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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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. Lacan 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 as it forms the condition necessary for empathy and relation to others.

There is a gap between the mirrored image 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 functioning “to establish a relationship between an organism and its world”, and so whether the mirror stage is present or not, society will always provide a mirror, conceptually speaking. This point is underlined by Kaja Silverman when she states that “Lacan speaks as much for our medieval or Renaissance counterparts as for us when he remarks, ‘We are beings who are looked at, in the semantic circle of the world.’”

Lacan’s Other is always a product of a culture. In seeking to define cultural absence, Silverman 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 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 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 within Unmarked with the notion of the after-image. This is the battle that I believe the notebook records, the attempt to define cultural absence by the borrowed terms of absence with which someone bears the ‘marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze’.

The internalised image of perfect whonedom, produced by a dominant gaze that is not that of women by themselves, hurts all women. The marks and scars with which it borders Phelan’s unmarked blank only increase as women age, and take on the emotional ‘impotence’ as we no longer being reproducible. In The Threshold of the Visible World, Silverman explains how, in internalising images of ourselves in the world, we assume “the shape of either a desired representation or one that has come through less happy circumstances to mark the physical body.” This ‘less happy’ shape she sees as a stain of the perfect image, a sort of future ghost, which we try on before we reveal. Lacan in The Four Fundamental Concepts, where he describes a type of crustacean capable of changing colour to hide itself, as taking on a temporary stain as a form of environmental mimicry: “It [the crustacean] becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture.” This metaphor offers us partial masquerading agency in relation to the social field, but it also shows how dependent we are on a priori, primarily pictorial, field, and how, if we fail to find positive images we might assimilate, become part of the larger social picture of, this can result in the painful ‘marks and scars’ of...
The next evening, she pinged with tiredness as she looked for dinner in the supermarket. What she had in the trolley was inconclusive, but it would do. She paid, parked, and pocketed the coin. As she turned into the shopping centre, a wind from outside caught her, and it turned into the shopping centre, a voice enfolded her head, asking whether she was lost. 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 Film 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, glamourous 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 for her surprise at her own mortality. Like the older

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

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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. 204

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, 223 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 nurturing 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. 208

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 into an object into a body composite that extends 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 has become a more complex composite body. It no longer internalises a machine cloak, as the bloody flayed form has gone, and is replaced by an apparition tied to a pair of legs. This fantasy of parts is painfully beautiful, as delicate, light, 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.

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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 her attempt to embrace her renewed objectification 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...
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. 212

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.” 213 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,
It also creates new contexts by virtue of that landing, becoming a part of the very process through which new contexts are delimited and formed. Butler was specifically talking about mass produced images of war and their after-life in culture, but all images have such an uncontrolled after-life one way or another.

The process of fantasy can be the process of changing one's world, a process of re-negotiation with the image world, by making new images out there in culture that might usefully effect new images in there in the Self. If a subject embraces the fantasy of the body in bits and pieces, Sturm suggests that “the body-image of these individuals loses its unified appearance, spills over the borders [...] becomes fictional [...] and performative, through the enactment of a new form of self-seeing.” For Sturm this process involves “expanding the mirror's scope and transmitting its promises to other objects.” Lassnig's dispersed or amalgamated forms stretch and distort the idealized body as they incorporate other objects and perform new pictures of Self experience.

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 [...]
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. 211

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 fabulosity 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.” 22 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 ‘cathedected’ to. 212

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 cathedected objects that are at the time in the process of becoming destroyed because real, becoming real because destroyed. 213

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].” 221

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 ourselves as children 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.” 222

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
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.” 226 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 lives 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 cultural people, mediated by images.” 226 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 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.” 226

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, the 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 Rancière's work, a break with this woman's designated role. She went further however, and imagined a new sort of body with which she could reflect on her subjective experience, an imago she would not have been able to find in the world around her. This early feminist gesture of daring to imagine differently takes on 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.

It requires a viewer to ask the simple question: what is it? And to find that the only answer that has any 'meaning' is the one the viewer finds herself, re-connecting as spectator to her own, freeing, imagination. The works of Debord's spectacle do the opposite, in their attempts to insert themselves before or under the spectator's capacity for creativity under this imagination, tearing the spectator's capacity for creativity away from them, and numbing them with inserted fantasies.

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 spectra 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." 232 It is when we reify our cultural objects that they become fetish objects, and we are rendered dumb by their spectacle. Debord already pointed out in 1967 that tapping into people's fantasies, and then feeding them back as completed spectacles was a way to sublimate the perhaps troublesome needs behind such fantasies, by offering a false, fetishized realisation of them that only seemed to address the need. This is the core work of a great deal of contemporary popular culture. To understand how a fine art object might, despite this overwhelming aesthetic field, offer itself as a nurturing and translators."  

An emancipated community is a community of narrators and
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 the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction 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 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.’ 236 These are the norms that control the frame.

In 2011, design theorist and artist Fiona Jardine (d.o.b. unkown) created the exhibition Troglodytes 237 at Paisley Museum in Scotland. This show highlighted how the frame, or the coming of the image, can alter over time, and questioned normative notions of portrayal as the most effective carriers of a now 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 on noted by Barbara Stafford as coming 238 100 years of the Contemporary Art Society. What’s Next? Inside Public Collections, CT Editions, London, 2011

These ideas had become popularised across Europe via the writings of the Swiss Johann Lavater, Italian Cesare Lombroso, and the English Francis Galton. There is of course also a history of women of all classes being coded by signature. The anonymous notebook is not coded by ‘signature’ as an intervening pre-condition or necessary component, 239 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 its radical presentation of a non-specular body can be further thought through in its relationship to this curatorial experiment.

Jardine selected and hung the portrait paintings according to the length of beard, and neither sitter nor artist were named. Both the portrait and the painting itself therefore suffered a loss of identity. Alongside these was a display of pots, organised according to the famous names of their makers, from Wedgewood to Leach. In an accompanying essay, Jardine describes how the Scottish mercantile class commemorated in her selected paintings would have been the same men ‘of professional and cultural standing’ who may have met in The Troglodyte 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 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, imaging 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, which they also built, as a frame for the portraits. In terms of 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 theories and distorted them to the future, according to their portraits, ‘portraits’ even when marked by signature, but the frame of Modernism, as a ‘vector of power and history,’ and the values governing who could be read as a subject in that time, were more clearly to be seen in the ceramic pots than in the commissioned pictures of now absent body worlds. When reduced to the objectifying trope of beard length, the painted portraits raised only questions as to the efficacy of this sort of depiction as a record of subjectivity, despite the pronounced interest at this time in exactly this belief. A changing interior landscape of thought and belief was more clearly disinfected into the pots, which as body stand-ins, more clearly revealed a changing world for the many, through the ethics revealed by the aesthetic languages. Jardine’s work is of the many 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 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, which they also built, as a frame for the portraits. In terms of 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 theories and distorted them to the future, according to their portraits, deeming certain face and head shapes to reveal a deviant inner mind. 237 This was a powerful idea at the time and Jardine explores how the notion that moral purity was a visible trait was entwined into the early Modernism of thinkers like Adolf Loos (1870-1933), who used such ideas to ground his seminal essay Ornament and Crime. 240 The problem of ‘liying paint’ as one noted by Barbara Stafford as coming 100 years of the Contemporary Art Society. What’s Next? Inside Public Collections, CT Editions, London, 2011

The writer at the party, what had he meant about the academic necessity of the impersonal world-view? As she smoothed the smooth 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 lump-over mind conjured a galloping brain in a tea-pot, a boiling stream of knowledge pouring onto its bloody surface as brown fluid chugged from the spout into a plaid cloth with a map of the world.

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Dawn's early light comes late in December, and the sun was still rising through bare branches as she stood at Sadie's kitchen window and sipped reparative muesli. Her thought caught in its beams. The handsome blonde soldier from her dream was James, the hopeless love of half her life. He had died in the summer and she had not said goodbye. Now he was back; striding confidently into her room; her eyes. She had searched his uniform for white hair. It was there, and he seemed to have held his breath, trying to find it. She had not seen her, but she welcomed him with his eyes. She had not seen the dark-haired man crouched under the tree in front of her either. But the dark-haired man had seen his, and leapt. She was behind the tree and saw only their backs as they fought. Then it was over, and dark-haired man was pulling a blonde severed head over his own like a mask. It was a bad fit; the beautiful face contorted, the cheeks bulged wrongly, and torn human skin hung like steam from the severed neck, but the dark man got up and walked nevertheless, sure that this was enough. It was always enough. She stared as blood rushed and tingled through her. Was she the dark man walking?

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 a “cult of the body double [and that] subject description and body description are by no means synonymous, but they join, in [the portrait] into a tense union.” In Jardine’s objectification of a group of men set in counterpoint to a group of pots, de-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 beads. What remains is their ‘right to portray,’ 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 emblazoned emblazoned. By asserting individual biography only in relation to non-mimetic pots, Troglodytes 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 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 place’ of boa constrictors and elephants, but it has an adult purpose in the way it extends the mirror to other objects.

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 are normally kept out of direct 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 representing potential bodies as ways to think about 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 parts holds the inner space of memory. The notebook belongs to the eighteenth century but the artist who painted it found ways to make a personal 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
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 posseseth 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
Georgiana Houghton’s Spirit Drawings, created through the 1860’s, are a beautiful example of the free expression that could come out of such practices. 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 spectrum 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 joyous 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 serenity can be read as an embodiment of Nordic Romanticism’s wider cultural investment in the psychological qualities of the white light of midsummer, here diffused 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 Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) in 1875, the outcome of years spent researching visionary religious practices in India throughout the 1860’s. Synthesising her wide religious research with the visual interests of socialist artist Annie Besant (1847–1933), in new discoveries related to the visualisation of radio waves and electromagnetism, the two women created an idea of a parallel world, in excess of our vision, an invisible ‘astral plane’ of foundational knowledge, from which all religions of the world had sprung. Through the deep meditation of the séance, combined with a developed understanding of the history of human thought, this astral plane might become directly accessible. It was this deeper understanding of their already existing beliefs that AF Klint and her friends established their closed, women only, séance group to explore. They called themselves both The Friday Group and The Five. In “Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Rudolph Steiner,” Helmut Zander (1957–) points to the intellectual hunger that such Theosophical practices touched upon, relating them to a rapidly expanding world-view that was dislodging the religious assumptions that the power structures and colonies of the West had been built on.

Everything appeared to be just history, where every idea was subject to relativist scrutiny, where [...] no absolute truth existed any longer, where no divine ideas existed independently of history. Theosophists claimed to provide everything, “without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour.” 245 Blavatsky had formulated a syncretic notion of a genderless god, a religious text that existed solely in people’s individual imaginations, and a radical and progressive openness, which, at the same time, held onto familiar concepts of disassociation, or externalisation, of forbidden desires, the psyche working to place challenging thoughts safely in the identity of the Other, in order to give the Self permission to entertain plans and projects that did not easily fit within social norms. Taking such ghostly voices as anything other than such an inner working of the mind is implausible today, but in 1903, AF Klint was merely tuning in to a significant movement of her time, one that attracted intellectual interest across Europe, and sought to deepen religious understanding by relating spiritual experience to new scientific discoveries about light at the invisible ends of the spectrum. This movement was the Theosophical Society.
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 women could only begin to articular these ideas. In the absence of this contemporary viewpoint however, Theosophy became the late nineteenth century’s most fashionable articulation of what is a perennially confusing aspect of being. Trance voices were disavowed and given the role of external forces as the theosophical ghosts of the astral plane. Perhaps embracing this conceptualisation afforded the artist an explanation for internal drives, which, in the ten years leading up to 1906, led to automatic drawings and ideas for strange new paintings so far from her academically trained creativity that they may otherwise have been overwhelmingly confusing. She was also only one of a great many artists, poets, and scientists, who all turned to Theosophy in these closing years of the century, searching for new ways to interpret their internal experience. The movement claimed the interest of Strindberg, Rydberg, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Yeats, Edison, and Ghandi, among many others. It was at root a movement designed by women however, it celebrated their roles as active participants, and offered them independent voices. It is not surprising that so many women flocked to its meetings, Af Klint and her friends among them.

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Hilma af Klint was born in Karlbergs slot on Oct 26, 1862. Her father educated her at home, and she excelled in astronomy and mathematics. (Source: conversation with Johan af Klint, the artist’s great-nephew, January 12, 2019). Triangulation charts may have influenced the many lists in the notebooks, and the complex use of codes to serialise groups of paintings in a specific order of viewing – equations of looking.

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.
the 1980's, 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 stratiﬁcations 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. 261 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 surface marking the 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 underlyng currents that will guide us into our futures. Thinking with this idea of the sea as an oscillating body without form, we can extend a quality 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 implying 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 in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth and stratiﬁed space, the mapped body of the sea becoming an artistic Body without Organs, 262 given form, or social structure, by the painted striations that are conceived in Deleuze and Guattari's terms in order to be made, and the artist had spent the previous ten years developing her capacity to open herself to traces coming from her own unconscious. When she wrote that

The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and [...] I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict. 263 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 Karlsberg 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

The landscapes 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 straights 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, demanded a quite different bodily engagement, and so mind-set, from the artist. 264 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 is a direct and clear revelation of hands at work. The ten largest pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and [...] I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict. 263

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261 Ibid, pp. 474–501
263 February 10, 1908, notebook Häl556, translation by The Hilma of Klint Foundation. This notebook also records that the artist asked others in The Five to work with her on the Temple paintings, but they chose not to.
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 sex. In this 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 real. 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 his metamorphosis.” So to understand the Temple paintings as a cartography of sensed experience opens up a reading full of energy and desire, but also reveals that the female body as ghost, 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 1890’s. After graduation, many took them to the Konstenahuset (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 Idol - an early Feminist group, and from 1910, of the Swedish Women’s Artists association. It also housed Blanche’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 catalysed, 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 socialist 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
Swedish Life Reform saw answers to compelling social problems in a more unified approach to art and life, and sought to re-interpret aesthetic value as an essential everyday experience for all levels of a healthy society. The rapid industrialization led to previously self-sustaining agricultural communities, their traditional communities, and the agrarian cultural traditions they left behind disappearing. Ellen Key sought to unite what she saw as the best practices of both worlds, re-imagining the hard work and ritualised seasonal awareness of country life within an intellectual framework of progressive social ideals, newly affordable mass-produced household goods, and access to art and literature. Together, these would produce a new, everyday, culture for all, which she conceptualised as ‘the beauty of everyday life’. This synthesis of the aesthetic of everyday living with progressive ideas of Selfhood may have been an essential inspiration for The Paintings for the Temple, an intellectual foundation on which the influence of Swedish Style, V&A Publications, 1901, p. 18. Anders Zorn moved back to his home town of Mos, in Dalarna, in 1906, bringing an intellectual community north with him from Stockholm. Adelborg’s diaries record frequent meetings with Zorn on the train, and regular visits to both Mos and Sundborn, as the families became friends.

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 lived in close contact with most of its traditional communities. Adelborg had begun the process of moving to the village of Gagnef, which her diaries record she experienced as “completely naïve and [in] a fairy tale style.” She began to record local life there in watercolours, perhaps seeing in this remote village, the constructed myth of the wholesome Swedish countryside that Key and Hazelius had created at Skansen. She noted that the diverse communities of these agrarian civilizations however, was that they were run a dangerous one thirty years later, but at this point it was linked to a spirit of renewal that found its voice in Swedish Life Reform. 

Women’s work

Af Klint’s exact relationship with Anders Zorn and Carl Larsson is not recorded, but she undoubtedly knew their wives, through her life-long friend and artist and partner, Ottilia Adelborg (1855–1936). As daughters of naval officers, they been children together in Karlsborg naval palace. They followed the same route through craft school and on to the Academy, and after Af Klint graduated, Adelborg shared her atelier for a time, noting in her diary on November 4, 1899, that: “I now have access to my old studio in the afternoons, Hilma Klint and Anna Cassel have the mornings. They are both women also belonging to the group, who women also belong to the group, who are active in the development of the social democracy and eventually, a more democratic nation - ideas that seem to present a solution to a fast-developing world of WW I, cultural investment in these rituals by the intelligentsia for most of 1908–1909, both were interested in, and a museum director. The Hilma af Klint Foundation.

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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 (Julklappen) 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 visualities, 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 tri. gible tabular form that was part of the very first paintings of the cycle, Primordial Chaos. Af Klint wrote about receiving her imagery during séances, 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.

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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.

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

**Surdegs 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

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 diffraacted 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.*
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 engage with various levels of life in the brief 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 orgasmic amalgamations of the experiencing body and the light and air of the world.

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 uniting 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 Ottilia, 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 move to the passage of time. The Ten Largest show share these methodological approaches to the application of paint, and in an article from 1908, Matisse wrote “I simply try to put down colours which render my sensation.” Af Klint’s notebooks record how much she struggled with the inner sensations she felt commanded to put into paintings, so the Stockholm discourse on what Matisse was trying to do may well have engaged her. Was this famous, controversial painting already in her mind as she formulated her plan for The Ten Largest, studied the patterns from her friend’s textile collection, and perhaps remembered the flat planes of her grandfather’s maps? Matisse goes on to emphasise that his colour choices remained attached to his worldly reality, but then as digested by his sensing body. This is another suggestion of the merger of outer and inner experience that midsummer celebrations sought out, that Af Klint may have used sea maps to model for herself, and which the direct references to women’s textile locates, like Matisse’s choices, in a particular body of experience. In 1908 Matisse briefly opened a school in Paris, and when the first Stockholm artists, both men and women, returned from it in 1909, the work they brought back was completely rejected by the Stockholm art world. Matisse’s values utterly unappreciated. Af Klint had just completed The Ten Largest and around 100 other works for The Paintings for the Temple. If she had been secretly influenced by Matisse’s ideas, the reception of his returning disciples was bad news.
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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,” 306 in Alchemy in Contemporary Art, Urszula Szulakowska (1950–). 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 par excellence manifested in art and literature, the end-product of the dream work of countless individuals.” 307


308 Ibid., p. 7

The artist carefully burned her personal diaries in the last two years of her life however, any thoughts she may have had in this have gone, they are not to be found in the notebooks that she left.

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.

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Much has already been written about French American artist Louise Bourgeois’ late Cell cycle, but this chapter focuses 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 own 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, The Ghost Artist is focussed on the artist’s eyes as it falls away from the morning 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 self-representations. She understood them as a negative social force into new, possible, ways of seeing.

Like Hilma af Klint, Louise Bourgeois recorded her thoughts on her work and life in extensive notes and diaries, and the published parts of these archives reveal parallels in artistic approach. Both women had carved out early careers, but they both, some time in mid-life, retreated from these to enter a period of seclusion—Af Klint into Spiritualist cleansing rituals and for Bourgeois, into a period of intense psychoanalysis that eventually led to the serial becoming that figure of return in the work of older women artists. Renegotiating this negative social force into new, possible, ways of seeing.

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Both artists had found it necessary to take a sidestep, away from the discipline of their artistic training and professional practice, and into the very different modes of being present that the séance and the psychoanalytic session offer.

The séance and the session are both approaches to the unconscious part of ourselves, and writing became an important way both Bourgeois and Af Klint sought to make sense of these experiences. Af Klint’s notebooks record her attempts to make sense of the strange words, sensations, and images she understood herself to be ‘receiving’ in séance experiences and automatic drawing sessions. Her focussed attention was towards the unknowable, unconscious part of herself, but the unconscious was then a new clinical idea, and lacking any exposure to it, Af Klint transferred its agency onto an imagined external, religious, power. Her inability to fully claim her creativity as her own, believing it to be directed by external agents, must have been a confusing artistic position to be in, and perhaps influenced her ongoing decision not to publicly share her work. It was her exploration of what might come out of a séance that led to the Temple cycle however, and it was Bourgeois’ immersion in the practice and theories of psychoanalysis that eventually led to the serial becoming that is the Cells, the late, great, cycle of works where her earlier formlessness would merge with forming.

There is no writing to support the meditative processes the eighteenth-century notebook artist may have engaged in, but it is in this formlessness-forming that all three artists really meet. As the heart-wood of the eighteenth-century log serially disintegrates across the canvas, its two-century-old formlessness is reborn. As the maps of Af Klint’s childhood, and the patterns of the women of Dalarna dissolve into light, they re-congeal as The Paintings for the Temple. With the Cells, Bourgeois takes the domestic space of the room, and remodels it as a psychic body. The haunting presence and non-presence of a female subject is held within all three of these serial works, a figure held just beyond representation, a becoming form.

Partial Recall

In 1982, when Louise Bourgeois was 70, she became the first woman artist to have a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was a moment of step-change in her career and production. Rather than slowing down, and reaping the psychological benefits in the 1950’s, during which she barely exhibited and perhaps influenced her ongoing decision not to publicly share her work. It was her exploration of what might come out of a séance that led to the Temple cycle however, and it was Bourgeois’ immersion in the practice and theories of psychoanalysis that eventually led to the serial becoming that is the Cells, the late, great, cycle of works where her earlier formlessness would merge with forming.

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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 thirty years of analysis, the artist had developed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the emotional conflicts of her adult life and her own childhood experiences. As an older woman, she could see 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 and the mind. The problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world. This combined refutation and objectification nearly summed up the male Surrealist exploration of sexual desire.

**Partial Recall, 1982; Museum of Modern Art, New York. Arthand published, as an artwork, the section of this narrative recounting her life with her tutor Sadie Gordon Richmond. In 1994 MOMA published all the images in book form, as Album.**

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**322** Philip Larratt-Smith, introduction to the exhibition The Return of the Repressed, Fundación PROA, Buenos Aires, 2011.


**324** rue de Seine. Bourgeois lived in an apartment on the first floor in 1936.

**325** For a detailed biography, see Philip Larratt-Smith, 2012, op. cit., pp. 289–298


**327** In a letter to a friend, sent shortly before she left for the U.S., Bourgeois seems to hope that her new life would offer her a better relationship with this art world. Fortunately, in New York she shall be joining artistic circles... Chino and Salvador Dalí are Robert’s friends and will be in our house regularly. Picasso and André Breton will also be there.” Louise Bourgeois to Colette Richarme, October 1938, quoted in Mignon Dixon, ibid., p 15

**328** Louise Bourgeois in Paul Gardner, Louise Bourgeois, Universe, New York, 1994, p. 26

**329** André Breton famously wrote in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism, 1929, that “The problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world. This combined refutation and objectification nearly summed up the male Surrealist exploration of sexual desire.”

**330** Fellow New Yorker Dorothy Tanning (1910–2012) did call her: “Hello, my name is Dorothy Tanning.” In a 1918 letter to her sister, she wondered if its artists weren’t so deeply attached to their misogyny, 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.

**331** 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, Freud demonstrated that women were more often than they knew the bearers of 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 work 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 contain, to maintain social order, and 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.

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**333** 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 person you can 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, Freud demonstrated that women were more often than they knew the bearers of 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 work 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 contain, to maintain social order, and 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.

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position within the Swedish
a similar way to the objections
I stop I strike at my family."
represent an expression of
focus away from the primacy
redirects the psychoanalytic
focusses on the death drive
New York, 1960 [1932],
Alex Strachey, Grove Press,
trans.
Kunst Halle (catalogue), 1996,
Louise Bourgeois,
1998, p. 175
Michigan Press, Ann Arbor,

There are many subsequent
is LB-0401, February 21, 1965.
Klein in the published diaries

The first mention of Melanie
in the published diaries
the silent vivacity of the notebook may only ever have had an audience of one, or two. Louise Bourgeois found her own way to attract or repulse each other. There is this urge to integrate, merge, or disintegrate. 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.’ The objects inside this frame are dominated by a large circular mirror, that reflects 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 overlook the orbs towards a front view. 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, but also ovaries, 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 mirror a psyché. This nineteenth century dressing mirror, seen here in a painting by Berthe Morisot (1841–1895), was a common household item
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 until mirrored wardrobes made them obsolete. 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.

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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 sea surface, 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.

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, the drain, once noticed, provokes an involuntary desire however, is hard to comprehend for an alabaster ‘skin’ placed within the rough wood of the water tower, has a smoothened 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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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 nudges 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...
Julienne Lorz, ‘From the Bell Jar to the Cage,’ in Lorz, op. cit., p. 33

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.’ 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.’

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.

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
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 precariously hallowed ghost of internal drama.

The used, personal, objects Bourgeois chose were similar to those reworked by the book artist and AI Klint. Logs, bonnets, and maps were objects these artists could reach out and touch. When curator Marie-Eve 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 artworks. In the Cell series, for example, the perforated metal which she uses for the walls of the enclosure is the exact same metal grating 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 complete materials 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–) 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 his time and re-directed it, and when Bourgeois reached out to touch, also made new. Dionea Rocha Watt (1969–) writes of Bourgeois as a ‘poet of touch’ and he reminds us that Freud’s thinking grew out of the analytic mind-set of his time and re-directed it, and when Bourgeois reached out to touch, also made new. Dionea Rocha Watt (1969–) writes of Bourgeois as a ‘poet of touch’ 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 visualise 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 re-directed 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 mycelum’. 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 a suggestive force, to portray a Self that, made of Julien 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 of his schizophrenia, he found it to be a prison. Ursula Szulakowska could be a stand-in body for his own human one, which, because of his 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 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 pr...
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.

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