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Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Mirroring Age

[The] body is understood as an image – something that is a resemblance or likeness, a mirroring. (Mike Featherstone)

We should like to know what the ego would be in a world in which no one had any idea of mirror symmetry. (Jacques Lacan)



Narcissus (2008) by Antony Crossfield

A look at British photographer Antony Crossfield's *Narcissus* (2008) reveals two heads, a twisted torso, and a number of naked arms and legs that form an indecisive mass of human flesh situated in a bare and shabby room. The amassed body parts are dimly mirrored in a puddle of dark green liquid on the floor. Two faces as well as an altered intersection of those same bodies emerge from the reflecting oily patch. The floral tapestry of the walls is stained and scratched, the radiator behind the two figures rusted and seemingly dysfunctional. An old tape recorder on the right and two partly unwound tapes on the left side of the dirty tile floor give the impression of an abandoned documentation project. Memories of a concluded past, recorded on analogue media, seem discarded, dispersed in a space of incipient corporeal development. The heap of flesh on the floor consists of two male bodies that seem to grow out of each other. They are intimately intertwined, touching inevitably as much

of the other's surface and insides as if they were Siamese twins. Their heads are turned towards their reflections on the floor. One man tenderly holds his fingertips just above his mirrored right hand while watching himself doing it. His fingers do not disturb the smooth surface while his protruding veins expose the effort of suspending his arm in midair. Comfortably resting one arm on his bent knee, the other man contemplates the reflected scene.

I introduce Crossfield's photograph at the beginning of this chapter to rethink and re-picture both the figure of Narcissus and the mirror stage, suggesting an alternative manner of self-relation to those powerful models. In contrast to my reflections on narcissism and the mirror stage in chapter three, where I proposed the potential productivity of losing, instead of forming, one's self in the mirror, I will here focus on the idea that the assumed symmetry between the self and his or her acquired body-image in the mirror stage is precarious, yet transformational. I here shift my attention to the potential failure of the mirror to form our aging selves, which, as I contend, are misinformed by the body-images we learned to form in infancy. Crossfield's image helps to problematize the function of the mirror stage and the conceptualization of the body-image by supplementing three aspects: age, intimacy, and horizontality. Crossfield's Narcissi are not young but old, they are not solitary but intimate, and they do not reflect themselves vertically but horizontally.

Crossfield's photograph shows us age, intimacy, and horizontality in a way that helps me to reflect on identity after and beyond Lacan's mirrored subject (2006: 75-81).⁹¹ I want to try to analyze the possibility of forming positive versions of what the American age theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls "aging identities" (2004). As Crossfield's photographic account of the myth of Narcissus severs the necessary and seemingly unproblematic link between the incipient self and the mirror, I find the image useful for developing a theory of the aging body in productive terms, which not only account for the subject's inner self as developing over time, but also for the significance of the subject's changing body, which in time out-grows the once-defined mirrored body-image. Crossfield adds new aspects to psychoanalytic conceptions of the formation of a subject's identity through the solitary (or parentally and socially monitored) look into a vertical mirror. He adds a second body next to Narcissus's aged and naked visual presence in the picture, and moreover rotates the

⁹¹ See also my discussion of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in chapter 3.

whole scene onto a horizontal plane, traditionally associated with the intimate sphere of two partners' love-making, or perhaps more negatively with the sick-bed of the ancients, those individuals who are almost ageless, closer to infants, expelled from the world of upright posture. The double Narcissus displayed here provokes a new look at the formation of old selves with old bodies. Crossfield narrates the event of self-recognition in the mirror differently, thus telling another mirror-story. In my eyes, the picture puts forward a fresh, yet age-considering, bodily narrative that may indeed concern all subjects, young and old, male and female, small and big, picturing a poignant relationship between our bodies and our culturally mirrored body-images. In that sense, the work challenges the discriminating "age-gaze" (Morganroth Gullette: 161-2) of traditional theories of subject formation by showing the viewer an alternative, and possibly queer, version of the mirror stage.

In this chapter, I aim to explore body-images from the perspective of later life. Starting with the earliest conscious encounter of our self-seeing as an infant during the mirror stage, yet now exploring it from an aged point of view, I want to counter what we can call the decline-value of psychoanalytic and Western cultural body narratives. The visual separation of the child from the mother in the mirror phase not only leads to subject formation, but also contains the potential danger of conflating one's sense of self largely or merely with one's mirror image. By tracing the concepts of the *specular body*, the *speculative body*, and the *performative body* in relation to Crossfield's photograph, joined below by a sculpture by Robert Gober (*Untitled*, 1990), I attempt to examine the mirror's incapacity to reflect aged body-images positively. I consider the idea of a reversed mirror-phase, which may broaden Lacan's conception of and our perspective on our bodies' vital influence in the development of our selves after infancy and youth.

Crossfield's photograph presents the viewer with a twisted version of a *specular body*. The specular (reflected) body is the physical self that others see and, in relation to the processes of aging, it is the body that is responsible for the narrative of decline, decrepitude, illness, weakness, and passivity. Crossfield, however, gives his specular bodies new visual agency by using *speculative photography* in Anca Cristofovici's sense, showing them as part of a speculative project (10). In *Touching Surfaces: Photographic Aesthetics, Temporality, Aging* (2009), Cristofovici defines speculative photography as an artistic practice that extends visibility and temporality through a variety of non-conventional photographic techniques, like digital editing or

collage. She ascribes to this form of photography the ability to represent paradoxical perceptions of time and identity and to reshape our understanding of corporeal and mental realities (88, 63).

Through artistic means, the artist mediates (speculates on) the becoming self and presents the viewer with an internal mirror (*speculum*). His work creates the idea of a *speculative body*, a body that cannot be represented in linear time or in accordance with the binaries of past and present or young and old. My conception of the speculative body is a body that incorporates paradoxical, uncertain, and provisional features; a body that is a collage of several bodies, objects, spaces, and gaps; a body that motivates a viewer to speculate about its properties and material substance.

Finally, in Crossfield's as well as Gober's artworks, the *performative body* emerges from the material of the artworks. Photography, as well as the wax Gober uses for his sculpture, are inevitably associated with dimensions of time, much like aging. The passing of time and constant change are a condition for the aliveness of art and human existence. Yet, photographs as well as aging materials and bodies are defined by the recording of, or a reference to, an earlier moment in time. Crossfield and Gober consequently present bodies to the viewer that will eventually "outlive" or leave their medium, since the material that represents them will not survive the firm grip the bodies are supposed to have on their ideal appearance in an unreachable past. In that way, the artworks touch the spectator's sense of corporeality by offering the conception of a deteriorating mirror instead of a decaying body. They might thus slightly modify our self-relation and body-image.

Crossfield's *Narcissus* displays obvious visual similarities to Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, such as the dark oily puddle on the floor, which in contrast to an actual mirror reflects the body/bodies nearly in the form of a relief or sculpture. The black paint in Caravaggio's work produces a thickness and depth that dissolves the hard flat surface of the mirror.⁹² Crossfield's puddle looks as if perforating the floor, creating a deep hole, or like a high-relief that pushes the reflected figures out of the reflecting surface. The image of Narcissus thus gains liveliness and substantiality, doubling the "real" boy as sculpted human material. In Crossfield's photograph, the duplication becomes a quadruplication with a comparable effect. The produced carnality, or

⁹² See Bal's analysis of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* in Bal (1999): 231-61.

fleshiness, produces what Mieke Bal describes as the dissolution of the mirror's boundary in Narcissus' self-formation:

As Narcissus' body gets to know itself, it loses its boundary. Something along the way of this boy's mirror stage went wrong. At the four corners of the austere, self-enclosing rectangle, the sleeves, especially in their reflected form, seem icons of the water the disturbance of which will make Narcissus' image disappear. As Caravaggio represented him, Narcissus is suspended between the solidity that imprisons and the fluidity that dissolves; he is framed by his own body. (1999: 242)

Crossfield's Narcissi are similarly close to transgressing the limits of their selves into the space beyond their reflections as one man's hand hovers close to the still surface, putting both men's self(-image) at risk by "muddying the water" (Bal: 242).

Crossfield's intertwined bodies also frame their self-image, yet not as all-embracing as Caravaggio's Narcissus. The splattered puddle gives form to their image by imitating the bodies' entanglement. The scraggly confusion of extremities is replicated by the haphazardly spread liquid on the floor. Form is constructed here through chaos, unity through multiplication, living flesh through dead matter, the self through the other. This, I argue, amounts to a reverse process of Narcissus' ego formation. The matured "boys" do not experience the jubilation of the assumed wholeness of the infant. But they nonetheless engage in an intimate, yet different, communication with the mirror, robbing it of its powers. In place of the reflected mirror image, the "real" bodies take over the function of signification. Does Crossfield, like Caravaggio, show us and contaminate us with a collapse of narcissism? (Bal, 1999: 246) Did something go wrong in their mirror stage, too?

Bal suggests that Caravaggio confronts us with a reversed mirror stage. (Bal, 1999: 245) I would like to argue that what went wrong in the mirror stage of Caravaggio's Narcissus is not the essential and productive "miscognition" (*méconnaissance*) that Lacan proposes, but Narcissus' recognition that the mirror, any mirror, always already contains an image of himself and his body, even before he lays his eyes on it. This interpretation suggests that self-recognition and the ego formation are threatened at a later life stage, not so much by the potential loss of one's body-image, but rather by the realization that whoever I am, I am (only) in view, or in the eyes, of the mirror; in other words, what I am is what I become when I meet my own

reflection in a mirror that contains more than my inner sense of self. What I, as a matured person with an aged body, see in the mirror is the mirror's narrative, its cultural construction as constituent frame of my self. Turning my back towards the mirror becomes potentially dangerous because, by identifying the mirror's powers, I lose the imagined control over my body-image. Ovid's Narcissus thus not necessarily sacrificed his life for his self-love, but for fear of losing control over his sense of wholeness and unity.⁹³

In contrast, Crossfield's Narcissi do not seem desperate or in pain to look at their mirror image. Instead of languishing in their reflection, they seem to engage lazily in a pleasurable visual conversation with their reflected counterparts, a process without temporal or spatial limitations. The dialogue displayed in this image is a constructive revocation of the infant's alleged mirror stage. Hence, Crossfield challenges Lacan's notion of self-formation. If, in Lacan's conception, the body-image as unity emerges from the body in bits and pieces, Crossfield's *Narcissus* suggests another emergence: of intimate and foreign (other) bodies as inherent parts of the self.

The Foreign Body

Crossfield's "Foreign Body" comprises a collection of images, in which two aged male bodies intersect in ways that make it unclear where one of them ends and where the other begins. The borders of the figures dissolve. The digital composition of several images, taken of the same subjects at different times from different angles, produces images that show the body as contingent on the surrounding space and lived time. The montage of the photographs suggests that several pictures were taken at different times in different settings and then merged. One picture adds to another not only a new layer of visual content, but also an additional layer of time and space. The chronology of the singular pictures is obscured, and the interior design of the photographic stage may well have been tampered with. The end-result of the images

⁹³ A poem by Sylvia Plath (*Mirror*, 1961) reports the powers of the mirror over an aging woman by using the mirror as first-person narrator. The mirror's indisputable objectivity is cold and incapable of emotion. It swallows everything as it sees it and instead of reflecting back the woman's inner sense of self, it harshly focuses on her body's decay and refers to her as a "terrible fish" that has, as a girl, drowned in the mirror's lake-like depths.

thus represents a real situation, real bodies, and real props, while also highlighting the uncertainty of their authenticity. The depicted bodies cannot be separated from the transformation of the spatial and temporal frames of the digital project of the artist and are thus contingent upon their surroundings. Crossfield describes his images as equating “the temporal and spatial indeterminacies of the bodies and selves they depict with the analogous fragmentation of photographic representation in a digital age where old certainties have been compromised.”⁹⁴

The term “foreign body” is mainly used in physiology and designates an object that is external to an organic or mechanical organism and intrudes into the body in either inert or irritating ways. If, in this context a foreign body commonly causes a disturbance in the system’s functioning, in the context of Crossfield’s art project, it seems to add to the performance of one body to another in a beneficial or at least creative way. Crossfield’s reference to a disturbing element in such a way suggests that the disturbance is dependent on whatever function is ascribed to the body, and that a “foreign body” might as well be conducive for a human subject’s self-image.

Analog photography uses a medium, photographic paper, that reacts to chemical processes to record visual information. The information conveyed by analog signals consists of a continuous response to changes in light and temperature, and is directly transposed to a physical medium. Digital photography records information discontinuously through image sensors that read the intensity of light. The captured data, converted in binary numeric form, are transferred onto a digital memory device and converted to digital images on a computer. While, in analog photography, the linear progress of time is important to capture information, digital photography ignores the continuity of time by recording distinct, and possibly unrelated, moments in time. In Crossfield’s images, analog and digital technology seem to merge. The dilapidated and obviously aged settings of his photographs, as well as the wrinkles and sagging skins of his models, all work to convey the passing of time. Yet, the digitally-manipulated fusion of the bodies creates the impression of non-linear reality. This suggests an ambiguous or anachronistic relation between the passing of time and the process of aging.

The Cartesian concept of a disembodied self is twisted here in several ways. Each subject finds itself in another subject’s body, manifesting and augmenting the

⁹⁴ Crossfield quoted from: www.antonycrossfield.com (April 12, 2011)

self's physical dimensions, seeping into the space around the bodies, like in *Narcissus's* puddle. The décors and props of the rooms display body-like characteristics, imitating and exaggerating the human body's tendency for decay and mortality. Rusted radiators suggest bared ribcages; cracks in the walls and flaking wallpaper bring to mind wrinkles and dried skin; old pipes and truncated cables look like protruding veins. The prominent presence of a typewriter, sewing machine, and tape recorder in some of the photographs seem to reference the body's dependency on mechanical technology as prosthesis, even in our digital age. A superimposed set of old photographic cameras in one image (*Foreign Body #5*) suggests the predesigned nature of the way bodies see and are seen.

Frosted or blackened windows, large or small mirrors, and a half-transparent screen of cloth all suggest, as the artist describes it, "both a barrier and a display; a means of concealment and of revelation. [The screen] evokes the idea that the body is something that is projected upon, as much as something that hides what is within, and further suggests the breakdown of the distinctions between inside and outside" (Crossfield in Kouwenhoven: 43). Crossfield's images challenge the existence of a border between mind and body or self-image and mirror-image. The images projected onto the subjects' bodies pass through their skin and evolve in the subjects' self-perception, which is, partly, again propelled outwards. The body thus becomes a body with several layers, created in conjunction with other, foreign bodies.

The conjoined body-mass in "Foreign Body" consists of more than one self at the same time. The four legs and arms, two heads and torsos accommodate a multiplicity of potential, shifting, and developing selves and sexes. From a technical point of view, Crossfield's aim seems to produce a fragmentary image that reads as a singular photograph. He thus offers a visual metaphor for the illusion of wholeness that conceals a fundamentally fragmented self.



Foreign Body #5 (2006) by Antony Crossfield



Foreign Body #4 (2005) by Antony Crossfield

The merged figures seem to be masculine, but, in some of the images, their overlap conceals the obvious signs of biological maleness, the penis and the absence of breasts. What becomes visible instead alludes to the hairy triangle of women's pubic hair, smooth female breasts, or the round and soft bottom of a younger woman. Sometimes, one man's leg stands in for the missing penis and creates an uncanny sight, shifting between the lack and surplus of phallic anatomy. In contrast, the parts of the images not digitally altered reveal the sagging flesh, wrinkles, scars, skinny legs, large bellies, hairy soft male breasts, thinning scalps, and pimples of Crossfield's older male models. The two photographs that do show a penis give an unusually energetic impression. The two men are caught in different acts, recorded at different points of time, and the combination of their frozen movements exudes a vigor that seems greater than the singular acts of two individual actors. In other words, the

models share one penis and two men's energy. Each of them moves individually, one pulling away from or pushing towards the other, so that they seem to direct their combined body towards several aims within a single moment. This anatomical confusion exhibits human action and movement as not merely emerging from an individual body, but as dependent on physical interactions, the simultaneous merging and clashing of different intentions and material conditions.

The sprawling torsos and limbs in Crossfield's *Narcissus* display a version of the myth of Narcissus that neither exhibits Narcissus's youthful beauty, nor performs his solitary meditation of self-reflection. Here, the mirror scene entails two aged male bodies, intricately interwoven and, through their reflection, in a constant visual dialogue with each other. Similar to the adolescent Narcissus, they seem to be lost in their reflection. Like their younger counterpart, they might be in danger of drowning, of losing themselves, in the dark pool that gives the impression of a black hole in the floor.

In the mirror stage, the subject is simultaneously constituted by self-love and self-loss; the identification with the mirror image is an alienating process; yet, it also forms the condition for relating to others. For Narcissus, in Ovid's myth, this process has not reached the productive and social stage. Young Narcissus remains stuck or lost in self-admiration; his (sexual) orientation towards others has yet to develop. Unlike their predecessor, however, the aged Narcissi's duplicity in Crossfield's photograph breaks the spell of perishing self-love. Through the presence of a second body, Narcissus' self-relating identity is disturbed. The mirror does not bestow on him his own image as exclusive love object, but directs his gaze to another person, a man, not quite like himself, but inseparably entangled with him. Self-love is still present, but only through another body's manifestation in the mirror.

Reverse Mirror Stage

In an article on the literary imagination of old age, Kathleen Woodward postulates the "mirror phase of old age" (1983: 58). Woodward bases her idea on psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who considers old age a distinct phase in human life as much as infancy, and on clinical psychological research, which suggests a critical relationship of elderly persons to their mirror images (1972). The most extreme reaction to the mirror image is an aged person's radical rejection of her or his reflection. Sigmund Freud associates the perception of one's aged "double" with the uncanny: when one is surprisingly

confronted with one's mirror image, one does not necessarily recognize it as one's reflection, yet it conveys something familiar that has been subdued.⁹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir connects the obsession with mirror images with aging, declaring that the knowledge of old age comes from the Other (within me) as well as from one's physical "decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health" (40). She writes:

For the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him. Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person who I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself. (284)

De Beauvoir describes the awareness of oneself as old through the look of someone else who regards one as old. Relating this idea to Woodward's theory, one can say that the self-recognition of an aged person takes place in the interaction between the mirror image (myself) and the gaze of the other (outsider).

De Beauvoir's argument suggests a resemblance between the mirror stage of infancy and what one could identify as the mirror stage of old age. The one could be seen as the inverse of the other. In both phases, the subject assumes an image by which it is transformed. The difference between the two stages lies in the type of transformation. While the infant experiences an incipient discrepancy between visual self-image and lived experience that leads to the anticipation of bodily wholeness, the aged person's interaction with the mirror image seems to move into the opposite direction, as Woodward proposes:

The harmonious whole resides within the subject, and the *imago* prefigures disintegration and "nursling dependence." If the infant holds his mirror image 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. (1983: 60)

The mirror stage of old age thus harbors a new form of narcissism, one that, by rejecting the subject's self-reflection, becomes a self-love beyond or even in opposition to visual pleasure. "Young" Narcissus desires his own vision; "old" Narcissus despises it. If we assume such an aged version of Narcissus to exist, what

⁹⁵ In his essay on the *uncanny*, Freud tells a story about how, after having woken up with a start on a train trip and seeing his reflection in the window, he confused his mirrored double with an intruder into his compartment. He did not recognize himself and described this experience as uncanny. Freud, 2003: 162, n III/1

makes his narcissism blossom if not the visual pleasure gained from his own sight? Where, if not through vision, does he find love for himself?

For me, the figure of Narcissus in advanced age becomes a symbol for the general struggle with one's own body in relation to vision. The child's bliss in recognizing itself in the mirror reflects the satisfaction of anticipating its own body as whole, separate from the mother and the rest of the world. For the infant, body and self materialize and merge through visual recognition. For the aged subject, the gaze into the mirror separates the self from her or his body. As Woodward claims, "Old age is a state in which the body is in opposition to the self and we are alienated from our bodies." (1983: 55)

Crossfield's *Foreign Body* refers to alienation in age as well. But, in contrast to Woodward's contention, I understand Crossfield's images differently. He depicts alienation as a process that takes place between a subject's own older and younger self and that productively allows for a form of intimacy between distinct (other, several) selves. The images postulate a new sense of self, less dependent on the image that was acquired time and again in the reenactment of the mirror stage, and more dependent on the interaction with other bodies.

The suggestion that alienation is enforced through aging by the growing time-gap between the self's fantasized state *before* and the acquired ideal body-image *after* the mirror stage, is stressed by Jane Gallop:

The jubilation, the enthusiasm [of the infant upon seeing itself in the mirror], is tied to the temporal dialectic by which she appears *already* to be what she will *only later become*. [...] The mirror stage itself is both an anticipation and a retroaction. (Gallop: 78)

The mirror stage is a turning point from having a "body in bits and pieces" (Lacan, 2004) to acquiring a totalized image. Yet, as Gallop states, the mirror only retroactively brings forth the fantasy of a body in bits and pieces.⁹⁶ The violently shattered image is merely a projection or a reflection of the infant's becoming-self. There is nothing beyond the mirror. The mirror stage thus symbolizes a chronology of

⁹⁶ "Laplanche and Pontalis thus seem to answer that the body in bits and pieces precedes the mirror stage. The mirror stage would seem to come after "the body in bits and pieces" and to organize them into a unified image. But actually, that unorganized image only comes after the mirror stage so as to represent what came before. What appears to precede the mirror stage is simply a projection or a reflection. There is nothing on the other side of the mirror." (1987: 121)

the developing self, which is fundamentally dependent on the fantasy of the “before”. The achievement of, and the ensuing desire for, the self’s “new” body-image is as much based on the recognition of the infant in the mirror, as on the idea of the self’s emancipation from an earlier, shattered version of itself. Not only the self, but also “the body in bits and pieces” emanate from the mirror stage (Gallop, 1987: 80). The temporality embedded in the mirror is perpetuated throughout a person’s life. While the totalized image must continually be validated, the mirror trauma of the dismembered body accompanies every look into the mirror. Gallop emphasizes the importance of this temporal dialectic as “violations of chronology,” confirming the anachronistic nature of the body-image.⁹⁷

To disrupt the idea of a natural formation of a subject’s self, I want to add the concept of the “screen”, which plays an important role in Lacan’s theory of the gaze and which is interpreted by Kaja Silverman in her theory of vision. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (1998), Lacan characterizes the screen as an imaginary mapping (107), which, as Silverman puts forward, is reminiscent of the infant’s imaginary sense of mastery over its own body in the mirror stage (1992: 147). If the mirror is part of the imaginary order, the adult, on whom the child is in fact dependent to be carried to the mirror, as Silverman stresses (1992: 127), represents the symbolic order. The symbolic dimension of the mirror stage, which Lacan identifies as such only in his later work, corresponds to the gaze of the mother who watches the child seeing itself in the mirror.⁹⁸ Silverman explains the child’s self-recognition in the mirror by stressing the importance of the external gaze. She contends that the child’s mirror experience is facilitated, if not dependent, on the fact that the mother watches the child’s self-seeing. The “seeing of oneself being seen” is a step towards the “seeing oneself seeing oneself” and constitutes the experience of the child’s first sense of “self” (1992: 127).

The external gaze is thus a necessary component in the infant’s identification and is later replaced by what Silverman calls the “dominant cultural screen” (1992: 75), a repertoire of external images, which first comes in the shape of the mirror reflection, subsequently in the form of parental images, and later in the guise of a range of cultural representations. The exteriority of these images to Silverman

⁹⁷ 1983: 121. The loss of one’s body-image does not only occur in aged subjects, but also in persons with eating disorders, physical disabilities, different skin color, and transgender subjects. See Prosser in Stryker & Whittle: 270; 94).

⁹⁸ Lacan, 1973/1998.

suggests that the subject becomes more and more dependent on the integration of what can be called “other” (1992: 56). The subject, Lacan writes, is not, however, “entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it, [insofar] as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. [...] The screen is here the locus of mediation” (1998: 107).

Complementing Lacan’s concept of the subject’s formation, Silverman insists upon

[the] social and historical [ideological] status of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality. (1992: 150)

This specification opens up the screen for political contestation, through which agency in self-formation becomes visible, as does the subject’s capability of what Lacan calls “playing with the function of the screen.” (1998: 107) At the same time, this function can serve as a defensive weapon or a shield. The screen thus intervenes within the subject’s self-reflection. As helpful and necessary as this intervention might be for a developing child, as disruptive it may be for an older person. In later life the screen might be the element that stands in the way of the subject’s connection to his or her self-reflection and body-image.

I would like to suggest that the screen’s grid, through which the subject is seen and sees itself, becomes denser and more opaque during a person’s life span, hindering the aged person to recognize herself in the mirrored image on which identity is also conditioned. In Lacan’s account, the screen is opaque by definition, necessarily so in order to see the pictures as we see them. As Lacan states, “if [the subject is] anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen” (1998: 97). However, Silverman stresses the screen’s social and historical contingency to emphasize the subject’s visual agency. If the subject is capable of playing with the function of the screen, he or she might be able to “exaggerate and/or denaturalize the image/screen; to use it for protective coloration; or to transform it into a weapon” (1992: 149). In addition to considering the screen as controlled protection, which, even in Silverman’s account, is a rather bold and uncertain proposition, I want to suggest that the screen could be seen as becoming, with age, gradually *more* of how

Lacan refers to it: “a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown-off in order to cover the frame of a shield” (1998: 107).

If the screen becomes denser with age, filling out and obscuring the mirror, the subject loses his or her body-image through the sheer overload of stereotypical, discriminating, youth-glorifying, and gender-dividing images. It would be productive, therefore, to seek one’s self-reflection outside or beyond the rectangular looking glass. Here I see the constructive element in the idea of a reversed mirror stage in old age. When, according to that concept, the subject starts disidentifying with her or his imaginary self in the mirror, the elderly person’s look into the mirror becomes equivalent to the child’s fantasy of a body in bits and pieces. As Crossfield’s images show, this state of fragmentation is, however, not necessarily undesirable, since it potentially allows for a different and more intimate relationship with the other. The two bodies in Crossfield’s *Narcissus* are intimately intertwined by way of yielding parts of their bodies to the respective parts of the other’s body. Their fusion can only take place by means of abandoning their sense of wholeness.

Crossfield’s image thus seems to suggest that the fragmented self can, at least in digital media or in visual fantasy, have a positive fragmented body-image. If, in Lacan’s theory, the ideal ego formed in the mirror stage is a fiction (Lacan, 2006: 94), and if there, as I propose, the specular (reflected) body becomes a speculative (multiple, uncertain) body, the formative process of becoming a subject is also a performative act of acquiring and admitting an image of oneself as partial, as linked to others, as aging. In this respect, subject formation can describe a continuous movement between seeing and identifying with one’s specular body (acquired in the mirror stage of infancy, as seen by others) and accepting or even desiring the utopian nature of bodily wholeness (speculative body), which, as Crossfield shows, can playfully be re-signified in relation to other bodies.⁹⁹

I mostly consider this oscillating movement to be invisible to other people’s eyes. However, in Crossfield’s images it seems to gain partial visibility. Crossfield uses the fictional body as a tool to represent body-images of aging subjects in a “reversed” mirror. His images present adult subjects who embrace, rather than distance themselves from, the fantasy of the body in bits and pieces. As a consequence, their body-image loses its unified appearance, spills over the borders of

⁹⁹ I want to emphasize here that the speculative body is not necessarily experienced as a visual image, but rather as material presence.

a “rectangular” mirror reflection, and merges with another subject’s body. Moreover, it becomes fictional (through digitized mutation), and performative (through the enactment of a new form of self-seeing). The child’s revolutionary differentiation between the *I* and the mother is disrupted, opening up the possibility for Crossfield’s fantasy of exceedingly intimate, if not merged, selves and bodies.

Mirrored Intimacy

In “Fear of Intimacy” (2009), Cecilia Sjöholm argues for a reevaluation of intimacy within psychoanalytic theory. She gives an account of the ways in which intimacy is neglected or given a negative connotation in Lacan’s and Freud’s theories. Their fear of or caution against intimacy is on the one hand historically linked to the Enlightenment ideal of separating the private from the public. The private sphere is related to the emotional and sensory aspects of life, and those are disregarded for being unstable, inconsistent and vulnerable (179). On the other hand, the intimate issues of sexuality are an important part of psychoanalytic therapy and are treated with care to avoid the fall into an affective and emotional discourse (179). Lacan’s refusal of intimacy is born from the notion that the emotional inner life of the subject belongs to the imaginary, a sphere that psychoanalysis must traverse. In the space of psychoanalytic practice, the emergence of intimacy is thus not only assisted by the “confessional” discourse and the role of the couch, but it is also resisted in order to avoid reification of the unconscious (Sjöholm: 179).

In his *Seminars* (1997 & 1998), Lacan introduces the term “extimacy” (*extimité*) or “intimate exteriority.” The subject is intimately linked to that which is radically foreign and exterior to it. For Lacan, the Other is always exterior to the I, although, as he states, it is “at the heart of me” (1997: 71). In Jacques-Alain Miller’s analysis of the term, he states that:

Extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite. [...] The extimacy of the Other is tied to the vacillation of the subject’s identity to himself.
(76)

This understanding of the subject and his or her symbolic Other as tied to each other by their intimate exteriority and as constituted by what is strange (*entfremdet*), yet familiar (*vertraut*), explains Lacan’s reservation towards intimacy as emotional

attachment and un-controlled reciprocity. Intimacy does not exist without its potentially precarious counterpart, as I contend, the subject does not exist without an (internalized) foreign body. The capital Other, being at the heart of the subject, yet also exterior to the I, is both un-assimilable, yet mediating between the self and others (Evans: 136). This Other appears for the first time in the infant's mirror image in the Gestalt of the symbolic mother, who introduces the child to language and the social order.

The function of the mirror seems to put into practice Lacan's rejection of intimacy as a way to relate to ourselves in relation to others. The autonomy of the subject is at stake here, since intimacy requires openness to others without total identification. I suggest that aging subjects may produce positive body-images precisely through this openness to others, which might break the dynamic of strong identification with the mirrored self.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's reassessment of intimacy within psychoanalysis, Sjöholm contends that

[a] discourse of intimacy does nothing to revolutionize society, but it may well present us with a certain protection against the colonization of ready-made images that marks the capitalist society of aggressive new media. (192)

I would like to fit Sjöholm's "ready-made images" and "aggressive new media" into Silverman's "dominant cultural screen." The disidentification with the mirror image for aged subjects, as described by Freud, de Beauvoir and Woodward, seems to be conditioned on the discrepancy between a more or less successful self-reflection in the mirror and the lack of a subject's intimate relation to her or his corporeal self. This appears to create a split between visuality and intimate corporeality. Yet, I want to suggest that Crossfield shows how the body can be conceptualized within the field of vision as an intimate object, an object that not only allows for a relation to other bodies on the basis of the autonomy of the subject formed in the mirror stage, but also, and simultaneously, on the basis of a shared sense of self that is achieved through the disruption of this same autonomy by way of intimacy.

Hanneke Grootenboer proposes a theory of the intimacy of vision (2006) in relation to eye miniature portraits from the eighteenth century. Eye miniatures are portraits of one eye of a loved person, dead or alive, which are gifted as presents and

worn on the body as precious ornaments. Grootenboer argues that the miniature's subject matter is intimate vision (497). The small paintings reverse the object and subject of seeing, and thus stand for a reciprocal mode of vision. Grootenboer's conception adds an important factor to the reciprocity theorized by Lacan's. The eye pictures are portrayals of a "sight", rather than representing a body part. As Grootenboer writes, "What they show is a mode of being seen, rather than of seeing, that has been withdrawn from representation only to recur in moments of self-reflexivity" (505).

This observation ascribes a certain visual agency to the object, the image. This view attributes the object with a form of intimacy, sensibility, and corporeality. Is it possible for aging bodies to elicit a similar form of transformation in the order of vision? The openness to others involved in intimacy, and the intimacy of vision that is triggered by specific visual objects, or one might argue, by specific bodies, would then lead to a reconsideration of the importance of the mirror for the formation of identity.

Disidentifying with the glass mirror image in a rectangular frame as we age does not foreclose identification with our reflected image in others.¹⁰⁰ As we lose the coherence of our self-image, we lose the mirror's complicity in self-identification, and we achieve identification through others, not radical, but intimate others. This body-image is related to its reflection in others' bodies rather than the mirror. Such a recognition allows for the idea of intimacy as something that combines the self's relation to her or his body and the physical contact or exchange with another's body.

Crossfield shows how the physical intimacy of his two older models allows them to engage lovingly in their reflection without the perishing effects of Ovid's Narcissus. The two subjects look and see each other reflected simultaneously. The duality of their bodies is stronger than the seductive power of the mirror: they hold each other, and they hold each other back from drowning in their reflection. The reflective surface strengthens the two subjects' intimate alliance by doubling it. Two bodies merge into one mass of limbs and flesh and become a new form of self. They are neither quite one nor two, challenging the norm of an independent corporeal identity, permeating spatial, physical, and temporal confines. In Crossfield's *Narcissus*, the subject engages with his mirror-image in a way in which self and self-

¹⁰⁰ See chapter 3 in the present book on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "mirror in the flesh".

image are separate, yet inseparable. One individual is distinguishable from the other, yet their physical borders are suspended. Their duality becomes a form of composite unity. Separation is shown as the condition for complex unification and vice versa. Intimacy is characterized as corporeal dialogue, shared vulnerability, transparent boundaries, and reciprocal identification. And, it is made visible and tangible through the presence, yet not the power, of the mirror. Here, it is not the mirror that frames the subject, but the subjects that together frame their reflections.

To take a further step, I turn to a sculpture by American artist Robert Gober (*Untitled*, 1990). A waxy sack-like torso with breasts, hair, a navel, wrinkles, and creases stands on the floor, biding its time. The material's surface has a warm quality, although the pale color makes the texture seem cold. The torso embodies two anatomically contrasting sides, divided by a hairline that marks the center: a fleshy, smooth female breast and a flat, hairy male chest. The two sides show male and female body parts on a figure otherwise sexless. Missing a head, arms, shoulders, and lower body, the sculpture does not show primary sexual characteristics. Clear male or female markers like genitals, facial expressions, muscle, fat distribution, hair-growth, bone-structure, or posture are all omitted. While the trunk on the whole looks stiff, the right breast seems alive, plump with blood and fat tissue, slightly weighing down the right side of the body. The folds of skin are thick and firm and remind the viewer as much of human flesh as of creases in a cement-filled paper bag. All in all, the trunk embodies indefinable states of age, sex, health, and aliveness. The sculpture exudes a mixture of helplessness (as subject) and uselessness (as object). It combines the disparate qualities of life and death, subjectivity and objecthood, agency and docility.

Unlike *Narcissus*, it molds two separate corporeal shapes within a single body. The sculpted body takes the form of a mirror of sorts. It emphasizes the vertical symmetry of human bodies, not by replicating it, but precisely by refusing the supposed reflection or likeness of the body's left and right side. As Crossfield's photograph, this artwork too seems to rob the mirror of its function as the necessary counterpart for subject formation, allowing for a new definition of body-image. Additionally, Gober's torso consists of more than one, yet not quite two subjects, who share one body. Physical intimacy is transposed from two subjects to one body. If, in Crossfield, the subjects' intimacy is partly expressed by their shared look into the mirror, Gober's sculpture abstains from the intimate look, while yet attracting the viewer through the torso's appealing as well as disturbing fleshiness.



Untitled (1990) by Robert Gober

My point about the mirror is that it brings to the fore the subject's exteriority, constituted by and intimately linked to others' bodies. Crossfield and Gober visualize this exteriority by showing two bodies folded into one. To develop my argument further and bring it closer to my central topic of aging bodies, I introduce a photographic self-portrait by American artist John Coplans (*Back with Arms above*, 1984). This image reveals a singular body; yet, through the lens of the reverse mirror stage, it projects an alternative to the uncanny recognition of a subject's aged self in the mirror.



Self-Portrait (Back with Arms above) (1984) by John Coplans

The square backside reminds us of the form of a mirror while presenting us with the body's reverse side. Coplan's aged, hairy, and freckled backside does not reveal the characteristic outline of a body that gives the viewer the possibility to attach an identity to the subject. Thus, the title of the work is confusing. The bracketed addition (*Back with Arms above*) suggests that the self of the artist is either expressed through only minimal references to his body and posture, or, alternately, inexpressible in a picture to begin with. The lack of personalizing features may indicate that the artist questions the capacity of an image to be a representative portrait of a self or body. Although one might identify this body as male, gender has become meaningless. The image does not contain or expose a self, but reflects on the concept of portraying a self. The work uses the visual object through which a self is commonly represented, the body, yet it displays it in such a way that it mocks the identificatory effect of corporeal depiction.

Coplan's back displays a mirror in the flesh. Reversing the traditional perspective of a body, the work depicts a blind yet living mirror. The two fists on top of the back replace the missing head. They seem almost aggressively directed towards the viewer, as if to say, "return your gaze to yourself, I will not serve as your mirror." One might imagine the sitter's head to be turned inwards, towards the breast, towards the intimate self that is protected by the angled arms, hidden away from view. Here, intimacy can be interpreted as a form of self-protection from vision and as indifference to the mirror. Coplan's hidden eyes are thus not blind, but look within the body for identification. The reversed torso shows us its inverted gaze and so depicts a "mirror within". In my view, the photograph offers a literal portrayal of a reversed mirror stage in old age, bringing to the fore a form of intimacy of the subject with his own body.

Coplan reverses the direction of the look onto his body, from without to within, from upright to upside-down. The change of visual direction allows him to redefine his body-image. In Coplan's photograph, the verticality of the symbolized mirror in the flesh is still intact. But, I see the mirror's rotation from vertical to horizontal in Crossfield's image as a similar changing of visual direction, if not an even stronger redefining gesture.

Horizontality and the *Informe*

In Crossfield's *Narcissus*, the bodies' position, the puddle, and the mirror image all oppose the vertical axis that is constitutive of Lacan's mirror scene. Lacan accepts the *Gestalt* psychologists' term of the "good form" to describe the infant's first discovery of a figure of wholeness, coherence and balance, which prefigures the "I" (Krauss, 1997: 89). As Rosalind Krauss observes, Lacan does not mention that this

image, as seen in the mirror, will also be upright. [...] All images – whether seen on a horizontal plane or not – will enter the space of his or her imagination as upright: aligned with the verticality of that viewer's body. (90)

In contrast, Crossfield's photograph stresses the horizontal plane: all the horizontal lines in the image and of the picture as a whole are longer than their vertical counterparts. The room's walls are cut low, giving the room an elongated appearance; the rusted heater is wider than tall, despite its vertical rungs; the two bodies as well as the pool on the floor are sprawled and splattered in such a way that makes it impossible to see a clear geometrical configuration. In this way, horizontality and a certain formlessness come together.

The ideal form-giving mirror is laid down, and the (self-)representation of the two men is instantly transformed. The unity achieved by the mirror is shattered. The figures' form and their selves' formation are recast along the horizontal plane of the reportedly animalistic and sexual field of perception. With respect to Freud's interpretation of the function of man's "Gestalt" as "erecting himself from the earth" (2010: 66) and thus shifting his interest "away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole," Krauss, drawing extensively on Georges Bataille, develops the concept of the "formless" (Krauss, 1997: 91-92).

To connect the concept of the formless to the cultural importance of form in relation to gender and other categorizations, I would like to refer to an artwork by the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi.



Torso of a Young Man I (1917) by Constantin Brancusi

Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Man I* (1917) combines the symbol of a phallus and the concept of *Gestalt*. The strict verticality of the sculpture, the missing arms, the upper body's straight orientation and the stone pedestal all cite the traditional form of a torso. Yet, the sculpture can only be interpreted as a torso because of the stumps of legs at its bottom. The clean, shiny and nearly sterile form does not allow the viewer to compare it to a human body. The allusion to an erect penis is the sole ground that entails such a comparison. Paradoxically, what makes Brancusi's torso look like a torso is its semblance to a fantasmatic penis. The sculpture's excessively articulated use of structure and shape plays with the replacement of one form with another. The form of the penis represents and replaces the implication of a torso.

Thus, Brancusi seems to have used the concept of the formless in a different way. He presents the viewer with the strongest symbol for sexual difference and power, which, after Freud and Lacan, also marks the simultaneous superiority and fragility of the human subject. The relation between *Gestalt* and verticality is exceedingly evident here, a fact all the more significant in the case of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and its implicit phallic dimension almost forty years after

Brancusi's sculpture. If a torso, a part of the body that represents less of a subject than the head or face, is shaped in the form of a penis, it implicates a peculiar link to the formation of subjectivity. The phallic impression is intensified by the extreme verticality of the sculpture. Of course, if it actually represented an erect penis, the sculpture would have to be more or less horizontal. The longest of the three cylinders that represents the upper body points upwards in such a rigid way that the two shorter tubes, representing leg stumps while alluding to testicles, appear to be pulled outward involuntarily. Hence, the figure looks like the reverse of a limp penis pulled downwards by gravity. Although the phallic form is an evident and necessary element lending the sculpture the appearance of a torso, Brancusi's slick art object transforms form. Form is here used in a way that links the body to subjecthood through sexual difference.



Torso of a Young Girl (1922) by Constantin Brancusi

This link is also visible in Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Girl* (1922) consists of one round piece of stone, pointed at the top, broader at the bottom and slightly leaning forward. The sculpture is made of pink marble, showing the stone's fissures that look like veins. The girl's torso, in contrast to the young man's, is merely an abstracted

form of an upper body without arms and legs. As much as this sculpture could represent a man's body as well as a woman's, the lack of the phallic form seems to dictate the marble's sex.

In contrast to Brancusi, Crossfield plays with the dissolution of clear forms without embracing the concept of anti-form. He thereby suspends the borders between bodies without losing the concept of the corporeal basis of subjectivity. Formlessness here does not refer to the opposite or negation of embodied form, but to its malleability. The subjects in Crossfield's images show an abundance of subjective energy directed towards each other or their viewers. Their challenged physical shapes do not take away their subjectivity. Their formlessness does not rob them of subjecthood; on the contrary, it awards them subject positions that expand beyond the frame of the small rectangular mirror of their ego-formation.

Formless Materiality

In Gober's wax sculpture, the formless takes on yet another quality. It is reminiscent of a particular stage in the process of casting metal or concrete sculptures. Wax, like resin, but unlike plaster or concrete, is often used as temporary mold in order to cast solid sculptures. In this sense, wax serves as a transient means of creating form. Gober's torso reverses the result and casts the temporary wax-figure as sculpture. The ambivalence of the material's texture and lack of solidity suggests an ambiguity of form and content. The torso takes shape in the wax cast, but it does not acquire the stability of metal, concrete or stone, frequently the final stage of creating an (art)object.

The wax-sack is the reverse trace of an object: it exists *before* the actual object, yet does not, as expected, disintegrate or dissolve *after*. The pale "body bag" has form, but conceptualizes the substance of bodies as inherently formless. Two sides, left and right, female and male, can only stay apart with great effort. The contours of either sex are still partly visible, but dissolve in the sculpture as a whole. The distinctions between male and female, body and bag, shapeless wax and erect Gestalt, young and old age, form and content break down in Gober's sculpture. The sculpture seems to resist and simultaneously amalgamate with the floor and walls against which it is placed. The figure's sagging appearance on the right side seemingly caused by the weight of the slumping female breast, contradicts with the sculpture's vertical position. Thus, Gober's art object erodes the distinction between figure and ground, and

between form and shapelessness by confusing structure and texture, or form and content.



Nude (1933) by Brassai

Brassai's *Nude* from 1933 exposes a similar confusion of form through the play with the body's horizontality. The image shows a woman's torso lying on velvet drapery. The viewer is presented with the body's back and right side. One arm hides the woman's head; her legs are invisible. The image reveals a flattened half-sight of one breast, the round shapes of her buttocks, and an angular protrusion of her hipbones. Displaying a reclining instead of a standing figure, this female torso seems to stand in stark opposition to Brancusi's male torso. Taking the phallic structure of Lacan's ego-formation into account, one might see *Nude* as symbolizing the social construction of "femaleness".

However, I want to suggest that here, akin to *Torso of a Young Man I*, the viewing axis of the body is rotated. If, in Brancusi's sculpture, the penis-like stature exaggerates the ideal of an erect penis and thus mocks the principle of verticality, Brassai's female torso challenges the feminized stereotype of horizontal posture. Despite the horizontal orientation, the body's most visible outlines are vertical. The light skin of the woman's side is silhouetted like a hilly landscape against the dark background. In contrast, her flat spine in the foreground almost disappears in the shadow. The vertical contours of the hipbone and arm are so prominent that at first

sight the lying torso looks like a picture of a misty mountain range. Or, as Krauss observes, “the image rotation transmutes the female torso into phallus.” (1997: 157)¹⁰¹

Despite the opposed alignment of Brassai’s and Brancusi’s torsos, both works alter the body’s relation to form and formlessness. The interplay between visual and other perceptions of the body relates these two earlier modern works to the works of Crossfield and Gober. Crossfield’s *Narcissus* can be compared to Brassai’s *Nude*; Gober’s to Brancusi’s torso. Yet, in contrast to the later art works, the bodies of Brassai and Brancusi are cold, lifeless, distant and inhuman. They do not only blur gender or sex distinctions, but they also lack personality, age, warmth, and intimacy. Self-less and thus exchangeable, they do not seem to have an identity. They are mere pictorial representations of bodies, this despite their challenge to visual stereotypes.

In contrast, another sculpture by Gober, *Untitled* (1999), expresses the body’s individual reaction to circumstance.



Untitled (1999) by Robert Gober

¹⁰¹ If I compare the woman’s body in Brassai’s photograph with a landscape I do not mean to compare women’s bodies with nature. The comparison here merely serves to highlight the paradoxical relationship between the horizontal position of the body *in* the image and the vertical visual impression *of* the image.

The same waxy female/male torso is now squeezed into a plastic crate, shedding all bodily characteristics as it is being submitted to the rigorous form of its enclosure. The crate looks like the torso's prison; yet, at the same time, the body seems to snuggle itself comfortably into the container. Again, the discrepancy between constraining form and malleable content emphasizes their mutual dependency and inseparability. Entropy, as defined by Uros Cvorc, "eradicates the distances between binary oppositions such as form and content, thus contesting the production of meaning" (56). The body shows entropic characteristics insofar as it partially melds with its surrounding space. If we learn to see beyond the structural outlines of the body, body-images could form beyond the rectangle looking glass and inform our selves less restrictively after having grown out of the mirror stage.

Lacan asks a crucial question: "We should like to know what the ego would be in a world in which no one had any idea of mirror symmetry." (Lacan in Krauss, 1997: 170).¹⁰² Krauss answers: "Without consciousness of 'mirror symmetry' the subject would dissolve into space, and the world, anthropocentric for the Gestalt-oriented human, would be stripped of its qualities, made characterless, isotropic" (1997: 171). I want to contend, however, that as much as Gober's and Crossfield's works dissolve their subjects into space, they do not make them characterless. Rather, the loss of symmetry breaks the spell of the mirror and returns the power of self-identification to subjects beyond infancy.

Mirroring aging bodies in a productive way entails breaking the mirror's spell and transforming its identificatory powers. It involves expanding the mirror's scope and transmitting its promises to other objects and embodied subjects. Crossfield's and Gober's art works, in my view, provoke such a rupture in the limited yet effective charm of the looking glass. In pointing at the fissures, rough edges, blind spots, and potential failures of the mirror, in treating it as a fallible object, while conceptualizing it as a form of intimate substance, I aimed to expose self-formation, especially for aging subjects, as a process in which one not only relies on the mirror, but must also be suspicious of it, and possibly resist its lure.

¹⁰² In Krauss' book on the *Formless* she does not give a reference for Lacan's statement. But, in another article she refers the reader to Lacan's French essay "De nos antécédents," in *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966: 71). See Krauss, 1996: 44.