple paintings. Karin Larsson’s most creative period was between 1900–1910, when most of The Paintings for the Temple were also created. Adelborg was a frequent visitor, loved the house, and often went on joint field trips with Karin to look for lace.

11 September, 1907 – I left Gagnef and went to Falun where Karin Larson and Brita [one of Karin’s daughters] met me […] The next day to Svardsjo, where we drove to different farms to look for lace. We didn’t find any lace, but embroideries and festive embroidered hats. There were also red cross-stitch embroideries all along the edges of sheets and pillowcases—a tree of life, a star, in a repeating pattern.

The colours that Af Klint used across The Ten Largest reflect the colours of these collected textiles, the bright red of cross stitch and of knitted sleeves, and the soft Indian Yellow created out of birch leaf dye. Karin Larsson’s weaving and embroidery also incorporated them, and in this early wall hanging from 1903, The Four Elements, there is a similar merger of abstracting and representational principles to that in The Ten Largest, an even more so, the later parts of the cycle, the Dove and the Swan. The combined geometric and biomorphic abstractions are woven around the central device of a maypole, a key signifier of the celebratory rituals of Nordic Romanticism. Could Karin’s freely experimental reworking of this traditional motif within in a diff acted sea of light have planted an aesthetic seed? There is no record of the artists meeting, but they shared a close friend, a strong artistic interest in the powers of renewal made possible by Life Reform ideals, and this garland of roses, from a 1923 weaving, certainly suggests that Karin had seen The Ten Largest.

Adelborg’s diaries record many such field trips between 1900–1910, the key years in the development of both Karin’s ground-breaking textiles, and Hilma’s painterly language. When I visited the house in 2019, an Adelborg painting of one of Karin’s children was hanging on Karin’s bedroom wall. The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.
Af Klint's own spiritual interests had led her to Theosophy, which also looked to light, if through a more scientific lens, and within a wider European context, light was the subject of the French Fauves, whose revolutionary work was widely reported on. Many Swedish artists from Af Klint's Stockholm community had visited the Swedish colony at Grez-sur-Loing and returned with Fauvism in their minds, and Life Reform's turn to the countryside in search of rituals focused on merging the aesthetic values of light with political goals became a natural subject. For an artist interested in portraying a world defined by her interior sensations, such an understanding of light, as a force capable of unifying all matter—baking bread, flowers of the mind, the life of the spirit—without and within, of a visual equivalent of a body held within the force fields of magnetic north and the 'astral plane,' light, as a substance without substance would seem to be precisely the ghostly body the artist needed. One way to engage with *The Paintings for the Temple* is to understand them as painterly stand-ins for an idea of a human 'body of light.'

When Henri Matisse's *The Joy of Life* was exhibited at the Paris Salon des Independents in 1906, its bright colours and spatial distortion caused a public outrage that was discussed across the European press, and closely followed by artists working in Stockholm. Af Klint could hardly have avoided this conversation on Fauvism's leading artist, as it was happening in newspapers and in magazines such as *The Studio*, which Otilia, Karin, and her all subscribed to. She may never have seen an actual Matisse painting, and her work does not reveal the influence of his use of colour or line, but black and white reproductions would also have revealed his revolutionary hue value to the passage of time. The wider Nordic romanticism within which these politics had grown, tapped into atavistic values in relation to the seasonal ebb and flow of the northern sun, especially the midsummer recurrence of day almost without night, which was traditionally celebrated as a cosmic or primal communal experience, in village parties that might go on for days. This was given new vitality by the Reformists, whose artistic and literary supporters created artworks overtly suggesting the ecstatic merger of inner psychological experience with the energy held within the light of endless day as orgastic amalgamations of the experiencing body and the light and air of the world.

**Bodies of Light**

In the key years leading up to 1906, Hilma af Klint lived within a community of artists and intellectuals dedicated to Swedish Life Reform. At the core of this lay a belief in the value of ritual, and of light and colour as aesthetic experiences that helped to unite and sublimate all experience. The wider Nordic romanticism within which these politics had grown, tapped into atavistic values in relation to the seasonal ebb and flow of the northern sun, especially the midsummer recurrence of day almost without night, which was traditionally celebrated as a cosmic or primal communal experience, in village parties that might go on for days. This was given new vitality by the Reformists, whose artistic and literary supporters created artworks overtly suggesting the ecstatic merger of inner psychological experience with the energy held within the light of endless day as orgastic amalgamations of the experiencing body and the light and air of the world.
scientific research into invisible wave forms, and the idea that human thought created
vibrations in the [...] body, accompanied with a marvellous play of colour, like that in the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it [...] The body under this impulse throws off a vibrating portion of itself [...] as figures are made by sand on a disk vibrating to a musical note [...] We have then a thought-form.

This body Besant wrote of as created by such thought is an object of great beauty, the delicacy and rapid motion of its particles giving it an aspect of living iridescent light [...] [this] desire-body composed of the finer qualities of astral matter, with the colours, rippling over and flashing through it, fine and clear in hue. 305

Besant writes of this imagery, created by a person’s thought and desire, as invisible, a sort of aura existing only as a form of energy, but the book then goes on to offer a colour palette and painted examples. Thought-Forms was widely read, and although her attempts to pin down her ideas with painted colour is not clear, the underlying idea of an energy body does describe the only place the Theosophists ‘astral plane’ could be said to exist, as a particular individual experience that nevertheless exists within us all. Besant’s ideas were produced as part of the work of a society that offered women creative freedom, and as an artistic approach seeking out new visualisations of inner experience, such a body-of-light is also an interesting premonition of Deleuzian planes and flows. And as Alex Owen suggests, it is easier to believe in ideas that help us live the lives we want, than in those that do not.

With the final paintings of the Temple cycle, an idea of the body as ‘the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it’ becomes fully realised as The Dove and Swan, which are filled with radiating light. Many of these final works also combine the mapped flows of earlier paintings with suggestions of the low hills and reflecting lakes of Dalarna, full with the prismatic light of sun and rainbows, the outer world from which the initial inspirations for the cycle came. The disassociation from her creative desires that belief in the séance offered Af Klint may have been a necessary liberation from a disciplined upbringing and education, and the vibrating invisible bodies of Besant’s vision would have resonated with these séance experiences. Identifiable traces of the maps and the trig tables of the artist’s formative experiences in search of a new aesthetic vocabulary, as part of the work of a society that offered women creative freedom, and as an artistic approach seeking out new visualisations of inner experience, such a body-of-light is also an interesting premonition of Deleuzian planes and flows. And as Alex Owen suggests, it is easier to believe in ideas that help us live the lives we want, than in those that do not.

A genealogy following on from Af Klint’s exploratory figuration of lived experience can be seen in the surrealist automatic drawing experiments of twenty years later, and their search for the resolution of dream and reality into an “absolute reality, a surreality.” In Alchemy in Contemporary Art, Urszula Szulakowska (1950–) traces this Surrealist work back to the experimental imagery of alchemy, which she sees as “the dream-work par excellence manifested in art and literature, the end-product of the dream work of countless individuals.” With Freud, this ongoing current within art practice found a language that made sense of a tradition that had been maintained through early Modernity by the Spiritualists. The Surrealists were able to realise “that alchemical imagery was, like the dream-work, an expression of unacceptable sexual desire [...] an insight discovered [...] from their reading of Freud’s dream analysis.”

The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.

The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.
It is not clear if either Hilma Af Klint or the notebook artist understood their work as a re-directed expression of unacceptable sexual desire, but they did not have to. It is enough that their meditative methods, the séance, or the slow study of logs, created the intellectual space for the aesthetic innovations that we can appreciate today. With the Surrealists came the further, social realisation that “sexual desire could be an aggressive political instrument for destroying the bourgeois social and political systems.” The Surrealists were a group dominated by a masculine world view however, and there was little space for women’s differing experience in their group.

It seems likely that Hilma af Klint, working twenty years earlier, knew that she had touched on both this power and this prejudice, when she chose to keep her work hidden. In tracing its visible connections to the work being done by the women of the Swedish Life Reform movement however, it is possible to trace a feminist politics embedded within these paintings of a female body of desire, which is still activating viewers today.

Af Klint’s way of seeing can be traced in the work of the later Surrealist painter Ithell Colquhoun (1906 – 88), as well as in the luminous heads of light created late in life by Maria Lassnig. In a different register, it can be found in the geometrics of Agnes Martin (1912 – 2004). Af Klint’s ghostly figure of the permeable, feminine, body of experience, realised as a serial form to be experienced through time, also moves through the visually penetrable walls of the late Cells of Louise Bourgeois (1911 – 2010). The Cells cannot readily be defined as vibrant images of a female body of desire however, and the next chapter explores Bourgeois’ quite different take on the conceptual figure of the ghostly body as a return of women’s historical erasure.
Much has already been written about French American artist Louise Bourgeois’ late Cell cycle, but this chapter focusses on the hauntingly ambiguous way Bourgeois registers her own body within this late cycle of works, and how this has the capacity to re-frame the way we now interpret the work of Af Klint and the notebook artist. Bourgeois often talked about the connections between her work and her personal history, and when she states that she has “endeavoured during my whole lifetime as a sculptor to turn woman from an object into an active subject,” she is making a wider claim for the political forces embedded within this, and this intentional, public goal differentiates her practice from the others. By looking at key examples from the Cell cycle, I will track how Bourgeois re-worked the methods with which the Surrealists sought access to unconscious forces, and re-deployed this approach for her own feminist ends.

The paintings of the notebook and The Ten Largest reveal an embrace of domestic objects as an extension of the still life genre historically ‘allowed’ to women. These were then ‘turned,’ aesthetically worked into body stand-ins for subjectivities struggling to find any other form within cultural screens that did not include them. This was an aesthetic act of resistance that Bourgeois, working in a later historical period, was able to articulate, but the aesthetic method was common to all three. By embracing the depiction of actual objects as the representational ‘stage’ for their non-visibility, these artists found a form capable of both holding the “marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze” within nature mort, and of returning this self-alienation—the realisation of their object status in the eyes of others—in images that hold subjectivity within the ‘skins’ of those chosen and depicted objects. It is in ghosting themselves in this way, removing actual self-portraiture, that they achieve this politicised return. These...
It is not an accident that I have found this ghostly conceptual figure of return in the work of older women artists. Renegotiating our relationship to our skins becomes an essential act when looking in the mirror begins to reveal the impossibility of maintaining any semblance of the ‘stain’ of perfect womanhood that remains women’s greatest vulnerability within the cultural screen. At a certain point in mid-life, ‘re-scripting’ our relationship to our skins becomes a survival strategy. And while several later twentieth century women artists have focussed on direct portrayal of this particular objectification, and I have looked at later works by Maria Lassnig and Cindy Sherman, Bourgeois understood the artist as it falls away from the mirror, and looks for a body that teases portrayal apart from body mimesis, in order to re-direct this negative social force into new, possible, ways of seeing.

Bourgeois began work on the Cells when she was in her late seventies. The cycle contains 63 works, and she was engaged with it until the end of her life. Each piece is structured as a container: either jerry-built cages made from salvaged architectural materials— window frames, doors, wire mesh fencing—or perfectly built glass vitrines. These containers hold and reveal an interior ‘still life’ of carefully placed objects, both found and made. Bourgeois understood the Cells to be representations, but of states of being rather than the specular representations, but of states of being rather than the specular

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background, and married to a successful art historian, Bourgeois always had her ‘five hundred a year,’ but the creative expansion that followed the MOMA show underlines the energy that is held within cultural recognition, and therefore also its opposite.

As part of this exhibition, the artist created Partial Recall, a slide-show style film of annotated family photographs from her childhood. This glance back through the photo album presents an emotionally invested account of the artist’s early life in her large family home on the edge of Paris, which also housed her parent’s extensive tapestry restoration business. Many of the photos depicting Louise’s teenage years are written over with memories of her father’s affair with her live-in tutor, and the emotions aroused by this psychological complexity. This, and memories of the early death of her mother in 1932, dominate Partial Recall. Curator and Bourgeois archivist Philip Larratt-Smith (1979-) points out that the short biographical narrative Bourgeois created with this work instantly became the “definitive critical lens on her production, [and] advanced the interpretation that supplied critics with a hermeneutic device that was no less aesthetically convenient than ideologically congenial.” It is only with the posthumous archiving of Bourgeois’ more complex psychoanalytic notes that it becomes clear that in her thirty years of analysis, the artist had developed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the emotional conflicts of her adult life and the therapeutic sessions she would keep in place, and in taking control of her biography in this decisive way, and sticking with it in the years after, she both created a ‘congenial hermeneutic device’ of her own design, and deflected art historical interest from her more complex adult life, the one she shared with her family, colleagues, and friends. The title of Partial Recall always acknowledged the unconscious discriminations of memory, and in placing her story in the MOMA show, the artist’s use of her past as a tool of practice. That this psychological ‘readymade’ is still so securely in place as a codebook to her work is an unfortunate short-circuit, but perhaps also a reflection on just how disturbing it might otherwise be.

**Surrealist Roots**

An interest in the psychologistic testing can be traced back to the work Bourgeois sought out as a young artist. In 1936, she was living above the Gravida Gallery in Paris, the Surrealist epicentre run by André Breton (1896–1966). By this time, the work of Freud was being widely read, and the automatic drawing techniques of Spiritualist artists were being explored by a new generation for whom a psychoanalytic lens did away with the externalizing logic of religion. The Surrealists could fully claim their experiments as their own. In Fantastic Reality, Bourgeois scholar Mignon Nixon (1962–) traces how the artist tried to engage with this group, as part of a wider interest in French Modernism that also led to a trip to Moscow to meet the Constructivists in 1934, and study with Ferdinand Leger in 1938. The Surrealists were looking for ways to contact the force of their unconscious desires, seeing this energy as having direct political potential as a destabilizing instrument. Bourgeois approached Breton to be a pupil in his studio, but was rejected, and would never engage with the publicly revolutionary impulse of this group. Later in life, she found her own way to explore ‘dream work,’ through psychoanalysis and the extensive diaries and notes she kept, which often wove in word associations and semi-automatic drawing elements. In Thirties Paris however, rejected by Breton, she re-directed her artistic interest towards the formal abstractions of Modernism, and moved on from her erausure as a potential Surrealist. In 1938, she met, married, and moved to New York with American art historian Robert Goldwater (1907–1973), and she would live there until her death in 2010.

With the value of hindsight Bourgeois was able to distance herself from this rejection. Breton had arrived in New York only a year after she had, one of many fleeing the war, and although she was finding a place in the New York art scene, she was aware that these émigrés brought the power dynamics of the old world with them. In a 1994 interview she said that “although I was now close to them, I objected to them violently. They were so lordly and powerful. As an older woman she could see how hopelessly prejudiced Breton and his group had been against the possibility of female creativity, but she retained her interest in what such a take on Freud might have to offer, if its artists weren’t so deeply attached to their misogyny.” She had been denied access to the Surrealist fold, but the goals of the movement were in any case fundamentally problematic for women. In The Interpretation of Dreams, painted in 1938, Bourgeois had written dreams as disguises for thoughts and desires that exceed acceptable social norms. These forbidden wishes, along with difficult past experiences, are revisited in the psychic world of dreaming, but also distorted by internal censorship mechanisms that avoid direct contact with elements occupying the realms of trauma and taboo. Freud understood the dream, along with the slip of the tongue and inadvertent body movements, to be important decompressions of such unconscious material, and so was interested in hysteria as a possible gateway state between the rational and unconscious mind. He also wrote about the sublimation of such material into the non-linguistic space of art. Freud believed repressed material, driven by the unconscious forces of our desire, contained a charge of energy. This he found important to control, but under no circumstances to release, as a potentially revolutionary force. The goal of their dream work and automatic writing sessions was, in Breton’s
words, the ‘re-creation of a state of mind which can be fairly compared to that of madness.’ 332 This journey into a state of furor 333 also revealed the idealizations within which this male desire slid however, and Nixon points out that the hysterical position Surrealism celebrates—marked by passivity, fragmentation and helplessness—holds the danger for a ‘woman artist’ of being confused with feminity itself. It is one thing to identify, as an artist, with the hysteria of the other, as the male surrealists did: to turn hysterical might feel exciting or terrifying, liberating or rebellious. It is something else to lay claim, as a ‘woman artist,’ to the hysteria that is culturally synonymous with being a woman. 334

It seems likely that Hilma af Klint and The Five had already worked out that there was a social problem with women ‘letting go,’ when they chose to form a women-only séance group, and the silent vivacity of the notebook may only ever have had an audience of one, or two. Louise Bourgeois found her own way to engage with this potential force through her reading of Melanie Klein (1882–1960).

In 1951 the artist entered psychoanalysis, and began a serious study of its literature. 335 Her diaries reveal a developing interest in the work of pioneering child analyst Melanie Klein, along with other theorists, throughout the 1960’s and beyond. 336 and her veriginous descent [...] into the forbidden zone 337 of Breton was not one focussed on hysterical jouissance, but on its lack. When in 1994 she remarked that “My work is not about sex, it is about its absence,” 338 this would not have been a lightly placed comment. Klein had developed an alternative psychoanalytic position to Freud, one that moved the analytic focus away from Freud’s concentration on the libido—what can a person or society recognise about their own destructive tendencies? 339 Open aggression is not part of what is culturally synonymous with being a woman, and cannot be assimilated into the Surrealist idea of transgressive liberation within hysteria. Klein’s emphasis on the negative impacts of aggression and destructiveness therefore open the male-orientated thinking of Surrealism to a Feminist perspective on transgressing.

In The Sublime Jealousy of Louise Bourgeois, Juliet Mitchell (1940–) suggests that, in the artist’s work as an analysand, Bourgeois came to realise that her feelings of aggression, her rage and jealousy—her hysteria—might be a force she could usefully re-direct into her artwork. 339 This reformulation of the cultural understanding of hysteria, through Klein’s exploration of aggression, allows women to explore formlessness, and the energy held within loss of control, in relation to the real cultural transgression for a woman, an allowance of her aggressive impulses. Bourgeois has recounted that

Once we were sitting at a table. I took white bread, mixed it with spit, and moulded a figure of my father. When the figure was done, I started cutting off the limbs with a knife. I see this as my first sculptural solution. 341

A note-to-self from 1964 is even more direct: “I have the missing link.” 342 The absolute social taboo on such a ‘missing link’ to female creativity is a point Juliet Mitchell specifically makes, when she notes “that women’s hysterical violence is pathologized where men’s is legitimated may be a major factor in the overdetermined world-historical absence of women artists.” 343 Transforming anger and pain into an art practice was the revolutionary work that Bourgeois took on, and share her success with the Cells that she hoped “to give meaning to pain and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal abstract shape.” 344 She worked to share, to give cultural voice to her experience of life, as a woman. She also sought out the unknowable roots of this experience in the complex relationships between the Cells, writing that “The Cells either attract or repulse each other. There is this urge to integrate, merge, or disintegrate.” 345 This is the artist’s interest in the fragmentation and helplessness of hysteria, articulated as a product of pain and absence. This gap where something might have been is pointing to a ghost space, to something that cannot directly be articulated, but relates to the pain.

Cages

Cell, Eyes and Mirrors, 1989–1993 is one of the first works in the cycle. Its ‘room’ is constructed out of salvaged wire mesh fencing on front, back, and top, with old window frames at each side. The interior space is closed off but visually permeable, as ‘each Cell deals with the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at. 346 The objects inside this frame are dominated by a large mirror, which is divided into two sections of industrial H-beam. The front face of the marble is polished flat and angled up to the front. Within two smooth circular cavities sit two shiny marble orbs—eye balls in their sockets. Directly above these ‘eyes,’ a large circular mirror is attached to a cut-out section of the wire mesh roof. This portal is swivelled to reflect the orbs towards a front-view mirror.

Flattened and unified into an image by the mirror, and placed at the apex of the work, this cut-out reflection becomes more of a face than the stone below, which in this relationship becomes a lower body, balls in a sack, the balls of Fillette, 347 but also ovaes, stripped of their body. Both upper and lower orbs stare forwards, one down, one up, encasing us in a look made of stone. The roof mirror is hinged so it might swivel, and when seen as part of the vertical body created by both it and the stone below, it brings to mind the French miroir a psyché. This nineteenth century dressing mirror, seen here in a painting by Berthe Morisot (1841–1895), was a common household item.

331 André Breton’s Second Manifesto of Surrealism, (1930) quoted in Soulkowska, op. cit., p. 7.
333 Nixon, op. cit., p. 32.
334 The egoistic initially was Leonard Cumber, changing to Henry Lowenfeld in 1952, whom she visited on and off until her death in 1985. Lowenfeld was born in Vienna in 1900 and had been a student of Freud.
335 The first mention of Melanie Klein in the published diaries is LB-0401, February 21, 1965. There are many subsequent references.
338 Melanie Klein, The Psycho-Analysis of Children, trans. Alex Dworkin, Grove Press, New York, 1946 (1921), focuses on the death drive and the aggressive instinct in children. Her work historically redirects the psychanalytic focus away from the primacy of the Oedipal conflict, and towards the role of maternal relationships in the formation of self. This emphasis on maternal anxiety has been critiqued, in a similar way to the objections to Klein in the published diaries.
339 In 1991 the artist entered psychoanalysis, and began a serious study of its literature.
340 The Easton Foundation archive. LB-0381, November 9, 1965. “My work must represent an expression of anger/rage because when I stop I strike at my family.”
The largest of the mirrors that surround the stone further underlines this connection. It is one of six placed around the central body parts. They are all on stands, and either highlight areas of the work we would not otherwise see, or reflect each other. Their stands are industrial steel however, not gently gleaming wood. There is no boudoir here, no pleasurable aspect to this site of body discipline, and our looking quickly becomes entangled in the mirrors’ crossing reflections, as they disorganise our over-view of the space. Our expectation of a single, controlling viewpoint is disrupted by the simultaneous presentation of the back, the top, the area below. These mirrors fill the space around the marble and are supplemented by two small wing mirrors soldered onto the back fence. These are attached as if they were last-minute additions to some panoptic need to see into every possible corner, but the prying vision they press home does not enhance our panoptic viewing pleasure at all. These multiple viewpoints only create a fracturing optical dissonance and, despite an apparent abundance of visibility, we still have to pace the perimeter of the cage to see what is inside, in a choreography of looking through holes in the fence or clear patches in dirty windows, only ever seeing a part, as we catch sight of ourselves in our spying.

Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (You better Grow Up)*, 1993; *In and Out*, 1995; *Cell (Choisy Two)*, 1995; *The Runner*, 1999; *Cell IX*, 2000; *I do, I redo both 1999*, *Cell XV (For Turner)*, 2000; *Cell XXVII*, 2003 all employ similar large swivelling mirrors in the walls. It is a key motif.

Cell, *Eyes and Mirrors* is a symphony of cuts, a violence that reappears throughout the cycle, whether it is into fabric or marble, revealed as a pile of stripped bones in *Passage Dangereux* (1997), or by a prosthetic leg in *Couple* (1993), or, in *In and Out*, 1995, meat grinders built into the walls. Our viewpoints are also cut, by obstructing cages and mirrors that chop up internal unity, creating the views that paste us also into the interior. In *Cell, Eyes and Mirrors*, hacked marble sits on sliced H-beams, while its mirrored face above moves as we move, its now oblique look cutting into our sense of perception itself. These continual impediments to clear vision are what
trigger our desire to see more or better, and tinge our experience with its transgressive, voyeuristic edge.

We peep into this artist’s room through salvaged fencing and window frames that are claggy with dirt; humanised by dirt that we almost touch, as it is the outmost shell, and we go close, the easier to see. This awareness of dirt evokes an abject connection with our own skin, a little shock of repulsion. This is an energy from the work that opens the cage to being experienced as a form of body, and the voyeurism of looking in through the skin of a visually penetrable subject, experienced in full knowledge we are looking at an object, is rammed home.

Bourgeois grew up with caged animals in her childhood garden. When the artist’s father came back from World War One he began to collect farm animals, and kept them in the grounds of the house in Antony. The temporary enclosures of animal pens shiver through all the salvage material Cells—old doors, mismatched bits of wall, and mesh fencing, spaces of both refuge and entrapment. When she writes in her diary that every day brought its wound and I carried my wounds ceaselessly, without remission, like a hide perforated beyond hope of repair, the artist writes of her body as animal, and as visually opened up by pain. As the domestic woman/house analogy runs all through the artist’s practice, the walls of Cell, Eyes and Mirrors easily become such a perforated hide, and we are invited to look through holes in this body’s unity. These ‘wounds’ of surface allow us optical access to interior forms, and conceptual access to their interpretation as aspects of a psychic body. If the suggestion of mapping in The Ten Largest evokes a place of the imaginaries. The ever contain are either as invisible as air, or those of our own dissonant experience of its lack. In Cell, Eyes and Mirrors, the multiples ‘psyches’ that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths’ and their merger with our blood and guts. Voided of such physical weight, the vials lift upwards on industrial steel trees, but the sparkling aesthetic pleasures of this are in tense dialogue with their bottom-less malfunction. The bed, the place of dreams that the trees surround, has a drain built into the metal base board. Like the dirty walls of the previous Cell, the drain, once noticed, provokes an involuntary step back. The body as blood and guts rushes back, as this site of rest and refuge repulses us with this detail. Nothing good comes from a bed with a drain.

The space of all these tense oppositions is intimately lit by an alabaster sculpture that sits on the floor facing the bed. This smoothly carved double curve glows from an internal light source; it has been lit up. The natural beauty of its alabaster, wood, fabric, metal and glass, collection of The Pompidou Centre, Paris.

Precious Liquids (1992) is one of the few Cells created out of a single found room, the solid wooden walls of a Brooklyn water tower. We can only peek in through a small door cut into the side of this space, which we are invited to walk through. Once inside, ancient alchemists seem to seep from a dingy interior dominated by trees of glass vessels guarding a bed. An ambiguously gendered change of black clothes hangs on the wall above two huge black balls, a mnemonic of Cell, Eyes and

Mirrors. The laboratory-like glass vials are either sealed spheres or open bottomed, so the only precious liquids they could ever contain are either as invisible as air, or those of our own imaginations. These invisible ‘precious liquids’ rising up through the water tower seem to stand in for our own physical interiorities, in the forms ‘that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths’ and their merger with our blood and guts. Voided of such physical weight, the vials lift upwards on industrial steel trees, but the sparkling aesthetic pleasures of this are in tense dialogue with their bottom-less malfunction. The bed, the place of dreams that the trees surround, has a drain built into the metal base board. Like the dirty walls of the previous Cell, the drain, once noticed, provokes an involuntary step back. The body as blood and guts rushes back, as this site of rest and refuge repulses us with this detail. Nothing good comes from a bed with a drain.

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We have walked into this space through a small door but there is not much space, and as the interior objects repel and attract, we are made uncomfortably aware of our own presence, as we take on the tension of vessels that cannot contain, and a bed with a drain. Rest or torture, orgasm or death, container/uncontainable, there is no symbolic resolution here, only the dissonant experience of its lack. In Cell, Eyes and Mirrors, we
are similarly destabilized by the lack of panoptic ‘master’ narrative, and both Cells present a stage for a vulnerable, unclothed body, seeing and feeling. The only one present is our own. Both works nudge us towards a claustrophobic sensation linked to loss of meaning, and the experience of a psychic zoo whose cages are impossible to get clear in our minds. The mutability with which we experience the attracting force of desire, and aggression, in repulsion and the thwarting of vision, is disorientating, producing cuts in thought as visual tensions become difficult to ‘compute.’ These dissonant breaks bring forth hysteria as a subject, but one tied to fear, not desire, to the aggressive face of disfunction, to anger at our lack of ‘understanding’ only partly readable objects. When this happens, the Cells begin to move us towards the place where processing fails. Sensing remains — I don’t know but want to keep looking — as an excess that cannot be fully resolved in language. This nudge us towards the destabilizing acknowledgement that, in relation to our own unconscious, none of us are master in our house. The sense of entrapment within what we ourselves seem to compel, in our choosing to look, is the movement towards the urge to ‘integrate, merge, or disintegrate,’ with which Bourgeois describes the cycle. This movement is the helpless dissolution or fragmentation of hysteria, but brought about through fearful confusion rather than ecstatic abandon.

The Portrait Cells

The narrative Bourgeois sought to create with Partial Recall circled around an Oedipal drama, but archivist Philip Larratt-Smith suggests this may have covered a deeper wound. In 1915, when the artist was four, her father was injured in the first world war, and sent to a hospital in Chartres. Louise and her mother travelled to the hospital so her mother could help look after her husband. In a diary entry from 1959, the artist writes “keep me in the dark, in the closet at Chartres – prevent me from seeing.” The artist was apparently locked in a cupboard so she would not see the worst horrors of the hospital, but she would inevitably have encountered damaged bodies with missing limbs, faces destroyed by mustard gas, dirty metal beds, stained linens, and broken minds. These were the artist’s reality between the ages of four and seven and must have a ricocheting encounter with the real. Exposure was controlled using a cell, seeing and not seeing two parallel forms of violence. Traces of this early horror, mingled into the power dynamics of adult sexuality, run throughout the Cells, but perhaps most directly in the soft, vulnerable materials of the eyeless, guillotined heads of the Portraits.

Created between 2000–2005, the Portrait Cells are an important sub-series within the cycle. These cages are purpose-built glass vitrines with only traces of salvaged fencing, and they are the...
abattoir of the cycle. Hand sewn patchwork fabric heads and limbless cloth bodies are placed in riveted metal cases that confuse scientific isolation tanks with museum vitrines. They are stripped of individualizing detail and function more as, in the words of Julienne Lorz, ‘placeholders for elemental human feelings [...] portraits of emotional states.’354 Some of the heads bear a striking resemblance to those in the observational studies Théodore Gericault (1791–1824) made in preparation for painting The Raft of the Medusa in 1818. Such a link to the history of French Modernism is further underlined by Bourgeois’ repeated use of its essential motif, the guillotine, in several other Cells, notably Cell (Choisy), 1990–1993. The guillotine, and its immense role within the French cultural imaginary, perfectly embodies the amalgamation of violence and desire that is revolution as the ecstatic dimension of death. Guillotined bodies and heads reappear across the Cell cycle, the separation of mind from body a key and repeated mutilation, ecstatically let loose in Cell, Arch of Hysteria (1993). The guillotined or ripped off heads in the Portrait Cells look either flayed or burnt, human life made meat and isolated from the absent bodies suggested by the clothes, furniture, and prosthetic extensions of the salvage Cells. The social skin of clothes has only been incorporated however, not removed. The heads are often sewn, or sutured together, from the sort of cloth we place next to our skins, or from bed ticking, or most abjectly, towels. They present the convulsed remnants from all that social salvage, placeholders for that which could not find its place in the representational ‘screen’ of the more complexly discursive Cells. Social constructions are flayed remains here, and they bear ‘the marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze.’355

Paulo Herkenhoff (1949–) describes Precious Liquids as an immersive theatre of experience, and finds a resonance of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) and The Theatre of Cruelty within it. While we cannot walk into, immerse ourselves, in any of the Portrait Cells, Artaud’s belief that theatre should confront the spectator with truthful precipitates of dreams, in his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, his utopian sense of life and of things, even his cannibalism, poured out on a level that is not counterfeit and illusory but internal”356 still resonates.357 I have already explored how walking into Precious Liquids opens us to our feelings of aggression and desire, and Artaud’s manifesto goes on to state that “the theatre, like dreams, is bloody and inhuman.” Blood and dehumanisation merge in the screaming, blinded heads of the Portraits, as eye sockets of soft pink corduroy or towelling are punctured and closed by sewing threads and stuffed tongues push out. Artaud rejected the logical narratives of European theatre as too safe, and his theatre of cruelty included the audience in its space,
and made performing hieroglyphs of its actors. He was influenced by Balinese dance, but also by the glossolalia he experienced when in the grip of his extreme schizophrenia. The magnetic removal of analytic distance was part of his aim, and this is also realised in any felt engagement with the Cells. Their part bodies, whether depicted, or suggested by a bed, a set of clothes, a pile of remains, also perform a dual hieroglyphic role. They are readable, but they also suggest narratives that never fully form, and this theatrical image excess stages a voyeuristic encounter that draws out attraction along with a wave of repulsion. Body identifications are created with controlled viewpoints, symbolic tensions, and material illogic, and they all seek out Artaud’s desired rupture of the safe space of logical representation. We are the missing body in Bourgeois’ para-domestic stage sets, and with this imaginative movement, the Cells also become not ‘illusory but internal.’

Still Lives

With the Cells we experience an artist conducting an alchemical symphony of physical forces around our viewer experience, as we are ensnared by the work, back into ourselves. The flayed heads of the Portrait Cells are the tortured shock troops of the cycle. Their flayed and encased forms literally work through the poetic doubling of being ‘skinned alive’ of Peggy Phelan.

Endless looking for an interior beneath the surface of the bodies and images with which we are forever ensnared is the catastrophe of living (in)skin. Skinned alive, our bodies are sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.

To look for things that cannot be seen. The impossible double vessel, flayed and encased, is key to all the Cells however. Bourgeois wrote that ‘what happens to my body has to be given a formal abstract shape.’ Bourgeois’ working method was her own take on the Parisian Surrealism of her youth, bent through years of personal investment into one that would serve her own, different, goals. With the Cells, she takes on the domestic room and its objects, and sets them up as a still life. Salvaged architecture brings references to the social body, to work places, water supply, or with a disused electric chair (Passage Dangereux, 1997). These specificities ground the work in the artist’s life in New York: a particular subjectivity, working in a particular time and place, but in their social connections they also tie the work to what Judith Butler would call the “vectors of power and of history.” This ‘skin of the social’ is then filled with clothes and props and perfume bottles, the intimate surfaces cloaking the private self. These choices appear to be steeped in personal significance, and if anyone doubted this, there is Partial Recall. These are domestic rooms, the site of a millennia of women’s unwritten histories, but they are also hers. Personal attachment becomes an aesthetic energy, doubling

Jean-François Jaussaud, Louise Bourgeois’ Chelsea apartment.  
The cast-iron lamp base and perforated metal table are both resonant of forms and materials that run throughout the Cells.  
Source: hyperallergic.com, see link 36 for the full address.  
Archived 23.03.2019
her still life set-up into a skin and its organs. As viewers, we are invited in, with our bodies or our eyes. Our ‘perspective’ is then from within these bodies, skinned alive. A life made objects, an ‘objectified life’ is returned to us. There is still no direct representation of a person, but this absence is now present. This inside out body is the artist’s ‘formal abstract shape’ for what happens to the body, the precarious ghosts of interior drama.

The used, personal, objects Bourgeois chose were similar to those reworked by the notebook artist and AF Klint. Logs, bonnets, and maps were objects these artists could reach out and touch. When curator Marie-Ève Lafontaine visited Bourgeois’ former home, she found it an eye-opening experience to see first-hand how different elements of the house’s interior were carried over into her artwork. In the Cell series, for example, the perforated metal which she uses for the walls of the enclosure is the exact same metal gating which can be found separating the different workspaces in her basement. 361

By the time she was working on the Cells, Bourgeois’ home was completely doubling up as her workspace, but it was also full of a lifetime of her things. She was a collector. The old Shalimar bottles in Cell II (1991) were her own, and when she needed clothes for other Cells, she was able to unpack her mother’s, who had died in France in 1932. Freud was also a collector. He famously collected small antiquities, the compacted material carriers of society’s oldest stories, but he was really a collector of other sorts of objects, the dreams and language slips of the unconscious. John Forrester (1949–) 362 makes the point that it was the collection and study of these cultural products, our usually discarded human ticks, that became psychoanalysis, and he reminds us that Freud’s thinking grew out of the analytic mind-set of nineteenth century natural sciences, redirected towards the invisible realms of the person and their intimate habits. In her own visual way, the notebook artist also took up the mind-set of her time and re-directed it, and when Bourgeois pools the amulets of her past into her work, she is aiming for a similar movement. The rooms of the artist’s actual basement become the structuring device into which she could pour her life’s experiences of the external one, beginning with a mother’s wounds that ‘every day brought’ and which were ‘carried ceaselessly.’ The ambiguous psychological ‘room’ of a psychoanalysis, where inner and outer worlds swim together in the transference, is a way to understand this movement, but it is effected with formal terms, within the work. This is not a form of spatially readable autobiography however. All this used, salvaged, lived material is held together by newly made forms and connectors, chiselled marble, blown glass. The fingers that reached out to touch, also made new. Dionea Rocha Watt (1969–) writes of Bourgeois as a ‘poet of touch’ 363 and it runs through her work as an underlying subject. Her richly considered surfaces compel us to think of our own touching, our skins from the inside rather than as an optical experience. We are redirected towards sensing, towards what we feel. Maria Lassnig’s ‘body-awareness’ paintings seek to directly visualize this dialogue between internal sensing and the image in the external form, but with the Cells, image-less interiority finds external form in what the finger tips reach out to.

Melanie Klein often used artistic metaphors to describe the ways children build their inner worlds, their subjectivities, from their experiences of the external one, beginning with a mother’s body, and an experience of bits and pieces. This was linked to her development of play techniques for the psychoanalysis of children, the ways drawing and making could help children to nurture and express their inner repairs, through the psychoanalytic process, of marks and scars left by deadening engagements with the world. 365 Real reparation happens at the level of wounds we do not know we have, and the somatic work of aesthetic experience, for both maker and viewer, allows for movements outside of language and ordered thought. As we know when we cry, confusingly, in front of artworks. 366

We have been ‘touched.’ Bourgeois’ insistence on the primacy of such sensing and aesthetic excess, is noted by Meg Harris Williams (1951–).

Louise Bourgeois stresses that it is not just the artist but the viewer who must work unconsciously. Her work is not ‘literal’ but ‘suggestive’ and if the viewer does not recognise this, he ‘cancels himself out of the game’ and the purpose of art is made redundant. The game is one in which meaning is revealed rather than imposed. 366

The Cells drag our embodied experience into the ‘game.’ In being held by them we come closer to our own surfaces, touch the ghosts of our own loving, and our own dying. Freud wrote of the appearance of an art object from the complex strands of the unconscious as surfacing ‘like a mushroom out of its mycelium.’ 367 The abundance of personal history that the Cells incorporate freely reveals itself, but, like those of the mushroom, they are impossible to individually trace. They are there as suggestive objects both physical and inner, the ghosts of Juliet Mitchell, is grasped “from the repressed in which her individual history is but one instance of what we all share, she must force [it] into the art object where we can understand it.” 368

Bourgeois’ notes often reference repair, and the work is full of it. 369 It is possible that the theory was doubly resonant because of her family’s history as tapestry restorers. Her childhood was filled with the repair of old fabrics covered in pictures of imaginary worlds, and her teenage role in this was to redraw the feet and legs of the people and animals, to metaphorically make...
them walk again. Later connections with Kleinian reparation must have come thick and fast. In the Cells, the open weave of tapestry canvas is re-imagined in three dimensions with wire mesh and window frames, which sometimes also contain salvaged tapestry fragments, restored to a new artistic role. Instead of sewing erased bodies back into a picture, Bourgeois has sewn their remains into three-dimensional ‘still lives,’ and the needle repeatedly penetrating the canvas grid to complete the picture is replaced by our optical penetration. In a note about a dream, the artist wrote

All of a sudden, a person [...] asks do you know what a symbol is— it is something that pretends to be something else. You know this woman that you call your mother— she really is ‘Death’ her body is like a wicker basket underneath her dress.  

This is the canvas and wool of tapestry become a three-dimensional image and invested with the psychic pressure of a loved one’s body. In the dream, a mortal and a sculptural body have become interchangeable in a description which, thirty years later, the artist would begin making into the Cells. Her mother’s body, now without organs, is a direct connection back to Artaud, and to a ritualised and reparative drawing practice that both artists shared. Bourgeois would often draw during the night when she couldn’t sleep, and for Artaud, a sheet of paper could be a stand-in body for his own human one, which, because of his schizophrenia, he found to be a prison. Ursula Szulakowska writes that Artaud found his own body to be an illusion that held entrapped within itself another more ‘real’ body which was both physical and somatic. He termed this entity ‘the body without organs.’ It was a symbol of the liberated human psyche and was to be found through drawing. He would first outline an image of the representable body, the one with organs, and then aggressively draw over this, in hybrids of scribble-images and words. The tension between these visual elements, which did not make up a narratable, logical whole, was intended as an affective presentation of his re-designed bodily experience, one that he carried into the theatre of cruelty with his hieroglyphic performers. Artaud’s ‘body without organs’ was a wishful aesthetic one to replace the organic one which gave him so much pain. Bourgeois’ bodies without organs, the Cells, re-visit her pain as an energy.

Bourgeois’ re-visititation of hysterical fragmentation, re-articulated through aggression into a feminist enquiry, allowed her to take the aesthetic space she needed to create a new stand-in for the body. Using the mirrors called psyche, she not only fragmented its form, but kaleidoscoped it into a multiplying vision of and into the room. This doubling of the historically gendered domestic space with a woman’s inner life places this body in time. These rooms, or cells, become perforated, wounded bodies that only partially clothe their vulnerable inner treasures, and set up a difficult viewer engagement that heightens our awareness of our looking, our guilt in wanting to look. The flow of this sensed engagement between viewer and work is one the artist meditated on in her own ritualised drawing of spirals, a form that both expands outwards from a centre, and curls inward, a movement the artist compared to our connection with the world.

You can expand outwards, because the present is unbearable [...] But if you go outward and there is no limit [...] you can go crazy [...] If you go inward, you will wind tighter, like the spring of a watch. This is dangerous because you can get twisted, strangled by your emotions [...] you can snap, or you can throw up!  

With the Cells, the tightening and unravelling of spiralling becomes the invisible flows of viewer attraction and repulsion, and their thinking through the various times of the Cells. Mirrors and hidden parts move us to a voyeuristic experience of looking, difficult symbolic and aesthetic tensions confuse calm reading, and the viewing experience is nudged towards a mirroring of the fragmentation and dissolution we thought we were only going to look at. If we are prepared to engage with Bourgeois’ ‘game’ then a spiralling sense of immersion makes these more than ‘still lives.’ Bourgeois was clearly haunted by her past, and situated her work within an emotively drawn autobiography, but this mycelium is not the narrative of the work itself. She used her past as a tool of practice, as her ghosts retained the capacity to agitate her, to bring to a state of ‘furor’ all through her life. Within the spiralling returns of analysis and a daily studio practice, she ‘turned’ the energy of this from a passively held weight into an active creative force.

The image inserted here in the printed thesis is not available in the digital thesis.
The Cells function as crypts for a layered past marked by the dirt of age, but these sites of mourning over a personal history we can never know, also contain new, unknown forms, strange glass and rubber evacuations. The tension of these material combinations provokes us to awareness of our own desire to touch, our awareness of others touching, of our own skins from the inside and out, realised through desire tinged with aggression. As our own ghosts mingle into the work, a dance begins to happen. The ghosts of a woman’s life, re-directed through the artwork and its perforated ‘skin’ merge with our own scarred and marked interior histories. Recognition, at a level past cool analysis, turns harsh experiences into agents of possible change, and the idiocy of Agamben’s individual bios is transformed into the potential of shared space within the zoë of the public.
Who was the ghost artist? Who is she today? This study has presented a conceptual figurine whom I argue has danced her way, unnoticed, through art history. A figure taken up by women artists who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. A figure who has found fantasised forms of portrayal to step into, and whose aesthetic vitality thrums within the skins of these self-knowing stand-ins. A figure I have found within the logs, maps, embroideries, mirrors, and windows re-presented by artists working across three centuries.

The stand-ins that the anonymous notebook artist, Hilma af Klint, and Louise Bourgeois chose as holders of this figure, all came from objects close to their own bodies, ones they experienced regularly from the sensing side of their skins. And the aesthetic bodies they produced from meditative study of these objects all took serial forms. Making still objects function through time in this way obliges us as viewers to dance with the figurine in order to see her, and to use both memory and imagination in this visualisation of a non-naturalistic body, revealed as parts. The way each artist immersed this spectral idea of embodiment, of figures on the edge of vision, within what we could, expansively, call the representational stage of the still life, is a sort of ‘natural magic’ that reconfigures the body as a thing, and returns it as a situation in time. The dance of viewing builds towards a portrait of the vitality that animates all our skins; of the pulse within. Tracing this dance has required new research routes into both the notebook and the work of Hilma af Klint. These have utilized contemporary psychoanalytic concepts familiar to studies of the work of Bourgeois, but not to that of these earlier painters. Unfurling these ideas backwards in time has framed the notebook as the anonymous record of an older woman negotiating picture-making in an attempt to make sense of her inner world, and my writing has stepped
with her as she painted a new sort of body, one that might hold her subjective experience, an imago she was unlikely to have found within the image world around her. This art historical lack has left that painted body unrecognised until now, but once seen, it is as blurrily insistent, beneath its religious and alchemical masks, as the one beneath Cindy Sherman’s masquerades.

It is a body that entered representation as a log floating in space, a choice that takes on the specular body, pulls it apart, and returns it as willed and speculative. The conceptual figure that makes this possible takes on the ghostly blank that the artist’s mimetic self-portrayal would have presented to the world, and forcefully returns this as a body self-consciously insisting on a new form of presence, which both registers, and rejects, its cultural erasure. This feminist de-scripting of a received world-view belongs, amazingly, to the eighteenth century, but the ghostly figurine supporting it also flits through Af Klint’s Temple cycle and Bourgeois’ Cells. These are also serial bodies of work that displace self-portraiture, and return its potential for self-alienation—the realisation of one’s object status in the eyes of others—within works that steep the artist’s subjectivity within the ‘skins’ of domestic objects, and so take on the silencing power of objectification.

She clicked and rose from the desk, concentration falling off like cold river water as she broke surface into the early evening sun. Her muscles delighted in its warmth, and her face re-mobilized out of its working rigor mortis. Bailing to the big back windows, she looked out at massing clouds. She thought of her mother as she watched a lavender cumulus build high over the treetops. It seemed to be coming off the sea, and was rolling slowly up and right, along the coast. Lower and faster, on some local wind, a grande dame of cloudy sails was speeding the other way, head up and oars out, trailed by wispily outliers that were buried by an up-draught into sharp birds clawing home to their night time.

She poured a glass of wine from the bottle in the kitchen and went back to the window. The low clouds had become pale grey against the now inky darkness of the cumulus, and the sailing ship had become a lunatic head tossed upwards, and cackling at the end of the light.
At around the same time as the notebook was being painted, and the gentlemen scholars of Europe were collecting and classifying their Enlightenment world, the Emperor of China was also busy cataloguing. In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, historian Neil McGregor (1946–) recounts what happened when this Emperor came across an object he could not define. He was struggling to locate the history of an ancient jade ring, *or bi*, and in attempting to classify it, he compared it to other, similar, objects, collected what historical traces he could find, and admired its aesthetic achievements. However, he remained baffled as to the ring’s actual use, and so he wrote a poem about its speculations, and had it carved into the back way, it was such a touch that sparked his interest. During writes that he also admired the emperor’s method because

thinking about the past [...] through things is always about poetic re-creation. We acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty, and must then find a different kind of knowing, aware that objects have been made by people essentially like us. 274

Honouring the necessity of informed speculation lies at the heart of The Ghost Artist. And while I am not convinced that the subjectivity of a Chinese Emperor is ‘essentially like’ mine, historical lack has also led me to compare my objects to other works, collect what historical traces I could find, admire aesthetic achievements, and then make things up. Unlike the empirical bodies of the objects themselves, but like him, I have also sought to inscribe more than ‘cold knowledge’ of the scanty facts. I have sought to nudge the prism of these facts, to see what new rainbows might appear with a slightly different angle of light.

To do this, I have written a lot about tiny flicks of a brush, the spreading of mute blotches of colour, surfaces worked and scrubbed. These processes are not much like the process of writing about them however, and when I came to make my own paintings, *my* material thinking, such marks went up my arms and all over the floor. The results are the visual lacunae that have offered resting places within this narrative, taken from the serial bodies of The Ice Cream Paintings (2008–2016) and D.I.Y. (2014 to present). These paintings were made as life coagulated on me along with my paint, and built up as wrinkles, memories, and the twitchy scabs that irritate well-planned intellectual intentions. Slippery paint is a constant reminder of the unknowable qualities that are also held within completed artworks. This mute quality of the visual, the part beyond analysis, was known by those who made Emblem books, and has pressed through every aspect of The Ghost Artist, as it takes on marginalised lives and unrecorded histories. My initial glimpse of the historical body of a woman artist, a presence marked only by its absence, led me into a spectral world of women’s stories, and to summon its invisible bodies, I have had to look in black mirrors as well as books. Irrational joys and anxieties have undoubtedly seeped into the process, but believing that these historical figures might be ‘essentially like’ me, I have mingled written history with my own experience and imagination, and sought to cast new light on these bodies without organs, as a salute to the many bodies with, who sit in the shadows of this tale.

Art works are not lives, but sometimes their wordless presence can help to connect us to our own unspeakable selves. When we are ‘touched’ by a work, we are changed in some incremental way, and it was such a touch that sparked this writing. During a visit to a Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Freud Museum in London, 275 I became stopped while looking into the industrial cage of a Portrait Cell in a small upstairs room of the analyst’s live-work family home. Mesmerised by a blasted lump of sewn serge, I had to strangle the impossible need to put my hand into its dark recess—a hole that spoke to some unknowable part of me. When I finally walked away, it was into a room full of cases displaying the artist’s notes. Rage and fear spilled directly out of every scribbled detail, but not the vital experience of my own life being grabbed and held, and so I returned to woolen cavities, stitched up eyes, and clausrophobic rooms. Downstairs, a marble baboon 276 stared at me, and I left struggling to control both legs and tears. Spiralling out of the encounter came this writer, I did not record these impressions onto lists of the notebook; spirals that have bent and curled through The Ten Largest. They are roads into the vanishing point, or out of it, and they are the routing of our vision into the Cells. They spiral back to a bloody knife on the ground.

The capacity of an art work to hold and share intensity can never be expressed as ‘cold knowledge’ as it is a constantly morphing power that exists between a material object and the evanescent ghosts of all our unknowable interiorities. Recognising this however, brings up the question of whose interiorities are deemed to matter to societies, and where the art might be found that each of us can recognise as our own, and revisit ourselves with. Searching for the seemingly invisible record of older women’s lives, I have made a journey through the notebook, and studied how it performed its work, allowed me to connect it to that of other older women, and find a commonality in their practices. Negotiating this into visibility has meant looking at these better-known works from a different point of view to that already written down. The ghost story that this has created is one that records cultural negotiations of the unknowable qualities that are also held within completed artworks. This mute quality of the visual, the part beyond analysis, was known by those who made Emblem books, and has pressed through every aspect of The Ghost Artist, as it takes on marginalised lives and unrecorded histories. My initial glimpse of the historical body of a woman artist, a presence marked only by its absence, led me into 275


276 This was the Baboon of Thoth, 30 BC – 395 AD. Thoth was the Egyptian god of wisdom and learning. Freud is known to have liked stroking the marble surface of this object, and it sat in a prominent position on his working desk (see the historical photographs in: *Freud’s Sculpture*, published by The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006). I do not know which Cell disturbed me so much. When I searched the catalogue raisonné, the work I remember is nowhere to be found.
focussed on art that resists and returns this dehumanisation, and I have found it in older women's art practices. It may be that it takes half a lifetime to find a way to work out, and work with, the rage that all these works, in their different ways, insist on revealing. It may be that this is the raging embrace of the freedom that the invisibility of ageing skin, as the visible erasure of reproductive capacity, also brings.

I have traced this aesthetic act of resistance back through hundreds of years, but *The Ghost Artist* is a project of and for today. As human trafficking moves countless women round the world like cattle, and the 2017 Me Too movement refuses to be silenced, and workplaces in the West continue to support the careers of men over women, as hard-won reproductive rights are eroded, and women of the Global South additionally contend with FGM and female infanticide, I end with Catherine McKinnon’s (1946–) description of what happens when women’s bodies become images for the use of others.

As the human becomes thing and the mutual becomes one-sided and the given becomes stolen and sold, objectification comes to define femininity, and one-sidedness comes to define mutuality, and force comes to define consent as pictures and words become the forms of possession and use through which women are actually possessed and used. Pictures and words matter, and we all need to see our inner ghosts being valued, out there in the world. To this end, I have not focussed on images of objectification itself, but on the ways these women have flayed and returned their objectified bodies, in the notebook, the Temple cycle, and the Cells. It is a gesture I found in the representation of domestic objects touched by the sensing side of the artist's own skin. This sensing, this being alive, is the knowledge that is carried, as aesthetic vitality, in these stand-ins that name the cage and retreat of the home as their site. By imagining body representation differently, by skinning their conceptual bodies alive, and hurling them back through art, they aesthetically insist on life in the raw, but a unified body is never seen. It pulses like a ghost and leaves us to patch our own body image together with our own, viewing, minds; a shared work of spiralling and dancing, forwards, backwards, and around.

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