

# Hud/Skin

**PASSEPARTOUT 46**

Skrifter for  
kunsthistorie

Årgang 28  
2026

Hud/Skin

PASSEPARTOUT

NR. 46—28. ÅRGANG—2026

UDGIVER

Passepartout—Skrifter for kunsthistorie

CVR-nummer 25 34 04 18

c/o Aarhus Universitet

Bygning 1580, lokale 024

Langelandsgade 139

DK-8000 Aarhus C

ISSN 0908–5351 (tryk)

ISSN 2597–0704 (online)

Passepartout er et peer reviewed tidsskrift.

Dette nummer udgives med støtte af Ny Carlsbergfondet.

**NY  
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GRAFISK TILRETTELÆGGELSE

Anders Brandstrup

Bogen er sat med Minion og Acumin.

TRYK

700 eksemplarer

Specialtrykkeriet Arco A/S, Skive

Trykt på Ofset 120g

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LIS NORUP



# Skin

## Introduction

EDWARD PAYNE, LAURA KATRINE SKINNEBACH,  
AND GRY LIND MERRILD HANSEN

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Skin is contradictory. It is the site of creation and destruction, transformation and regeneration. On the one hand, the skin is the largest organ and outermost covering of the human body, protecting the internal organs from external assaults. It forms a shield against harmful microorganisms and chemicals, and it regulates the body temperature while simultaneously containing the body's vital fluids. The skin is a resistant membrane which can heal and renew itself by replacing old cells with new ones. On the other hand, skin is vulnerable. It is porous and can be attacked or decomposed by illness, microbes, and bacteria. It is soft and thin, and can easily be penetrated, lacerated, broken, flayed, burned, and scarred. Skin can also harden, crack, peel, flake, stretch, wrinkle, blush, blemish, and blister.

Skin is a contentious cultural artefact. It constitutes the body's encounter with the world and may be read like a map of our lives and identities. But the different signs inscribed on our skin – its pigments, decorations, holes, scars, and hair (or lack thereof) – embody cultural meanings that throughout history have led to discrimination and repression, or privilege and power. Skin is a field of cultural debate and calls for further critical study. From a new-materialist perspective, we might trouble the tendency to treat the skin in anthropocentric terms, for does the tree not have skin? And what of the sculpture, the robot, the animal, or the face of the earth – skin surfaces that meet and negotiate with their surroundings?

Skin is pervasive. It envelops bodies – our own and those of others – and constitutes the inescapable interaction between all entities. The skin senses and it is sensed. Skin also permeates our speech, as revealed by numerous figurative expressions: “beauty is only skin deep,” “by the skin of one's teeth,” “no skin off one's nose,” “to be comfortable in one's own

skin,” “to be skin and bone,” “to be thick- or thin-skinned,” “to get under one’s skin,” “to have skin in the game,” “to jump out of one’s skin,” “to make one’s skin crawl.” These phrases concern the resilience of skin, as well as its penetrability. Most importantly, they demonstrate that skin receives and produces metaphorical meanings. Skin is necessarily related to the visual by virtue of its visibility. Indeed, since antiquity, skin has occupied a prominent position in the visual arts. Tattooing, scarification, and body paint, for example, make the surface of the human skin a canvas, and likewise, the bodily surface lends itself as a metaphor for a pictorial surface or support used in artistic representation.

Skin – human or other-than-human – is a frontier between outside and inside, surface and depth, visibility and invisibility. As matter and metaphor, skin offers an opportunity to investigate negotiations between the visual and the sensory from various historical and cross-cultural perspectives. In this theme issue of *Passepartout*, we explore the problem of skin and its intersections with art and visual culture. How are the material properties and metaphorical potentialities of skin incorporated in art and visual culture? How does skin connect such disciplines as language, literature, philosophy, art, medicine, and science? The following thirteen articles probe various issues concerning skin as a material, conceptual, metaphorical, bodily, or artistic interface; collectively, they interrogate skin as a multisensory organ, the materiality of skin, the skin of matter, and the troubling relation between skin and identity.

## Contents

Skin is the membrane with which we encounter our surroundings, a “sk-interface” (Hauser, 2008). This concept is underscored by **Anna Walker** and **Jo Milne** in their art-based study on the vulnerability and mortality of the skin of the body, and on the membrane as a container or an “edge of separation,” which is nonetheless permeable and porous. This theme is also central to the article by **Lea Emilie Hansen**, who analyses the porosity of skin as a prerequisite for the experience of Sissel Tolaas’ olfactory artwork *Liquid\_Money\_2* (2021). Her article reveals that the skin functions as a membrane through which we become part of the world, an experience

that we share with others. **Victoria Lyder Tissot** expands the discussion to consider animal skin and the tensions inherent in “animal-made-objects.” Comparing two materially similar, yet ultimately distinct artefacts – a second-hand fur coat made of mink pelts, and the Danish 1849 constitution, made of parchment from sheep and calf – Tissot addresses the dual nature of these objects as simultaneously influenced by human and animal agency. She suggests that the subtle traces of the once living animal persist as they become sites of human-animal encounter and transformation. **Chris Fernald** examines the tensions between self and the world, taking as a case study the strange vessels of *Void Fill*, Romanian artist Andra Ursuța’s exhibition at David Zwirner Paris (2021). Coining the term “grotesque fragment,” Fernald argues that the artist’s sculptures draw on traditions of fragmentation and grotesquerie in art to offer a melancholic yet humorous interpretation of the human epidermal boundary.

Representations of skin feature in several contributions to the volume. **Simone Rossi** explores skin as a surface for performing queerness and racialized embodiment through the work of Brazilian artist Hudinilson Jr. By tracing how xerox-based reproduction and live performance activate the skin as a haptic and vulnerable threshold, Rossi shows how exposure, fragmentation, and desire intertwine in a practice that unsettles normative frameworks. Skin emerges here as a charged interface of resistance, mediation, and queer singularization. **Emil Elg** writes about racialized figures in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Danish painting. Specifically, he examines the racialized figures that populate 18<sup>th</sup>-century Danish portraiture, focusing on how enslaved Black children appear as aesthetic counterpoints whose presence is often minimized or erased in contemporary museum interpretation. His article demonstrates how these portraits affirm white subjectivity while reducing enslaved figures to objects or symbols, arguing for new interpretive languages that confront the violence embedded in these visual histories.

Adopting a similar approach in his article on “Mapping the Skin” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, **David Ludwig** traces significant shifts in the rendering of human skin, both in medical and artistic contexts. Ludwig engages with illustrations, atlases, and photographic series, which make the skin a cartographic surface, a terrain on which diagnostic signs, moral attributions, and cultural differences become visible. Photography features in

two further contributions, which conceive it as a tactile mediation, the “skinnedness” (Hron, 2024) of the photographic surface. **Jacob Bach Riis** analyses a work from Sally Mann’s photographic series *What Remains?* The chosen image is a close-up of a decaying corpse. The image sparks both fascination and disgust; for Riis, its goal is to shift the ego towards the eco, erasing the separation between humans and environment. **Margherita Foresti** addresses the aged female skin as represented by Annegret Soltau. Her article conceptualizes “skin” as simultaneously the bodily surface in Soltau’s work, and the “photographic skin,” the vehicle for the artist’s inter-medial experiments between performativity and photography.

**Hanna Gerda Brøndal** turns to artificial skin in her analysis of the silicone-covered social robot Ameca, showing how its soft surface becomes a site where human projections, norms, and attempts at control are inscribed. Drawing on new materialism, she argues that silicone skin resists these inscriptions and reveals an emerging robotic sociality that destabilizes fixed categories of emotion, embodiment, and agency, expanding the possibilities of what sociality may entail. In their autoethnographic article, **Lea Laura N. Michelsen** and **Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen** investigate the visual qualities of AI-generated skin. The authors used *Deep Nostalgia* to animate images of one of the authors’ grandmothers; based on analyses of the result, the article argues that AI completely distorts haptic visuality. The skin can itself serve as a canvas, as revealed by **Louis-Philippe Savard**, who engages with body art and performance through the case study of Wafaa Bilal’s durational performance *and Counting...* (2010). Savard argues that the skin of the artist operates as an interface between the public, the artist, and the deceased of the war in Iraq, thus offering a complex meditation on the pain of life and loss. **Lis Norup** takes a different approach in her article on hysteria and writing on skin. Here she shows that in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, skin became the center for neurological and theological debates, and also constituted the way of living for a famous stigmatic such as Marie-Julie Jahenny.

The editorial team would like to extend special thanks to the authors for their stimulating contributions, and to the Ny Carlsberg Foundation for its generous support of this theme issue.

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# Touching Skin

A phenomenological discussion of two projects, by artists Anna Walker and Jo Milne, focusing on the skin of the body as the skin of the world

ANNA WALKER & JO MILNE

*Our contact with the world exists at the skin's boundary of the self. But as theorist Donna Haraway asks: "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (1985, p. 178).<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on Haraway's words, Anna Walker analyses the photographic images of her bruised body layered onto the bones of animals: *Bruised Ecology* (2024); and Jo Milne discusses new artworks, *Cytocdysis and Reticularae* (2024) that at first glance appear to be flayed skin, oozing and vulnerable after desquamation.*

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## Introduction

This essay explores the relationship between skin and the world through a phenomenological investigation, drawing on two separate research projects by Anna Walker and Jo Milne. In both projects, skin serves as membrane and boundary, prompting questions about its role as a vast sensory organ. For example, what new understandings emerge when we consider how skin mediates between the internal self and the external world? How might skin inscribe narratives or histories that extend beyond its biological function? In what ways does skin challenge the boundaries between human and non-human entities, acting as a point of connection and transformation? These questions generate new ways of understanding embodied knowledge, where sensing and witnessing arise from a plurality of viewpoints, and the whole body becomes actively engaged in acts of seeing and hearing. Skin is perceived as not merely a barrier, but as an active participant in the exchange of sensations and environments.

In Walker's photographs, skin is the site of transformation and the separation between animal and human. For Milne, her sculptures are a means to deconstruct different materialities. The artists' research is one of enquiry and discovery embracing thinking through making,<sup>2</sup> employing cross-disciplinary methods or 'methodological abundance' (Hannula, 2005, p. 40). With phenomenology as the cornerstone Walker utilizes auto-ethnography<sup>3</sup> to weave personal experience into a broader epistemological dialogue about skin. Whilst Milne adopts speculative inquiry, embracing curiosity and open-ended exploration to delve into the multifaceted qualities of skin, allowing for interpretations that are fluid and evolving. Writing emerges as a means to analyze and contextualize the act of making, deepening the enquiry and translating a dynamic practice of creation into reflective engagement with Walker's images and Milne's sculptures. It is a shared undertaking, making through writing, the co-authorship establishing reciprocal reflection that points to new speculations.

The psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu develops the concept of skin as the "common sense" to describe the fifth function of the skin (Anzieu, 1980), analogous to philosopher Michel Serres' description of the skin as the "sensorium commune" (Serres, 2008, p. 70).

[...] in the skin, through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin. [...] The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling. (Serres, quoted by Connor, 1999, p. 97)<sup>4</sup>

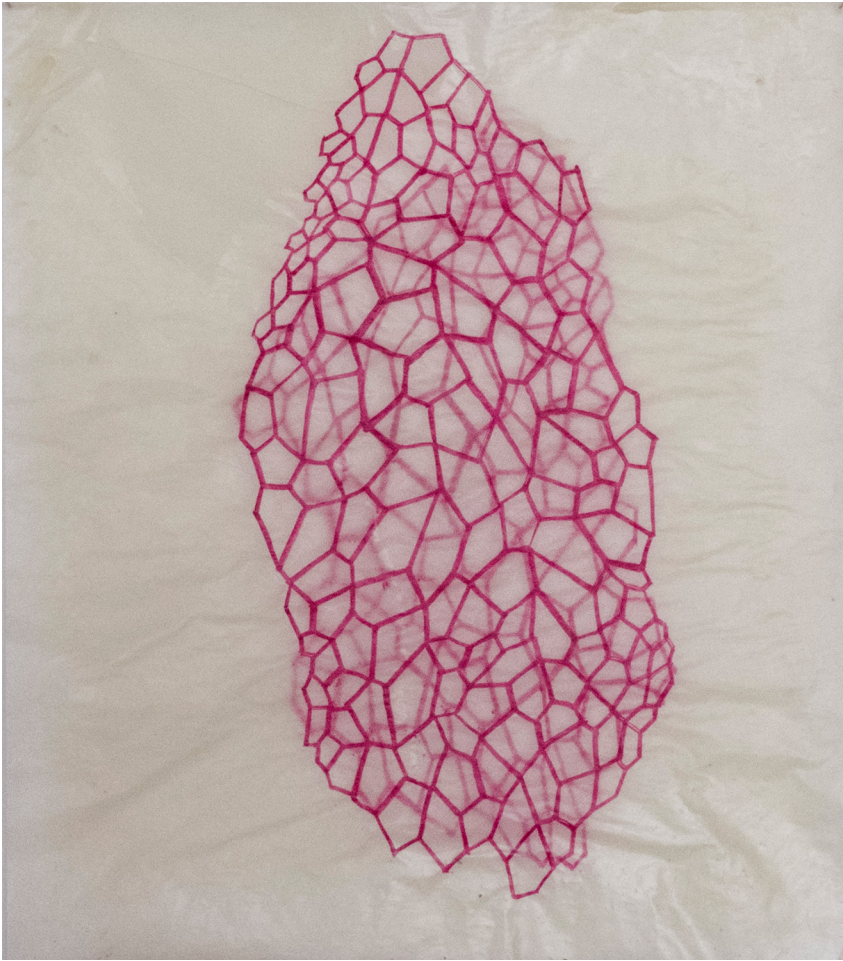
Skin is the meeting place, the medium through which we perceive the world and how we interact with it. The touch of skin upon skin is both arrival and departure dependent on the nearness or distance of the other. It is the place of making and of unmaking enacted in the inter-mingling of bodies. It is also the doing and undoing in the touch of the self, which for Serres is never wholly symmetrical. As Connor continues: "At every touching of oneself, every contingency, soul or consciousness crowds disproportionately on one side or other of the transaction, and is relatively absent from the other" (1999, p. 97). The asymmetry in self-touch manifests in the relationship between Milne's sculptures and her viewers: the artist's touch remains embedded in the work while the viewer's desire to touch

is perpetually deferred. Similarly, in Walker's photographs, it manifests in the slippage between bruised skin and bone – never quite aligning, never fully integrated.

Milne's artworks echo inner membranes, cytoskeleton structures, and cellular skins and are as seductive as they are abject.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Walker navigates the desire to understand our current challenges with climate change, extinction, and the grief of living when so much of the world is in crisis. There is an undercurrent of violence in the work of both artists, pointing to the fragility of existence and the skin that connects and separates us. For Milne, the violence is in the raw flayed skin that points to the dermis, and to the reticular layers that lie hidden beneath. In Walker's photographs bruised skin layered over animal bone implies a violence, a ghostly remembering of trauma.

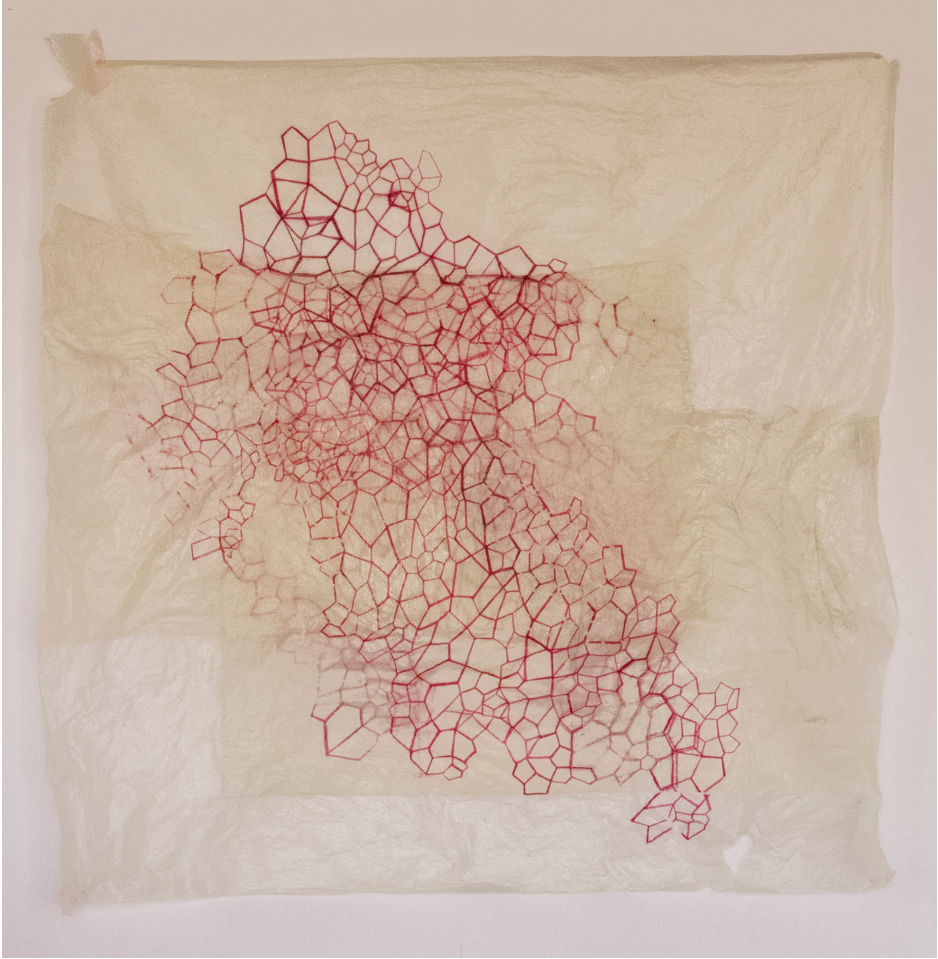
### *Cytocdysis and Reticularae*

Milne initiated the projects *Cytocdysis* and *Reticularae*<sup>6</sup> out of a desire to return to a tactile approach, moving away from the computer screen where much of her research is based. The two sculptures (*Cytocdysis*) and two drawings, (*Reticularae*) are a response to the permeability of skin, and a consideration of the multiple layers beneath the epidermis and the inner architectures of cellular membranes. The research builds on how scientific visualisations of cellular structures could be translated into more tangible forms; a project she began in 2022, at the Department of Medicine and Life Science at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (MELIS, UPF).<sup>7</sup> Beneath membranes of paper, structures resonant of the actin, tubulin and intermediate filaments of a cell emerge. In the *Reticularae* series, (Ill. 1 and Ill. 2), meshworks drawn in red are configured into thin structures. Their translucent surface glistens as a result of the wax and varnish used to strengthen the paper. In contrast, *Cytocdysis*, (Ill. 3) is more sculptural: the paper is molded into three-dimensional forms, built with layers of paper pulp, oil skin paper and shellac.<sup>8</sup> Yet the molds that shape them are no longer present, now peeled away, the paper skins point to the absence of a framework used to form them. These new sculptural artworks emerge from the wall or the floor like growths or swellings, and at first glance look as if they are skins



ILL. 1  
*Reticularae I*, 2024, 27 × 24 cm, sulphurized paper, acrylic paint, wax.

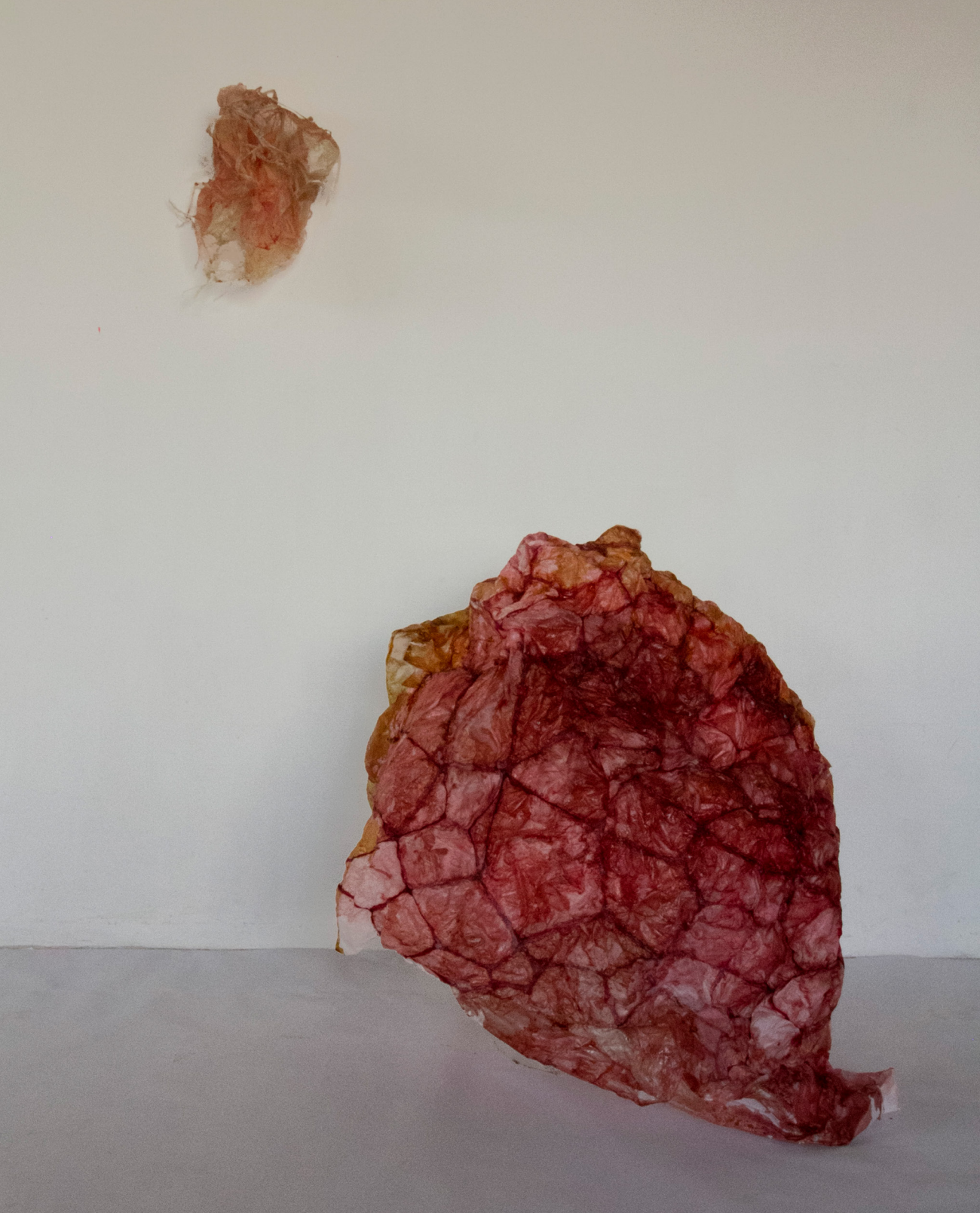
discarded by an unknown creature. The two-dimensional *Reticularae* series continues Milne's consideration of crystalline nets and complex mesh works. The lines traced in paint are layers of sulphurized paper also sealed in varnish and wax. Their wrinkled, ethereal nature breaks with the smooth sheer surface of Milne's earlier paintings.<sup>9</sup> The titles, *Cytocdysis* and *Reticularae*, refer to the dual emergence inherent in cellular or *cytostructures*.



ILL. 2

*Reticularae III*, 2024, 106 × 103 cm, sulphurized paper, acrylic paint, varnish.

The sculptures hold traces of the corporeal, a paper-thin fragility that evokes a different kind of embodiment. They recall the cast-off snake skins that Milne gathers while walking her dog through the dry wheat fields of rural Catalonia. The snake's epidermis, though damp when first shed, dries into a paper-thin vestige, its patterns resonating with the veins in Milne's sculptures. This iridescent fragility of the abandoned skins is what



compels her to collect them. Her sculptures share this quality: repelling and attracting in equal measure. Their fragility is offset by red stains and glints suggestive of blood or other bodily fluids.

Milne's sculptures are a remembering of touch, of the sensation of skin. Their surfaces feel familiar yet uncertain, echoing what Georges Didi-Huberman describes as "touching-without-touching", a paradox in which contact coexists with estrangement. "Consider this chiasmus of the surface," he writes, "how it swells between vision and touch, like something blind which gropes for sight and expression" (2004). This tension defines the viewing experience of Milne's work. Her sculptures invite tactile intimacy while simultaneously denying it – too fragile to touch, and mounted just out of reach, high on the gallery walls.

Beneath the epidermis, each dermal layer possesses a distinct consistency and internal structure. In the *Cytocdysis* series, Milne plays on this by employing different construction techniques. Developed in the studio through a hands-on approach, paper pulp and sheets of paper are layered and dried, with the structure of the paper both responding to the different drying times and the molds employed. These forms are an experiment, an evolution from the flat "skin" of Milne's paintings to three-dimensional forms that resist identification as specific body parts.

The creation of these sculptures requires touch with fingers, a whole bodily engagement in which a conversation is established between Milne's skin and the skin of the object. Elaborated through a process of thinking through making, their source is a tactile exploration of the tensions of paper. Crafted with great care, the damp paper is handled as gently as a skin graft to prevent the paper from tearing or ripping. This act of fabrication is accompanied by a sense of uncertainty as the paper only adopts its final form once dry. Its shape results from a dialogue between gravity, the underlying armature and the internal tensions within the pulp meshwork and paper skins.

ILL. 3 [OPPOSITE]

*Cytocdysis I*, 2024, 39 × 34 × 21 cm, paper pulp, onion skin paper, ink, gum-arabic, and *Cytocdysis III*, 2024, 83 × 73 × 54 cm, paper pulp, onion skin paper, pigment and shellac.

As flayed or cast-off skins, these sculptural forms are “The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10). They point to death but also to regeneration. They represent Milne’s response to the inner membranes of reticular layers and cytoskeleton structures as well as to the endless processes of apoptosis and multiplication in which cells die and regenerate as part of the intrinsic cycle of life. Peeled and peeling, these painted skins are as seductive as they are abject. Throughout her essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva repeatedly posits a connection between abjection and the border where abjection is that which disturbs identity, system and order. Abjection is ambiguity arising from the impact of a rupture.

Milne’s sculptures create discomfort, rejecting elegance for a scabrous form of being, as if an unknown body has been excoriated, its outer epidermis peeled away. Her intention is to call the viewer to the tangible, to feel the wound, in a manner akin to the religious painting of the *Incredulity of Thomas* (1601-1602), by Caravaggio (1571-1610). The painting depicts the apostle Thomas seeking comprehension of Christ’s ascension through touching his wounds. The focus is on the right hand of Thomas, guided by Christ. Two other apostles look on, unquestioning of Christ’s identity they are captivated by his wound as a touchable phenomenon. But where Thomas found certainty through touch, Milne’s works offer something more ambiguous. Her sculptures are skins of death and resonate with absence, while representing transformation, for in ecdysis the serpent molts its skin to grow or to heal. The cast-off skin, like the multiple layers we shed every day, is an intrinsic part of the never-ending breakdown and renewal of cells, which underlies life.

It could be said that Milne’s sculptures activate a form of caress, as philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests: “(...) in a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were a trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking like an absence which, however, could not be more there” (1990, p. 108). They hold the trace of the artist who has left her imprint on the paper. Milne’s sculptures are a return to thinking through making – or material thinking – in a playful reinterpretation of scientific visualization through a hands-on exploration of materials. They are not planned, so much as found, creating an open-ended, speculative

enquiry. They are an event that holds a place for touch, a touch that existed in their creation but cannot be present in their exhibiting because of their frailty. In this way, they echo the loss and absence in Walker's photographs: *Bruised Ecologies*.

### *Bruised Ecologies*

Walker's photographic series, *Bruised Ecologies*, (2024)<sup>10</sup> is composed of nine digital color photographs, 297 × 420 mm, printed on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper. Paper that Walker perceives as *the skin* of the photograph, the surface that holds the layers of color, light and shadow together, in this instance a smooth white surface. Each artwork is a composite of images: bones from a variety of animals<sup>11</sup> overlaid by Walker's bruised skin from two falls remembered here:

Fall 1: 2022, 40°C, the hottest day of the year, and I was teetering on a metal sheet laid over a hole between my house and the neighbor's construction site to my left. The neighbor to the right of my cottage approached with bare feet, I gazed at her toes, her pale 80-year-old skin and stepped back to make space between her body, her feet and mine, then slipped deep into the hole. Like every fall I've ever had, it was in slow motion. I closed my eyes and for a moment time stilled, and then I was lying on my side as if sleeping, head resting on bleeding hands, the blood staining the earth. When I opened my eyes, the construction site manager was peering down at me – "What's happened here?" he asked. Without a sound, I gathered myself up and limped inside to find ice as blood pooled into my shoe. Nothing had broken, but the bruise was tremendous, and the heat of the metal sheet had burned an indent into flesh and bone. Three years later it's still tender. Occasionally I rub it to find the bruise, briskly making the skin pink and for a moment it slowly yellows, remembering.

Fall 2: 2017, I was thrown over the handlebars of my bicycle, aided by the weight of a large backpack and the kerb that met my tyre. It was early in the morning, and I was racing to get the train. Both accidents were a reminder of the frailty of the human body, the collision between that frailty and the events that render the body, my body, damaged.

The colors of the images are faded, almost dreamlike, and at times it is difficult to discern where the bruises end and the bones begin. They are close up, abstract and fragmented, both a memory of, and a reference to.

At no point is the subject matter contextualized; rather they are traces of bone and tissue. While the bruises act as a biography of the artist's flesh, the bones are anonymous: they do not point to one genus over another, they have no indexical markers other than that they were once living, walking, breathing animals that resided in a zoo. The photographs recall Kristeva's reference to the creative process of the artist seeking a new internal language to utter what is otherwise unspeakable. Here what is unspeakable is extinction, the devastation of the earth and the increasing loss of species: animal, plant, and insect, due to climate change. Speechlessness: the silence that comes from not knowing the name for what no longer exists. Through bruised skin and the pale, bleached bones of death, Walker is drawing attention to the ghostly departure of what she holds dear; they are in essence, photographs about grief and loss, as philosopher Vinciane Despret movingly describes:

What the world has lost, and what truly matters, is a part of what invents and maintains it as a world. The world dies from each absence; the world bursts from absence (...) When a being is no more, the world narrows all of a sudden, and a part of reality collapses. Each time an existence disappears, it is a piece of the universe of sensations that fades away. (Despret, 2017, p. 219)

Similar to Milne's forms, the ghostly nature of the images requires a reaching, an invitation for the viewer to grasp what is on view, a sense-making of the abstraction of intertwined bones and skin. Philosopher Jean Luc Nancy posits the photo as the body: "It is the body, its thin surface, that is detached and removed by the film" (Nancy, 2005, p. 107). The body of the image is held in the body of the photographer, the subject and the viewer. The skin of the image is both the bruise and the surface of the photographic print. One dissolves into the other. Or as Nancy describes: "A photograph is a rubbing or rubbing away of a body" (2005, p. 107), one skin becoming momentarily another, creating a tension between presence and absence, a yearning for the lost skin. Walker's bruised skin literally rubs against the digital surface, creating a palimpsest where personal trauma and collective loss become indistinguishable.

In Walker's images, the bruised skin is a communicator, an inscribed site of wounding – a surface for the marks left by others. For Serres, the

skin is the true core of the body, being both subject and object, within and without, it is the place where “the soul resides (...) where the I is decided” (2008, p. 20). It is the place of consciousness of the self.

Skin on skin becomes conscious, as does skin on mucus membrane, and mucus membrane on itself. Without this folding, without contact of the self on itself, there would truly be no internal sense, no body properly speaking, coenesthesia even less so, no real image of the body (...). (Serres, 2008, p. 22)

The bruised skin in Walker’s images is not so much at the intersection of one body meeting another body, but rather at the conjoining of circumstances in time and space. In both situations, the bruises came about as a result of falling. Both falls required a landing, a *terra firma* to break the fall, and although the injuries were relatively minor and no bones were broken, in each happening it was as if time stood still. Far from being momentous in comparison to the traumas that Walker has experienced throughout her life, there was, in this instance, a deepening embodied realization of the fragility of the human body: that the simplest of actions could result in injury – even death, which stayed with her for months. Falling down the hole also triggered a memory from childhood, a near death experience of slipping over the edge of a cliff with over a hundred meter drop below, of the panic of holding on to the edge as stones and grass fell away, of the nothing that followed. She remembers falling and then being swooped up and saved by her father. The bruise holds these memories, it is never one instance that is inscribed on a body, but an accumulation. To return to Anzieu, it is triadic. The skin envelops the body, the ego the psyche, and “[...] thought [*la pensée*] envelops thoughts [*les pensées*]” (1993, p. 31). The bruise then – a ghosting, the skin, a container of memories. As he writes: “The skin shields the equilibrium of our internal functioning from exogenous disruptions, but in its form, texture, colouring and scars, it preserves the marks of those disruptions” (Anzieu, 1989, p. 40). Walker’s images function as Anzieu describes. They are marks of disruption, active containers of memory, holding both the immediate trauma of falling and the deeper anxieties about ecological collapse.

Bruises are tied to pain, to sensitivity, and the passage of time. The tactile qualities of skin evoke a visceral response. In Ill. 4, for example, we



ILL. 4

*Bruised Ecologies 2*, 297 × 420 mm, printed on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper.

see the raised surface of the skin, where tiny fair hairs catch the light. Like Milne's sculptures, viewing these images has the potential to elicit a sensory reaction. The contrast between textures of soft, bruised skin and hard, skeletal structures invites the viewer to reflect on their bodily experiences. This haptic resonance is described by Laura Marks as a visual strategy "that can be used to describe alternative visual traditions, including women's and feminist practices, rather than a feminine quality in particular" (2000, p. 170). It is a feminist practice that proposes tenderness, care and respect for all living things, a practice that the fragility of Milne's and Walker's artworks bring attention to, be it through the damage inflicted through falling or in the paper-thin presence of the forms themselves. In Walker's photographs, the bruise is a reminder of the body's susceptibility to injury, but it is also a signal of its healing capabilities. It is this tension that moves in and out of focus in her artwork. The bruise is the signifier of an unstable embodiment,



ILL. 5

*Bruised Ecologies 2*, 297 × 420 mm, printed on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper.

a body that is incomplete, and the artworks hover in this instability. The superimposing of the artist's skin on animal bones suggests a landscape of togetherness, adding to the tension – one unable to function without the other. It is through this coupling of soft human skin with hard animal bone that animal and human are intertwined in their vulnerability, caught in the in-between space of wounding and healing, death and life, absence and grief.

The photographs are also an ongoing thinking about the role of photography in light of the billions of images produced daily. Walker takes photographs as a method of documenting thoughts, dreams, walks, etc. *Bruised Ecologies* is about blurring the place between this form of documentation and painting. This inevitably raises the question as to whether the images can still be regarded as photographs, for Walker's photographs did not originate in the enclosed and communicative space between light, camera and film, to eventually emerge from the darkroom. These pho-

tographs were formed and edited through technology (Canon SLR, and Adobe InDesign). What does that mean for the photograph, and the future of these particular photographs? Do the photographs and therefore the subjects of the photographs suffer for being *born* in this way, for simply arriving without the alchemy of developer and fixer? Though Walker's images in their printed form become objects, they remain in essence un-touchable.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Walker's skin, present as part of the image, cannot be touched. Rather the viewer is invited to sense her bruise on their skin and understand how the tender flesh gives way to the hardness of bones (*here, our bones, animal bones, they are as one*).

Philosopher Roland Barthes' concept of the photograph is a "living image of a dead thing" (1982, p. 79). According to Barthes, what is unique about a photograph was its punctum: the seductive, sensory effect of a photograph on the viewer. "It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me" (Barthes, 1982, p. 26). The punctum is a rupture that carries with it a vision of the future. It flashes up at a moment of danger. In the instance of Walker's photographs, the viewer knows this is bruised skin, but does not know what is beyond each section of bruised skin, whose body it belongs to, what happened to the body to cause this bruising, or indeed what then happens to the body after the bruising. The viewer is held in a suspended moment of time: the moment when the bruise takes form and communicates the frailty of the artist's body, recalling the stilling of time when the artist fell. Together, the layered bones and bruises present an ethereal landscape, a map of fragility, where the bruised skin becomes a cover, an unstable layer of protection for the vulnerable nakedness of bones of animals now extinct. In her essay, "Loving a Disappearing Image", Marks suggests that the blurry illegibility of a photograph may aid remembering. "[...] an image that is grainy, indistinct, or dispersed over the surface of the screen invites a haptic look, or look that uses the eye like an organ of touch" (1997, p. 104). Walker's images are asking for the subject matter to be remembered.

In phenomenological terms, the haptic is a form of the visual that muddies intersubjective boundaries (Marks, 2002, p. 17), whilst psychoanalytically it is an aspect of the visual that moves between identification and immersion. As Marks comments: "The engagement of the haptic viewer

occurs not simply in psychic registers but in the sensorium” (2002, p. 18), where the eyes function like organs of touch and move over the surface of its object to discern texture, or absorb the imagery into the body. The haptic visual does not depend on the viewer identifying with a recognizable figure or character but on a more sensuous bodily relationship between the viewer and the subject. Like Walker’s images, Milne’s sculptures engage the visual to evoke the tactile but in the *Cytocdysis* and *Reticularae* series there is also the added accidental presence of sound. As the air vibrates across Milne’s artworks, gently moving them, the sounds of their fragility enter the psyche, eliciting tenderness, instilling coenesthesia, for her echoing the sound of the breeze through wheat fields.

## Finally

The body’s skin is a unified boundary – the point of embodied contact with the world. In the words of Didi-Huberman: “The skin is then a complex structure, reticular, defying geometric thinking, separating and nonseparated, intervening yet indistinct” (2004). In this essay, both artists balance the porosity of the skin with the boundaries of the skin’s membrane to identify, communicate and understand what it means to belong. The words, and connecting webpage of images, are an exposition. Photographs, objects and text echo Haraway’s concept of *worlding*: the blending of the materiality and the semiotic, crossing the boundary of skin between subject and environment. By coming together through words, thinking through their own and each other’s practice, Walker and Milne are co-making worlds. With care (*careful, and full of care*), the artists weave a tenuous membrane to contain the messiness of the world, while interrogating entangled human-world relations. In Haraway’s words:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. (Haraway, 2016, p. 12)

Their research is an ongoing exploration of the depth of things and their becoming, a philosophy of the visible and the invisible, and the commu-

nicative space beyond the surface of the skin. In her photographic series, *Bruised Ecology*, Walker addresses the loss due to extinction and its ghostly remains. Animal bones layered under bruised skin are an exploration of the themes of vulnerability and mortality at the intersection of humans and animals. While the *Cytocdysis* and *Reticularae* series by Milne focuses on how we experience and interpret the world through our senses drawing attention to the skin as container, the edge of separation, and the site of porous transference. Both artists create an awareness of the struggle of containment, where the skin can barely hold what rests within or beneath it, whether that skin be bruised, or folded, creased and painted. Milne's sculptures point to the nature of skin as a living permeable membrane that encloses and protects but can also be perforated or cast off. Walker's photographs bridge the past and the present, connecting raw skin with raw bone, both as a record of the healing power of the body and as a portend of death. Death is an undercurrent that moves between both Milne's sculptures and Walker's photographs. Walker reminds us that it is a fragmented skin-ego that holds our earth together, but within it there is hope. The cast-off skins of Milne's sculptures suggest that, much like the healing or growth implicit in ecdysis, there is the potential of renewal, and regeneration.

*Dr. Anna Walker, Plymouth University, Transtechnology Research, is a multi-disciplinary artist/researcher. She was awarded an MFA from Southampton University, 1998, and a certificate in Psychotherapy, CBPC, Cambridge, 2010. An interest in the effects of trauma on the body, developed during her work as a psychotherapist, led to a PhD in Arts and Media, completed in May 2017. Recent publications include: "Revisiting Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs to reimagine the noise of hysteria," Transtech Reader, December 2024; "When things fall apart, and the centre cannot hold," Monad: Journal of Transformative Practice, December 2024.*

*Jo Milne is a visual artist with a PhD in Fine Art from the University of Barcelona. She is a researcher and lecturer in Visual Creation at EINA, Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and also lectures at the Universitat de Barcelona. Recent publications include: "Thinking with Bookworks: The Making and Sharing of Artist's Books to Generate Relational Networks," Archaeology and Anthropology, Vol. 4-3, 2022, and "Spot the Difference, A reinterpretation of Lily Kolisko's Stiegbildmethode as a creative methodology for capturing the unseen," Bric a Brac, 6., 2023.*

## SUMMARY

### Touching Skin

*A phenomenological discussion of two projects, by artists Anna Walker and Jo Milne, focusing on the skin of the body as the skin of the world*

Researchers Anna Walker and Jo Milne consider what happens when the skin is viewed as a vast sensory organ, sensing and witnessing from a plurality of perspectives where the whole body is engaged in seeing and hearing. They also ask what emerges when other forms of epidermis are interrogated – forms that encompass the inner boundaries of the self and the cellular membranes. Donna Haraway suggests: “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (1985, p. 178). Reflecting on Haraway’s words, Walker analyses the photographic images of her bruised body layered onto the bones of animals; and Jo Milne discusses new artworks that at first glance appear to be flayed skin, oozing and vulnerable after desquamation.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Haraway was referring to cyborgs and theorized that we are all: "(...) fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation." (1985, p. 1).
- 2 Staying open to the emergent properties of the intrapsychic as well as the intersubjective.
- 3 Auto-ethnography, in this context, represents a reimagining of ethnography or anthropology. It combines an in-depth exploration of context with cross-disciplinary approaches, emphasising self-reflection and the subjective interplay between the artist's memories and experiences. There is an emphasis on self-reflection and subjective participation as both the artist and the owner of certain memories and experiences.
- 4 And translated by Margaret Sankey, and Peter Cowley: "The skin is a variety of contingency: in it, through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge. Contingency means common tangency: in it the world and the body intersect and caress each other." (Serres, 2008, p. 80).
- 5 Remembering Julia Kristeva's seminal book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).
- 6 <https://www.anna-walker-research.com/bruised-ecologies.html>.
- 7 <https://bit.ly/3TCI684> Milne at MELIS (UPF).
- 8 A material made from a solution of melted lac, a resinous excretion of the lac insect (*Coccus* or *Carteria lacca*) dissolved in alcohol, stained with natural pigments.

- 9 <https://www.jomilne.com/>.
- 10 <https://www.anna-walker-research.com/bruised-ecologies.html>
- 11 The various animal bones were given to Walker when she moved into Ann Finlayson's art studio in London. Finlayson had maintained a relationship with a zookeeper from Regent's Park Zoo, and inherited the bones whenever an animal died.
- 12 Untouchable due to the destructive traces and marks of bodily transmissions that destroy the surface of the photograph and/or because they are exhibited behind glass frames.



# Duftpartikler mod hud

## Lugtenes forbindelser med huden i Sissel Tolaas' *Liquid\_Money\_2*

LEA EMILIE HANSEN

*Under Covid-19 pandemien blev jeg ubehageligt opmærksom på, at huden på mine hænder ikke var min alene. Den var en del af en omverden af udvekslende materialiteter. Nogle kunne sanses, andre ikke. Den norske kunstner og kemiker Sissel Tolaas viser os med *Liquid\_Money\_2*, at lugtesansen gemmer på en rigdom af erkendelse, der kan udvide forståelsen for vores sammensmeltning med omverdenen.*

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The story will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world. The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us.

— Bennett, 2010, p. 4

Huden opfattes ofte som en skal, der markerer kroppens afslutning og omverdenens begyndelse. Biomedicinens fremkomst fra slutningen af det 19. århundrede skabte en fremherskende opfattelse af kroppens indre system som adskilt fra omgivelserne. En forståelse for kroppens interaktion med omgivelserne er dog ved at vinde frem. I nyere forskning beskrives kroppen som afhængig af mange andre livsformer både indeni og udenpå. Den kaldes af nogle biologer for et *holobiont*; et sammenrend af organismer i symbiose. Huden er en del af denne udveksling mellem omgivelserne og kroppens indre. På celleniveau sker det både ved, at der konstant afstødes og dannes nye hudceller, men også ved at huden er et miljø beboet af utallige mikroorganismer. De mest livlige steder på huden producerer mest lugt. Også næsen er et særligt organismerigt sted på kroppen (Formosinho et al., 2022, pp. 149-153). Næsen er derudover indgang for de mange kemiske

stoffer, vi omgives af og inhalerer hver dag, og i toppen af den sidder 50 millioner olfaktoriske receptorer. De sender indtryk videre til hjernen gennem lugtekolbens nerver, der sidder forrest på undersiden af hjernen. Ud over lugtreceptorer indeholder næsen også en følesans, hvilket man ellers kunne tro var reserveret til huden, og som ofte misforstås som en del af lugtesansen; den opfatter sviende luft. Både lugtesansen og produktionen af lugt i huden er aldeles veludviklede hos mennesker (Van Toller og Dodd, 1988, pp. xii-xiii). Derfor er det et interessant spørgsmål, hvorfor lugtesansen spiller så lille en rolle i vores erkendeshistorie. Lugtesansen kan måske hjælpe os med at sanse, hvordan vores krop interagerer med omgivelserne gennem huden.

Som den politiske teoretiker Jane Bennett har pointeret, er det på tide at “udvikle sans for (se, høre, lugte, smage, føle) en mere fyldig række ikke-menneskelige kræfter, der cirkulerer i og omkring menneskelegemer” (Bennett, 2021, p. 11). I denne artikel vil jeg analysere et kunstværk, som sanseligt demonstrerer disse ikke-menneskelige kræfter for at undersøge, om kunsten kan hjælpe denne udvikling på vej. Den olfaktoriske installation *Liquid\_Money\_2* var en del af udstillingen *RE\_\_\_\_\_* af den norske kunstner Sissel Tolaas, som kunne opleves i 2021 på Astrup Fearnley Museet i Oslo. Den bestod af en flydende sauna tilført lugten af penge. I saunaen kunne museumsgæsten opleve, hvordan den fremmede lugt trængte ind i huden og blev en del af kroppen, og derefter springe i havet for at skylle den væk igen. Jeg vil først beskrive og siden analysere værket ved hjælp af nymaterialistiske teorier beskrevet af Bennett samt fysiker og filosof Karen Barad. Analysen vil afprøve, om kunsten kan hjælpe os med at forstå hudens interaktion med luftens usynlige kemi og liv?

## Om at beskrive lugte

Lugtesansen har historisk været underkendt, men er i dag ved at vinde respekt i kunstens verden, hvilket fordrer et videnskabeligt engagement (Shiner, 2020, p. 1). Et kunstværk, som ikke er visuelt eller auditivt og ikke kan reproducere på en skærm eller i en højttaler, volder dog nogle analytiske udfordringer. Hvordan observerer man en lugt gennem tid og rum, som man ikke har fysisk adgang til? Der findes mange diskussioner om dette dilemma (se Shiner, 2020). Med *Liquid\_Money\_2* er der tale om en

specifik form for lugt i dampform, som antages at danne en væsentligt anderledes sansning end f.eks. parfume, som er formen på værkets forgænger, *Liquid\_Money\_1* (siden 2000). Saunaen sætter lugtene i forbindelse med huden, og den taktile oplevelse er svær at reproducere. Derfor vil jeg gøre brug af et interview med en gæst, der besøgte udstillingen. Interviewet blev udført i september 2024 af undertegnede med Maja Helene Vestergaard, der havde oplevet værket flere gange<sup>1</sup>. Interviewet giver adgang til de detaljer, et taktilt saunaformat har som særpræg. Der var gået tre år siden, hun havde oplevet værket, men det bemærkelsesværdige var, at hun huskede mange detaljer omkring sanseindtrykkene. Hun havde oplevet værket fire gange, hvilket giver adgang til variationer af oplevelsen. Med interviewet kan vi følge alle de forhold, der påvirkede museumsgæsten. Dog kan lugtbeskrivelser være svært tilgængelige, hvis læseren ikke kender den beskrevne lugt. Dette er bl.a. en konsekvens af, at lugtesansen ikke har haft en stor rolle i samfundet i nyere vestlig historie, og vi mangler sprog til at beskrive lugte. I stedet nøjes vi f.eks. med at referere til lugtens oprindelse (Classen et al., 1994, p. 3). Nogle dufte beskrives f.eks. i interviewet som fjordvand eller træ, hvilket kan være genkendeligt for nogle og diffust for andre. Præferencer spiller også ind, og værket var hos den interviewede en behagelig oplevelse, hvilket uundgåeligt vil påvirke analysen.

Dette fører til en anden egenskab ved lugtbeskrivelser; de er subjektive. Det subjektive er en forudsætning for at tale om dufte, da de opleves kropsligt for den enkelte, og det manglende olfaktoriske sprog giver anledning til metaforiske beskrivelser. De kan bidrage til en rigere gengivelse af værkets olfaktoriske æstetik. Jeg vil prioritere graden af detaljer frem for generaliserbarheden, og derfor har jeg foretaget et langt, kvalitativt interview. Den subjektive beskrivelse giver også adgang til den affektive oplevelse af værket, som behandles med nymaterialistisk teori for at beskrive værkets kropslige virkning helt ned på partiklernes plan.

### *Liquid\_Money\_2* (2021)

Værket kunne opleves iført badetøj i en sauna, der var fortøjet udenfor museet i Oslofjorden (se Ill. 1). Den følgende beskrivelse trækker hovedsageligt informationer fra interviewet<sup>1</sup>.



ILL. 1

Udstillingsvue, Sissel Tolaas, *RE* \_\_\_\_\_ (2021), © Astrup Fearnley Museet.  
Foto: Christian Øen. Gengivet med museets tilladelse.

Saunaen var opvarmet med brændeovn, hvilket tilførte en duft af brændt træ (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 26:00). Personalet sprøjtede duftolie ud i saunaen på tilfældige tidspunkter. Derfor varierede det, hvor tydeligt den kunne opfattes. “Der var nogle gange, hvor dem, der passede saunaen, ikke sprayede duften. Og på den måde forsvandt værket jo,” sagde interviewede (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 08:30).

Duften var værkets midtpunkt. Den var frisk som gin: “Grunden til, at jeg nævner det med gin, er selvfølgelig både enebærrene, men også den der spidse del af lugten, som jo har en alkoholfølelse (...) det er sådan sterilt” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 10:52). Man kan forestille sig, at næseborene i den forbindelse fik en følelse af kølig friskhed mod slimhinderne, som stod i modsætning til den varme fugt i saunaen.

Duften har en specifik oprindelse, som er baggrunden for værkets titel; flydende penge. Sissel Tolaas er kunstner med baggrund i kemi, ma-

tematik og lingvistik. Hun begyndte værket *Liquid\_Money\_1* i år 2000 ved at opfange lugtmolekyler fra schweiziske sedler og mønter i en bankboks<sup>2</sup>. Det er således et ældre værk, der på Astrup Fearnley Museet optrådte i form af en ampul med pengeduftende parfume, som museumsgæsten fik udleveret i stedet for en papirbillet. Denne billet kunne bruges gentagne gange under udstillingsperioden.

Tolaas er medejer af et laboratorium i Berlin, hvor hun i løbet af årtier har skabt et arkiv af lugtpartikler fra over 10.000 forskellige kilder<sup>2</sup>. Lugtene opfanges i deres oprindelige miljøer med noget, hun beskriver som en "superfin støvsuger". Hun analyserer de kemiske bestanddele for at kunne gendanne den molekylære sammensætning og derfra reproducere lugtene (Palmer, 2016). Det er således den autentiske lugt fra schweiziske franc, som Tolaas har genskabt i *Liquid\_Money\_1* og -2.

Duftolien i saunaen blandede sig med dampen fra vandet, som man kunne hælde over de varme sten, og den blandede damp lagde sig på huden. Dampen følte derfor lidt olieret på huden (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 08:24). Duftoplevelsen blev hjulpet på vej af smagssansen, når dampen blev indåndet, og man kunne mærke den lægge sig i næse, mund og øjne (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 09:44). Ud over penge, blandede der sig andre lugte i saunaen, afhængigt af tidspunktet. For eksempel kunne man lugte sure håndklæder, fødder eller gulvmåttens plastik, hvis der var mange mennesker. Man kan forestille sig, at lugten af de sure fødder er produktet af kroppenes mikroorganismer i huden. Man kunne også lugte det, der var tættest på: Éns egen hud, og hvis der sad personer, som havde dyppet sig i fjorden og var kommet ind igen, transporterede de lugten af fjord med på deres hud. Denne lugt kunne beskrives som brakvand: En blanding af saltvand fra havet og ferskvand fra elven, der løb ud i fjorden (Vestergaard, 2024 del 1, 34:17).

Udenfor mødtes man af en kold, frisk luft, i skarp kontrast til den varme, tunge luft inde i saunaen. Luften udenfor var tør, og lugtene sansedes "mere skarpt" i modsætning til indenfor, hvor de oplevedes mere intenst, fordi lugten var forbundet med dampen og "lagde sig på en helt anden måde," rent taktilt (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 02:06). Udenfor var kroppen indhyllet i dampe fra saunaen, som fulgte med, og mere damp dannedes i mødet mellem den varme krop og den kolde vinterluft; huden dampede.

Det var *Liquid\_Money*-dampen inde fra saunaen, som blev båret med udenfor af kroppen, hvorpå den havde overdøvet hudens egen duft: “[Duf-ten] bevæger sig med dampen, det er jo på en måde ret potent (...) sådan en duft-bærer i forhold til luft, der ikke er så mættet af vand.” Dampen hang et stykke tid omkring kroppen og sad i næsen, indtil man gik i vandet (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 38:29). Interviewede bemærkede, at dampen kunne mærkes med følesansen og som temperaturindtryk: “Om følelsen også er bundet op på det visuelle af, at kroppene står og damper, (...) men også at du kan mærke dampen på din egen hud, og hvordan den følger én, indtil man går ned i vandet. Så på en måde er det en varmekappe, man har på” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 41:13). Denne varmekappe af damp sanses således både olfaktorisk, visuelt, temperaturmæssigt og med følesansen.

Havneluften havde en svag lugt af fjord, jævnfør beskrivelsen af brakvand. Denne lugt blev mere potent, når man gik i vandet. Vestergaard uddybede, at lugten af fjorden var svær at forklare, men kunne sammenlignes med “indersiden af en mund (...) sådan at munden har været lukket lidt,” og “indelukket” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 46:50). Denne sproglige sammenligning giver mulighed for at sætte sig ind i den svært beskrivelige lugt af brakvand ved hjælp af noget, de fleste mennesker har; en mund. Ord som “indelukket” er metaforiske, men også generelle, hvilket giver mulighed for at sammenligne med lugt fra andre indelukkede kontekster. Denne lugt forbandt hun lidt med forurening (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 00:14). Sammenligningen af indersiden af en mund med fjorden kan også give et indtryk af, at de to ting deler en fælles materialitet.

Ved opstigningen fra vandet beskrev hun, at huden føltes “babyblød.” Dette føltes især til sidst, når man havde sit tøj på igen (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 02:59). Hun følte, at det at træde ind i saunaen og ud i vandet gentagne gange fjernede noget fedt i huden, nogle partikler af sved og skidt. Denne følelse tiltog, jo flere gange hun gentog processen, som om hendes krop “udskilte mere og mere.” På trods af saltvandet på huden og brakvandslugten føltes både saunaen, pengeduften og fjordvandet som rene (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 05:29).

Hun sad i saunaen i lige så lang tid, som i en almindelig sauna, for pengeduften var ikke “oredøvende” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 27:49). Dette er et eksempel på brugen af ord fra andre sansekategorier, her høresansen,

for at beskrive lugtens karakter. Dog kunne duften altid registreres tydeligt, når den var blevet sprayet (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 18:13). Når hun dyppede sig i fjorden, var hun altid i vandet i mindst et minut, længe nok til at lugten af flydende penge stort set var rensset væk (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 06:53). Når man var færdig med sit saunabesøg, var der en varig følelse af at være særligt ren, og duften sad kortvarigt i næsen. Ved det ene af besøgene, hvor hun ikke vaskede sig med rent vand efter saunaturen, havde hun en følelse af at have brugt skintonic på hele sin krop, fordi den sterile, spidse fornemmelse fra pengeduftten havde sat sig på kroppen, blandet med den rensede følelse efter den gentagne badning. Den stærke, kropslige oplevelse fulgte med i bevidstheden. Når hun har genkaldt sig duften senere, har mindet været så tydeligt, at det var som om, hun kunne lugte den igen (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 19:26).

### Lugtesansen og hudens påvirkninger

*Liquid\_Money\_2* viser, hvordan olfaktoriske sansninger er påvirkede af tid, mængde, sted, temperatur, andre sanseorganer og kulturelle konnotationer. Dette fænomen beskriver Tolaas selv i en artikel om lugtesansens kemi: "Odører præsenteret i forskellige sekvenser eller kombinationer opfattes også forskelligt" (Agapakis og Tolaas, 2012, p. 570)<sup>3</sup>. For eksempel var oplevelsen af værket påvirket af, hvad den besøgende havde snuset til i timerne forinden. En af gangene, interviewede besøgte saunaen, kom hun direkte fra resten af udstillingen på museet, og havde fået mange stærke lugtindtryk. Særligt to værker påvirkede hendes oplevelse i saunaen efterfølgende, fordi de skærpede hendes opmærksomhed på specifikke lugte, der også kunne optræde i saunaen. Det ene var *SelfLifePortrait* (siden 2005), en sæbe med duft af kunstnerens egen hud, og det andet var *Fear 21/21* (2002), en væg med lugt af sveden fra en gruppe mænd under angstanfald. Disse værker gjorde interviewede opmærksom på lugte af hud: "Det var sådan nogle dufte, der kunne hænge ved én i meget lang tid (...) og jeg tror, det er, fordi det handlede om hud" (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 33:10). Museumsgæsten er aldrig neutral i sin registrering af lugte. Det kan være tanken om det intime ved hud, der påvirker opfattelsen af en lugt. Hun beskrev værket *Fear 21/21* (2002) således: "Efter at have duftet de der, så blev jeg bare mere

opmærksom på (...) kroppes dufte.” Dette påvirkede hendes oplevelse af *Liquid\_Money\_2* den dag (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 14:29).

En persons reaktion på en lugt kan være biologisk bestemt, men også kulturelle og sociale konnotationer har indflydelse på, hvilke lugte man påvirkes af (Classen et al., 1994, pp. 1-5). Det er svært at skelne, hvilke konnotationer der genkendes biologisk, og hvilke der tillægges kulturelt. Interviewede blev kraftigt påvirket af sved- og hudlugt, jævnfør citaterne ovenfor, “hvorimod duften af penge (...) den er meget mere ‘ikke til stede’” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 33:10). Dette kan dog også have noget at gøre med mængden af duftpartikler. Lugtesansen kan i disse beskrivelser virke mere sart end følesansen, fordi svedlugten gjorde større indtryk end den olierede dampfølelse, selv om den blev sanset på afstand ved at snuse til en væg. Kombinationen af lugte- og følesansen har måske forstærket oplevelsen ved den sæbe, som duftede af hud, fordi man både lugtede sæben og fik lugt overført til sine hænder ved brug. Man kan fornemme, at lugtopplevelsen skaber en kraftigere fornemmelse af brud på intimsfæren, når det er hud, der kan lugtes, og kombineret med følesansen bliver reaktionen værre; som om lugten af en fremmed hud invaderer ens egen.

Noget andet, der påvirker sansningen af lugte, er temperaturen. Den kolde, tørre luft udenfor udtørrede slimhinderne og gjorde lugtene svagere, og “det hele blev mere skarpt”. I saunaen oplevedes duften “meget mere intenst, fordi der er den forbundet med fugten, altså med damp” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 2, 02:06). Det kan høres i disse udsagn, at luftfugtigheden har betydning. Lugtene opfattedes tydeligere, når både temperaturen og luftfugtigheden var højere. Det havde betydning, at udstillingen foregik om vinteren: “Der var mere plads til duften, fordi luften var mere klar (...) end sådan en varm sommerluft kan være” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 17:41). Dette kan lyde selvmodsigende; kulden gjorde duften mindre intens, men gav mere plads til den. Måske handler det om, at der er færre lugte fra byen og naturen om vinteren end om sommeren, og luftfugtigheden er lavere. Der findes celler i næseborene, der kan trække sig sammen og udvide sig for at regulere fugten og temperaturen af indåndet luft; på den måde er sansningerne også påvirket af disse faktorer (Van Toller og Dodd, 1988, p. xii).

Observationerne tydeliggør, at lugte aldrig kan afgrænses i et rum. Lugte blander sig og påvirker hinanden. Det er værd at bemærke, at in-

tervinterpersonen beskriver, hvordan lugte kan sidde i næsen i et stykke tid og kan hænge ved kroppen i løbet af dagen. Lugtenes gradvise henfald giver indtryk af hudens stadige udveksling med omverdenen, hvor lugten erstattes med andre materialiteter inde fra kroppen eller udefra. Man kan affeje lugte som noget forbigående, men i denne beretning er det tydeligt, at de bliver en del af kroppen i en given periode.

### En dampende materialitet

Nymaterialismen er en filosofisk retning, der søger at vise menneskets radikale indlejring i sin omverden og rette blikket mod den materialitet, som i 1980'erne og nogle årtier frem blev fraskrevet al tilgængelighed for os: Fremherskende teorier som socialkonstruktivisme og poststrukturalisme bliver kaldt *den kulturelle vending*, og der var fokus på, hvordan kulturelle strukturer skaber vores verden. I kølvandet på dette spirer et behov frem for at vende tilbage til den materielle verden (Bencard, 2016, p. 35). Arbejdet med *Liquid\_Money\_2* fordrer teorier, der kan behandle oplevelsen af at være nedsænket i forskellige materialiteter. Mange luftbårne partikler kan registreres i interviewet. Foruden dem, der direkte kan betegnes som lugte, er der vand, damp, røg, træ, forurening, sved, salt med mere. Disse materialiteter kunne sanses af den specifikke museumsgæst og trængte sandsynligvis ind og ud gennem hendes hud.

Inden for nymaterialismen findes nogle nyttige teorier til at trække analytiske vinkler ud af de olfaktoriske oplevelser; Karen Barads *agentiale realisme* (Barad, 2003) og Jane Bennetts *tingskraft* (min oversættelse<sup>4</sup>) (Bennett, 2010). Barads teori er anvendelig til at anskueliggøre menneskets opløselighed i omgivelserne, og Bennetts tilgang bidrager med et øje for ikkemenneskelige agents påvirkning på mennesket: f.eks. har den vist sig nyttig i et nyligt nummer af nærværende tidsskrift til at forstå virussets abiotiske livfuldhed (Riis, 2024, p. 22).

Luftmolekyler er en forbigået, men oplagt materialitet i dette forskningsfelt: De har en særlig dynamisk eksistens, da de er luftbårne og fordeles sig i rummet, lægger sig på og trænger igennem overflader og bliver indåndet af levende væsner. En af observationerne i interviewet, der opnår erkendelsesværdi gennem nymaterialistisk teori, er beskrivelsen af damp

som en effektiv *bærer* af dufte. Dampen beskrives som fyldt med *Liquid Money*, men også sved, fjordvand, og hvad der ellers har blandet sig ind i hudens lag. Den mættede dampatmosfære løfter de forskellige duftparkler med, både inde i saunaen og udenfor, og fordi damp stiger opad, kan duften blive hængende i luften i længere tid, stige ind i næseborene og tydeligere lugtes, jf. påvirkningen fra temperatur og luftfugtighed. Tilmed stiger dampen op fra kroppen ude i vinterluften og kommer tilsyneladende direkte fra huden. Duftatmosfæren inde i saunaen har altså sat tilstrækkeligt aftryk i hudens materielle sammensætning til, at den ikke forsvinder, så snart kroppen bevæger sig væk fra den. Den følger med kroppen. Denne observation kan forklares med Karen Barads såkaldte onto-epistemologi: Agential realisme. Her er kroppe, pengesedler, mønter, forurenede vand, plastikmåtter og håndklæder *materielle fænomener* snarere end *ontologisk adskilte enheder*, som Barad betegner det. Materielle fænomener påvirker hinanden gennem *agential intra-aktion*, når de støder sammen, og danner *materielle konfigurationer* (Barad, 2003, p. 814). En materiel konfiguration er altså en slags afgrænsning. Mennesker kan skabe konfigurationer, men også luft, lugte, plastikmåtter og penge støder sammen og flyder ind og ud af hinanden i denne intra-aktion. "Det er gennem specifikke intra-aktioner at en adskillende forståelse af væren udøves i den fortsatte ebbe og flod af agens" beskriver Barad (2003, p. 817). Hvis man anvender denne forklaringsmodel, er dampen, gulvmåttens plastikpartikler, sure håndklæder, føddernes sved og *Liquid Money*-parfumen en del af en intra-aktion med huden, og måske er lugte netop et tegn på dette: De fortæller os, at måtten, fødderne og pengene udstøder og udveksler en materialitet og ikke bare er afsluttede objekter, men i udveksling med omgivelserne, ligesom næseborene, der indånder lugten og huden, den smitter af på. Lugte er en effekt af, at selv de mest faste, afgrænsede objekter som plastik også har denne omskiftelige overflade. En anden beskrivelse i interviewet, som kan fremhæves gennem Barads ontologi, er oplevelsen af sauna- og badeprocessen, der renser sig dybere og dybere ned i deltagerens hud; huden udskiller mere og mere fedt og skidt og føles særligt ren. Spørgsmålet er i dette tilfælde, hvad der erstatter disse skidtpartikler i en ny konfiguration af kroppen? Er det brakvandets salt og forurening blandet med saunaens parfumerede pengeekstrakt? Eller er kroppens udstrækning blevet dette

lille lag af skidt og fedt mindre, og denne udstrækning erstattet af ren luft? Har vandet taget en lille del af kroppen med sig, og erstattes den af nye hudceller indefra? Måske er det en kombination af alle tre, der har erstattet fedtet og sveden i huden.

En anden tankegang, der kan hjælpe os med at forstå den olfaktoriske materialitet, er Jane Bennetts i hendes bog *Levende Materialitet*. Hun kritiserer den filosofiske og videnskabelige opfattelse af mennesket som den eneste entitet med såkaldt *magt* til at påvirke omverdenen, og beskriver magten i ting, materie og organismer. Hun navngiver dette *tingskraft*. Dette begreb understreger, at mennesket ikke er i kontrol over alle de materialiteter, der omgiver os, men at der findes alle mulige ukendte måder, hvorpå såkaldt dødt materiale kan påvirke os (Bennett, 2021, p. 34). Tingenes magt kan sammenlignes med Barads intra-aktivitet. I tilfældet med *Liquid\_Money\_2* er selve lugten af penge et eksempel på, at de schweiziske pengesedler påvirker omverdenen. Lugten fra måtterne på gulvet drejer tankerne hen på mikroplastik, der er påvist at kunne indåndes, absorberes gennem huden, krydse biologiske barrierer, påvirke helbredet og forårsage inflammation (Meena, 2022). Når interviewet indeholder beskrivelser af, hvordan lugte bliver hængende, efterlader følelsen af skintonic og at “der var flere (...) der reagerede stærkt på, at det blev for meget med lugtesanseindtrykkene” (Vestergaard, 2024, del 1, 12:35), så kan det tolkes som tingskraft.

## Økonomi som duft

Når det netop er penge, Tolaas har valgt at fremhæve i saunaformat, får det en særlig betydningsmæssig implikation. Med sin baggrund som lingvist bruger hun sproglige mekanismer i sine værker. I denne flydende, dampende tilstand iscenesættes penge som en materialitet, der svæver rundt som noget ukontrollabelt, og som et koncept, der har sin egen tingskraft. Økonomi påvirker både vores kroppe og naturen omkring os, og er ikke bare noget virtuelt, som bliver styret på børsmarkedernes kontorer. Det har et materielt aftryk af tingskraft. På samme tid giver den opløste vand- og dampform netop associationer til digitale dataskyer, som indeholder alle de informationer om valutaer, der flyder frem og tilbage mellem markederne. Det flygtige ved, at de forstøvede dråber falder hen, og værket på den

måde forsvinder, giver også et indtryk af penge som flygtige. Titlen vækker også associationer til begrebet *likvide midler*, der betegner let omsættelige værdier og derfor kan virke ironisk, når der er tale om en flygtig damp. Det kulturelle koncept, penge er, kan ses som en materiel konfiguration, der påvirker omverdenen; den duftende damp trænger ind gennem huden og viser, at de flydende penge også påvirker vores kroppe direkte. Værket belyser derfor også den mindre håndgribelige side af penge og økonomier.

Duften er beskrevet i interviewet som behagelig og frisk, forbundet med renhed. Dette er en interessant egenskab, som ikke nødvendigvis vil opleves ens af alle besøgende, men saunaen har i sig selv renhed som funktionalitet. Det rene og behagelige knyttet til tanken om penge kan stilles op mod tanken om fattigdommens beskidthed. Her tilføjes opfordringen til at vaske lugten af penge af sig i havet, hvor pengene derfor bliver transformeret til det beskidte, og havets natur får rollen som det rene, trods forurening. I denne symbolik bliver fortællingen, at økonomier er beskidte og trænger uønsket ind i alle aspekter af livet (hele kroppen), og kun kan vaskes af ved at nedsænke sig i naturens materialitet: havet. Afvaskningen af penge peger også i retning af hvidvask, der er en af de 'beskidte' dele af økonomien. Værkets lingvistiske kommentarer til økonomi engagerer på den måde den traditionelle, økonomipolitiske materialisme og trækker den ned på det sanselige, nymaterialistiske partikelplan.

## Afrunding

*Liquid\_Money\_2* skaber en altomsluttende sanselig oplevelse, hvor museumsgæsten oplever sig selv som en del af mange forskellige materialiteter, der trænger ind og sætter sig i huden. I saunaen opfattes kemiske molekyler ikke kun af lugtesansen i næsen, men også følesansen i både næse og hud. Med disse nære sanser kan vi kropsligt opleve Barads agentiale intra-aktioner. Værket demonstrerer, hvordan et konceptuelt fænomen som økonomi også er materielt, og hvordan vores krop er indspundet i denne materialitet, helt ind under hudens opløselige overflade.

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## SUMMARY

### *Scent particles on skin*

*Experiencing the connection between scent and skin in the art of Sissel Tolaas*

Skin is often experienced as a closed barrier between the inside of the body and the outside environment. New research describes our body as much more integrated in the environment. The skin is a contact point for this exchange, and this may be experienced through olfaction – the sense of smell. Through an analysis of Sissel Tolaas' scent art piece *Liquid\_Money\_2* (2021), I try to convey a sense of materiality experienced when entrenched in an atmosphere of smell as in the sauna that the piece consisted of. The analysis is written through a detailed interview with a person who had visited the museum and experienced the specific piece four times. Through this description, I uncover how smell infuses the skin, and how many more things can be smelled than we are aware of in our everyday lives. These observations, juxtaposed with New Materialist ontological views presented by Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, shape an understanding of smells signifying the flow of materials in and around us. In this way, olfactory art is an opportunity to experience the materiality of skin and the world anew.

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#### NOTER

- 1 Interviewet med Maja Helene Vestergaard foregik i september 2024 og varede en time og 15 minutter. Hele transskriptionen kan rekvireres i to dele ved kontakt til skribenten eller findes på [llk.dk/fbdnj8](http://llk.dk/fbdnj8) (del 1) og [llk.dk/35lwrh](http://llk.dk/35lwrh) (del 2).
- 2 *Smelling Reality*. (2021) <https://www.kvadrat.dk/en/about/rethink/smelling-reality>.
- 3 Alle citater og begreber, som er oversat fra kilder med et andet originalsprog, er min oversættelse.
- 4 Selvom der findes en dansk oversættelse af bogen, har jeg oversat dette ord anderledes, da jeg mener at der ellers går mening tabt.

# The Coat and the Constitution

## Animal Surfaces as Sites of Encounter

VICTORIA LYDER TISSOT

*This article explores human-animal relationships through two different yet materially similar artefacts: a second-hand coat made of mink pelts and the Danish 1849 constitution written on parchment made from sheep and calf. Considering these “faceless” animal skins reveals how animal surfaces act as “animal-made-objects” and sites of human-animal encounter. Through a material culture lens and recent theoretical perspectives, the article shows how animal matter remains active after death and postmortem processing, complicating conventional boundaries between humans and animals.*

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### Introduction

Animal skins occupy a significant role in human societies, spanning from practical uses to aesthetic, cultural, and educational purposes. The treatment and use of animal surfaces reveals much about the complexity of human-animal relationships. Skin, hide, pelt, fur, and rawhide – these are some of the terms that describe processed animal skins, each prepared in specific ways for specific functions. Although seemingly neutral, words like these articulate a clear distinction between humans and animals, often positioning humans as the dominant party and animals as resources within human-animal relationships (Heintzman, 2021, p. 361). Inspired by the *animal turn* and its confrontation with the notion of animals as passive objects, this article explores the complex relations between humans and animal surfaces through the lens of two objects: a fur coat and the Danish 1849 constitution written on parchment. Despite their apparent differences, both consist of *faceless* animal skins, processed in ways that obscure and erase their animal origins and individuality, unlike taxidermy for instance,

which attempts to actively sustain the illusion of animal life (Rony, 1996; Alberti, 2011; Poliquin, 2012). Examining them together highlights how animal presence persists to different degrees: in the coat, pelts still reveal traces of the mink, while in the constitution the animal is almost entirely effaced in the smooth, white surface. They also mark a spectrum of contexts: the coat, once a fashionable personal possession displayed on the body, and the constitution, a collective national possession largely hidden from touch or view. Yet both share qualities of smoothness and durability that make them enduring supports of human life. Through processes like cutting, stretching, tanning, and stitching, animal skins metamorphose from living beings into objects. These transformations raise fundamental questions: how much of the animal essence remains, and what is removed and diminished as the skins become objects to be worn, touched, read, and displayed? In examining these faceless skins, this paper also asks the contrary: how do animal surfaces subtly alter and affect the humans who engage with them? By exploring these ideas through case studies and theoretical perspectives, this article proposes ways to understand animal surfaces as sites of encounter and human-animal transformation.

### **Wearing Animal Skin**

When considering the use of animal skin, the idea of wearing it is often the first that comes to mind. Throughout human history, animal skin has served as a protective layer for the otherwise furless human body, shielding it from the elements and conforming to norms of bodily concealment. Yet, beyond these practical functions, animal skins have long been employed as powerful visual social markers with certain skins signifying luxury and status. In modern societies, the use of animal skin in clothing relies almost exclusively on animals bred and farmed for this purpose. While leather is typically a byproduct of meat production, where the skin is secondary to the animal's primary purpose of providing food, the fur industry operates differently. Fur-bearing animals are bred exclusively for their pelts, which are made into luxury garments. This production process involves a complex series of human-animal interactions, from breeding and slaughter to treating and assembling the pelts, and finally to the purchase and wear of





ILL. 1  
Second-hand coat made from 65 brown mink. Photo by the author.

the finished product. Several scholars have theorized and explored what happens when human and animal surfaces meet and interact through the production and wearing of animal skin. These interactions reveal tensions and blurred boundaries between human and animal actors. The following section examines mink fur through a secondhand coat, intended for female wearers (Ill. 1), as both a material lens and as evidence of the large-scale Danish mink industry. This coat raises critical questions about the dynamics of power in human-animal relations: Who holds the power over whom in this interface between human and animal skin? And perhaps more provocatively – who is wearing whom?

## Technologies of Power

At first glance, the coat may appear as if it were made from a single, continuous piece of skin. However, upon closer inspection, the seams become visible and tangible, revealing that it is, in fact, constructed from 65 individual brown mink.<sup>1</sup> The small size of mink means that many animals are required for a single coat, and unlike garments made from larger animals, the seams between pelts are an unavoidable feature. This makes the animal presence more immediate as the wearer encounters not one abstracted “fur” but the accumulated bodies of dozens of individuals. The softness, sheen, and density of mink fur further distinguish it from leather or other furs, which, historically, has contributed to mink’s desirability in fashion. The process that transforms living mink into a finished garment involves multiple steps: selective breeding, caging, feeding, slaughter, flaying, fleshing,<sup>2</sup> stretching, drying, tanning, and sewing (Weiss et al., 2013a, pp. 71-84). Each step is crucial in preserving the quality and surface integrity of the pelts, transforming the mink from living beings into a durable material for human use. While the coat’s exact origin is unknown, when or where it was made and who wore it, the lack of a label suggests it may have been privately commissioned, perhaps by someone connected to the mink industry. What we do know is that it ultimately ended up in a secondhand shop in Aarhus and was subsequently purchased for 600 DKK in 2019.<sup>3</sup> It now mostly resides in the back of a coat closet. The vast scale of the Danish mink industry in the past century and the tendency to refer to mink as collective populations, numbers, and colors such as “sapphire,” “pearl,” and “mahogany” (Weiss et al., 2013b, p. 44-45), emphasizes the perception of mink as commodities to be produced and sold.

This dynamic, where humans exert power over animals through breeding, regulation, and slaughter to transform them into material objects, is explored by Peggy McCracken through what she calls the “technology of sovereignty” (McCracken, 2017, p. 12). In her study of medieval French literature, McCracken shows how sovereignty is displayed through the killing, flaying, and use of animal skins: human dominion depends not only on animal deaths but also on the management of animal populations. She argues that “the technology of sovereignty that appropriates the use of animals as a symbolic and material support for human life (...) is a biopolitics. It

calls the power to regulate, administer, and even produce life” (McCracken, 2017, p. 29).<sup>4</sup> Crucially, however, McCracken also stresses that animal resistance can unsettle this power, undermining the very sovereignty it seeks to enact (McCracken, 2017, p. 30-31). Extending this theory to real, living animals, the mink coat reminds us of the material traces left behind from actual bodies. While the coat may appear as a seamless product of human craftsmanship, it also tells a story of animal resistance. The living conditions in mink farms often lead to self-inflicted injuries, with mink gnawing at their own or each other’s skin, creating wounds that could compromise the quality of the pelts and require mending, or lead to the destruction of the injured animals and thus reduced production (Rochmann, 1961, p. 297). Furthermore, mink farmers must wear thick gloves to handle the mink to avoid being bitten or scratched, emphasizing an active animal response to human handling. Ironically, these gloves are often made from ox hide, introducing another layer of animal materiality to the mink coat. In this way, animal skins become essential not only as the final product, but also in the very production of other animal skins (Ill. 2).

The mink coat, unlike McCracken’s literary animals, represents the literal materiality of animals condensed into a garment. Through industrialized processing, individual animals are seemingly erased, not only due to the vast numbers of mink in collective populations, but also through the removal of distinguishing features like heads, legs, and tails. These parts, which could help identify individual animals, are stripped away as the pelts are stitched into a single, cohesive object, underlining the facelessness of such animal materials. Furthermore, several layers of fabric lining help conceal the fleshy side of the mink skins and the stitching that holds them together. It is thus only after death, when the animal’s individuality and resistance are removed, that the fur becomes truly accessible to human touch and visual appreciation. While we should be cautious in framing all animal behavior strictly as resistance (Pearson, 2017, pp. 250-253), the actions of mink, influenced by the conditions in which they are confined and handled within human economic systems, display a form of resistance that cannot be overlooked. However, it is important to consider that it is each animal’s individual personality and circumstances that play a role in how this resistance manifests itself, for example in the form of food avoidance,



ILL. 2  
Mink in handler's gloved hand. Photo by iStock.com/Neznam.

aggressive behavior, or other acts of defiance against human control. At the same time, agency in this context should not be understood as conscious intention to obstruct human projects. As Pearson notes, there is a risk of anthropomorphizing if all disruptive behavior is labelled as resistance (Pearson 2017, pp. 250-253). Acts such as biting, scratching, or refusing food nonetheless alter human practices, even if the animals do not comprehend the wider economic system in which their skin is pursued.<sup>5</sup>

### Blurring Boundaries

Once the 65 mink represented in the coat were killed, they could no longer actively resist or influence what happened to them. Their bodily matter, however, could still affect, and even complicate their use as garments. Despite the measures taken to preserve the skins, their organic nature often

creates a breeding ground for pests and decay due to environmental changes. In this particular mink coat, traces of decay are evident in small bald patches of skin where fur has fallen out. Such flaws change how the coat can be worn or viewed: the smooth glamorous fur gives way to a sense of fragility and the lingering presence of animal mortality. Apart from organic material's tendency to eventually deteriorate, the agency of animal matter and its potential to impact and transform the wearer has been articulated by several scholars. Todd Borlik argues that: "Furred gowns and animal skins, then, were more than merely passive objects: even after its original owner was dead and flayed, fur could continue to radiate a bestializing influence (...)." A statement that underlines the "species-blurring" power of fur in Renaissance bear plays (Borlik, 2021, p. 195). Similarly, Chantal Nadeau examines the role of beaver fur in 20th century Canada through the concept of "furladies", which designates the intertwining of female sexuality, fur, and national economy (Nadeau, 2001, p. 194). For Nadeau, the furlady is both subject and material: post-war advertisements often showed women dressed in little more than fur, suggesting that the coats were "a natural extension of female skin" (Nadeau, 2002, p. 198). In this imagery, women became embodiments of the Canadian nation's advancements, their sexuality and bodies linked to the trade in beaver pelts that sustained its economy. The trope also reinforced enduring associations of women with nature and objectification, while simultaneously situating them as national agents. At the same time, the merging of fur and wearer into a kind of human-animal hybrid ties into broader discussions of animal agency and materiality. In both examples, the story being told complicates the relationship between human and animal to convey the idea that fur garments are not just material objects, but active extensions of the bodies they adorn. This interweaving of human and animal highlights the potential of animal materials to transform their wearers. This power that animal matter seemingly holds in the relationship between animals and humans who wear them stems from the fact that they were once living, breathing beings.

Erica Fudge introduces the term "animal-made-object", which emphasizes the inseparability of the living animal and the object it becomes after death. The term carries a dual meaning: first, the *animal-made* object

as a product constructed from the animal, and second, the animal *made-object*, emphasizing the objectified animal (Fudge, 2012, p. 42). Fudge's concept also addresses the issue of wearing animal skins. She argues that animal-made-objects worn by humans are "much more than simply a product and thence an illustration of human dominion". She further claims that "the persistent presence of the animal in the animal-made-object seems always to defy the objectification that attempts its absencing" (Fudge, 2012, pp. 49-50). This tension between the erasure of the animal and its continued presence relates to McCracken's notion of human dominion, demonstrating that the animal's agency is not entirely lost in the process of becoming object. It is compelling to consider the mink coat within this dual concept of objectification. The coat is both animal and material, shaped by human and animal agency, blurring the boundaries between wearer and worn. However, in today's context of a rapidly declining mink industry and the rise of faux fur, the animal *made-object* seems to have taken the upper hand in this complex relationship. Over the last four decades, a focus on animal rights and the moral complications of wearing fur has transformed mink coats from symbols of luxury and human success into "awkward heirlooms." This shift is clear in the fur farming bans seen in several countries in the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> In Denmark, the mink industry met its deathblow in 2020 with the mass culling of mink due to the risk of Covid-19 contamination after an already consistent decline in the demand for Danish mink.<sup>7</sup> Now, when we look at the coat, only the mink remain. Those who produced and wore it have faded from view. The fact that the coat, along with many others, ended up in a secondhand store at a fraction of the price it would initially have been valued at underlines its unwantedness. It stands as a reminder that mink coats are increasingly associated with tales of animal suffering rather than human success. The 65 mink present in the coat have not only resisted and altered their previous handlers and wearers; in a sense, it seems that they have entirely *outworn* them.

### Writing and Reading Animal Skin

For nearly two millennia, animal skin has served as the foundation for human communication in the form of parchment, used as a surface for

writing, drawing, and painting. Parchment proved to be far more durable than the papyrus rolls it replaced, making animal skin essential for the preservation of countless texts and images (Reynolds and Wilson, 1991, p. 35). Religious, legal, and literary works were almost exclusively recorded on animal skin, a tradition that has continued into modern times. Just as with the production of fur coats, the production of parchment relies on careful preservation techniques to ensure the skin's durability and suitability for its intended use. Various animals, including calves, sheep, and goats, have been employed for this purpose, with each animal offering unique qualities for different kinds of texts.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike fur-bearing animals bred solely for their pelts, those used in parchment production were not killed for their skins alone (Turner, 2018, p. 47). The transformation from living animals into parchment was a lengthy process, which ideally resulted in a smooth, white, surface. Like the mink coat, the animals used in parchment production became unrecognizable during the process, and arguably to an even greater extent. Unlike fur garments, which may still bear some recognizable features of the original animal, parchment requires a total removal of fur and other features to create an effective writing surface. As a result, the animals seem to disappear into complete anonymity, rendered invisible behind the text and images they carry. Yet, writing and reading on parchment create a unique and complex interaction between humans and animal surfaces. In this section, theoretical concepts of parchment as a site of human-animal encounter are explored, drawing parallels to recent examinations of the original 1849 Danish constitution (Ill. 3) – a crucial legal text written on animal skin. How does the animal make itself known in this kind of skin interface between humans and animals? And how do humans, in touching, writing, and reading, engage with the animal beneath the text?

### **Making Textured Surfaces**

On June 5, 1849, Frederik VII signed the first Danish constitution. This marked a step out of absolute rule into a modern democratic form of government.<sup>9</sup> Recently, on the constitution's 175-year anniversary, the codex has been the subject of close examination to establish its material origin.



ILL. 3  
Title page of the Danish constitution, 1849. Scan by Rigsarkivet.

At first, the appearance and quality of the pages, which are thick and white, made specialists wonder whether they were made of thick paper. Closer inspection, however, revealed that they were, in fact, made of parchment from four calves and one black sheep, all covered in a heavy layer of white paste.<sup>10</sup> In a substantial work from 1762, Jérôme de La Lande explains the art of parchment-making. The description of the process is a valuable source for understanding how parchment was made, the problems that could occur during the process, and the desired outcome. His description of the method begins after the slaughter and flaying of the animal. Once the skin was separated from the body, the weeks-long process began with removing the fur or wool, involving repeated lime treatments and scraping of the outer surface. The skin was then clamped to a stretching frame for fleshing and further scraping on the inner side. Then, it was dried, chalked, and scraped to make it lighter and whiter. Still not entirely smooth, it was then treated with a pumice stone. Following the description of the initial work, de La Lande dedicates a section to the correcting of damages to the skin, which could involve stitching or patching up with smaller fitted pieces of parchment. The final step was the cutting and squaring of the parchment. The qualities sought from parchment-making are continuously underlined: whiteness, smooth texture, and rigidity (de La Lande, 2021).

De La Lande spends a considerable number of pages describing how the ideal parchment is difficult to achieve due to defects resulting from experiences and conditions of the animals' life. Sheep pox and injuries, for instance, could compromise the quality of the skin. He concludes that if damages were great enough, such skins should rather be used for other purposes such as sieves or book bindings (de La Lande, 2021, p. 154). The animal's experiences in life, evident in its skin, thus greatly affected what it would become in death. A perfect white, smooth surface was almost impossible to achieve, and textures including blood vessels, pores, and scars were difficult to eliminate entirely, resulting in parchment surfaces with continuous traces of the animal to which it previously belonged. This is evident in the constitution and the choices made to create a suitable surface for the text. Curiously, the parchment used is of questionable quality.<sup>11</sup> The use of different kinds of animals, particularly a black sheep, which, according to de La Lande, was best reserved for different purpos-

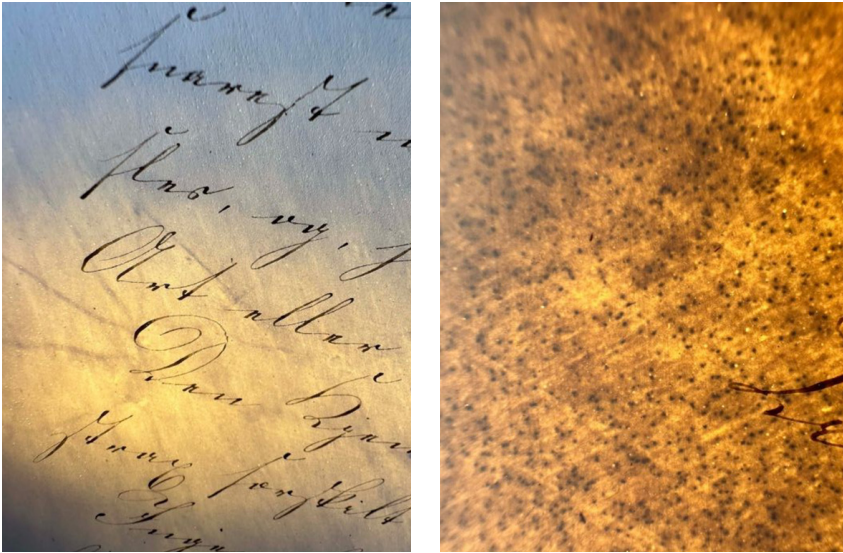
es due to the remnants of black wool in the skin (de La Lande, 2021, p. 352), is a strange choice for such an important codex. De La Lande is also adamant about the fact that bad quality or damaged parchment should never be used for documents of great significance (de La Lande, 2021, p. 349). Perhaps this was the reason for the unusual thick white paste used to whiten the pages. It certainly helped cover the parchment more than the chalk typically used. This layer of paste not only produced a uniform whiteness but also concealed the characteristic marks of skin including pores, follicles, or faint blood vessels that readers might otherwise feel or see on ordinary parchment. Jiří Vnouček, the conservator responsible for parts of the examination, considers that the thick paste could be an attempt to try out a new method of parchment-making and to underline the metaphorical weight of the document's contents.<sup>12</sup>

### Encountering the Animal Page

De La Lande's account of the parchment-making process is a relevant example of how these unavoidable animal textures in parchment affect the human encounter with it. For Tim Ingold, writing surfaces should not be treated as "taken-for-granted backdrops" (Ingold, 2010, p. 12). As an extension of this statement, Ingold argues that haptic vision, in contrast to optical vision, engages deeply with textures. Touch makes a person "dwell" in the surfaces they encounter. Furthermore, he states the bumps and creases are "of the surface rather than *on* it" (Ingold, 2017, p. 102), implying that the surface makes itself known through texture in such interactions. Sarah Kay presents a similar argument, suggesting that the material that contains a given text is as impactful as the actual contents of the text. With a specific focus on parchment and medieval literature, Kay argues that a metaphorical "suture" exists between writers and readers, and the animal skins they touch. Engaging with texts on parchment is "charged with affect and undermines the categorical demarcation between human beings and other animals" because of its animal origin and texture that still makes it feel like skin (Kay, 2011, p. 13-14). As a continuation of the metaphorical suture, Kay contends that the animal-ness of the page may even become a medium of unconscious reading through which the pages envelope and thus physically frame the

reader, thereby serving as a double for their own skin (Kay, 2017, pp. 142-143). The conflation of humans and animals when humans touch and read pages made of parchment parallels the blurring between humans and fur coats, indicating that animal skins can wrap and alter the human body in several different ways as different animal-made-objects.

The Danish constitution, however, presents a different case, initially. As a foundational legal document rather than a medieval manuscript, it was not intended for regular and close reading. Instead, it has served more as an authoritative object, which physically holds intangible human laws and ideologies. For most of its existence, the document's animal origins were hidden beneath the white paste, creating a smooth surface that shielded potential readers from any textures that could have revealed its animal core. Only specialists or conservators working in controlled conditions directly engage with it, and it remains encased behind glass during exhibitions, shielded from human touch. Therefore, any physical interactions that might evoke the animal presence have so far been limited, leaving the boundary between human and animal intact and *unsutured*, to challenge Kay's term. However, the recent examinations have drawn the animals back into the narrative. When exposing the individual pages to raking light, conservators were able to detect blood vessels, hair follicles, and cuts made by the butcher's knife (Ill. 4). All these signs of five animals whose skin became the initial and foundational surface of the constitution's text mark a stark contrast to the red velvet, gold appliques, and white silk that hold the pages together. Paradoxically, the paste used to erase the skin textures filled the natural crevices and irregularities of the skin, ultimately accentuating the visual appearance of the lines and grooves, revealing to conservators what animals were used.<sup>13</sup> The animal traces, hidden yet enduring, are now woven into the fabric of the constitution, a testament to the impossibility of entirely erasing the animal origins of its pages. As the black sheep and four calves have emerged as a part of this document's ongoing narrative, they add depth and vitality to the story as active, embodied presences, simultaneously *of* the surface and *beneath* it. This renewed understanding might form and evoke new "sutures" between the pages and those who view, handle, and interpret them in the future, an invitation to let the eyes and hands dwell in the pages of an animal *made-object*.



ILL. 4  
Enlarged details of pages from the Danish constitution, 1849, showing blood vessels, knife mark (left), and hair follicles (right). Photos by Rigsarkivet.

## Conclusion

While the mink coat and the constitution may appear as objects worlds apart, their skin surfaces each serve as sites of encounter and complex interspecies relations. They reveal that animal potency, insistency, and resistance remain embedded in these animal-made-objects. Despite their facelessness, the 65 mink, four calves, and black sheep reveal themselves in the fur garment and pages of the codex, a testament to the resilience and power of animal agency that transcends death, preservation, and human manipulation as they serve in new roles within human society. Cut, stitched, inscribed, read, and worn, these skins simultaneously blur and suture the demarcation between themselves and the human agents who engage with them, leading to a shift of focus in otherwise human-dominated narratives. As such, attending to these faceless surfaces not only recovers traces of once-lived lives but also draws attention to the expendability of animal life on which human culture has long depended. If scholarship cannot restore

those lives, it can at least reframe how we perceive them, reminding us that our actions today continue to shape the futures of animals whose bodies sustain human projects.

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#### SUMMARY

### **The Coat and the Constitution**

#### *Animal Surfaces as Sites of Encounter*

Throughout history, animal skins have been favored materials for a wide range of practical and aesthetic objects. Such items serve as tangible evidence of complex human-animal relationships, extending from the animals' lived lives to their deaths, preservation, and afterlives as material objects. The author examines two objects made from animal skin: a second-hand fur coat made of mink pelts and the recently examined Danish 1849 constitution, made of parchment from sheep and calf. By exploring the probable contexts of their production – including the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Danish mink industry and early modern parchment-making practices – and assessing their material qualities through theoretical perspectives rooted in new materialist thought, the author discusses the dual nature of these objects as simultaneously influenced by human and animal agency. These faceless, textured surfaces prompt thoughts on the boundaries between animal materials and the humans who wear, read, and interact with them. They suggest that the subtle traces of the once living animal persist as they become sites of human-animal encounter and transformation.

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#### NOTES

- 1 The number of pelts was determined by the author by visually inspecting the coat and tracing the seams between individual skins.
- 2 The process of removing all excess meat, fat, and connective tissue from the inside of the pelt.
- 3 Price point of new mink coats of this length today typically ranges between 25,000 and 40,000 DKK.
- 4 See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1978.
- 5 For further discussion of animal resistance as agency, see Carter and Charles, 2013, and Despret, 2013.
- 6 Fur Free Alliance.
- 7 Danmarks Statistik, 2021
- 8 For instance, a recent study suggests a preference for the use of sheep skin in legal deeds in the 13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries due to their specific skin structure, which made fraudulent text and manipulation difficult (Doherty et al., 2021).
- 9 Danmarkshistorien.dk, 2012.

- 10 Rigsarkivet, 2024a.
- 11 Rigsarkivet, 2024b.
- 12 Rigsarkivet, 2024b.
- 13 Rigsarkivet, 2024a.

# Andra Ursuța: *Void Fill* (2021) and the Grotesque Fragment

CHRIS FERNALD

*This paper offers a new interpretative framework for the corpus of Andra Ursuța and for the art historical lineages of the grotesque and the bodily fragment to which her concatenations of body and object belong. The hollow, crystalline skins of the artist's 2021 exhibition, Void Fill, cannily emblem- atize a world scenario in which objects become increasingly subjectivized and subjects self-objectify. Resurrecting Bakhtinian terms of the grotesque alongside Linda Nochlin's conception of the "fragment," I offer the "grotesque fragment" as a term of art for both a formal strategy in artistic figuration and a state of contemporary quasi-human embodiment in which worldly forces and perceptual revolutions press the body into forms which are both in excess of itself (grotesque) and diminished (fragmented). In their pithy titles, their canny choice of materials, and their formal experiments in figure-object synthesis, Andra Ursuța's sculptures leverage traditions of fragmentation and grotesquerie in art to offer a melancholic yet humorous take on powers which stress and reform the human epidermal boundary.*

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## Introduction

How can visual art render the skin's power to invisibly extend past the visible dermis, and for the world to invisibly extend into the skin? How might one begin to express the complexity of skin – an agent which is both a biological reality and a historically contingent formation which encompasses thinking and is, yet, beyond thought (Salamon, 2010, p. 65)?

In the strange vessels of *Void Fill*, Romanian artist Andra Ursuța's 2021 exhibition at David Zwirner Paris, we may find a particularly compelling stratagem – darkly humorous cast glass sculptures where the artist has fused casts of her body parts with various flotsam of the contemporary



ILL. 1

Andra Ursuța, *Phantom Mass*, 2021. Lead crystal, 110.5 × 46.4 × 52.4 cm. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

market, from BDSM costumes and packaging materials to Halloween props and trash from around the artist's studio. Despite what is reportedly a methodical, multi-step production process including both lost wax casting and 3D scanning, Ursuța's compositions feel improvised: bodily remnants and objects seem to smash together with all the seeming forethought of a highway collision (Wiley, 2019). Yet a deeper meditation on death darkens the candied figures of the show – the titles of *Canopic Jerrycan* and *Canopic Demijohn* explicitly reference funeral rites, while a viewer unfamiliar with the artist's previous sculptural explorations of graveyards (*Would It Were Closing Time, and All Well*, 2013; *Hammer Projects: Andra Ursuța*, 2014) might still detect allusions to tombstones in the cinderblock plinths, which support the pieces in the all-grey main gallery.

Across ten glass sculptures of swirling, gaseous color, Ursuța ricochets between affective registers, wedding subtle carnival violence and

the dadaist absurdity of chance operations with the stately gravity of archaeological display and the existential dread of sci-fi thrillers. For a synecdoche of the forms and conceptual maneuvers of the show as a whole, take *Phantom Mass* (2021): a gelatinous, cleaved torso oozes out of a spiked corset the color of moonlight while, in a confounding miasma of mechanical arousal, two skeletal hands extend forward from the chest, a pair of perky breasts with bottle spouts for nipples held aloft between their bony digits as in offering. Balanced atop the torso, in place of a head, a diminutive, graceless knob: a milky glass cast of what might very well be a whoopie cushion or gimp mask. The 'skull' of this figure is unnerving in its uncanny evocation of a deformed, faceless head, but as a visual denouement of the piece, it is as though the artist fixed the humorous disappointment of unmet expectations into form. But for all of the piece's departures from normative human anatomy, it may conjure some bodily truths more realistically than most.

The glass sculptures of *Void Fill* offer viewers a cogent proposal for how art might render human skin with phenomenological sensitivity and poetic discipline. Ursuța's approach to figuration combines the traditional grotesque's fascination with troubled bodily boundaries and the corporeal crops, cuts, and effacements that art historian Linda Nochlin posited as uniquely evocative of modern human experience. Taking the two strands together, we might call this approach the *grotesque fragment*, a sensibility emblemized both in *Void Fill* and in related practices of sculptural collage, from artistic forbearers like Oskar Schlemmer and Isa Genzken to artistic contemporaries like Rachel Harrison, Ruben Ulises Rodriguez Montoya, and Berenice Olmedo.

But the combination of these visual tropes does more than chart a lineage in art history. I offer the grotesque fragment as a term of art for both a formal strategy in artistic figuration and as a descriptive term for a state of contemporary embodiment in which worldly forces and perceptual revolutions press the body into forms which are both in excess of itself (grotesque) and diminished (fragmented, cropped, disassembled, made partial). This article will examine the formal and theoretical power of the grotesque fragment as a sounding device for the strange case of contemporary embodiment under digital capitalism.

## The Contemporary Grotesque

It might be fair to conclude that Ursuța was officially ‘onto something’ in 2019 when she debuted her first cast glass sculptures at the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Indeed, half of the sculptures in *Void Fill* (*Yoga Don’t Help*, *Succubustin’ Loose*, *Impersonal Growth*, *Predators ‘R Us*, and *Half-Drunk Mummy*) are chromatically enriched editions of pieces which first appeared in translucent white in the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. In the following Venice Biennale in 2022, a year after *Void Fill*, the artist exhibited nine of *Void Fill*’s ten works – five in new colorways. Her commitment to this medium and technical process is now certainly without question – every solo exhibition the artist has staged since 2019 has featured cast glass sculptures, often presenting old works in new chromatic guises, with new compositions appearing alongside the old motley crew. The artist has never before iterated one particular technique or set of compositions so consistently and for so long.

While Ursuța’s work has always been quite bodily and often suggests commonly understood notions of the grotesque – busts and castrated body parts rendered in a variety of materials seem more often than not to appear in each of her solo exhibitions – her approach to figuration when working in glass – that is, as a synthesis of cast body parts and objects, of self and world, into a single crystal membrane – suggests a less commonly remarked upon fundament of the historical grotesque, which nonetheless anticipates much of what it is to be a contemporary subject amid an overabundance of disposable signifiers, consumer goods, and histories.

In his discipline-defining text *Rabelais and His World* (1965), scholar Mikhail Bakhtin charts a teleology of the grotesque in the European world – and, consequently, a history of a particular understanding, expression, and experience of embodiment. Defining the grotesque in cultural practice as expressions of “all that extrudes from the body and links it to other bodies or [the] world outside,” Bakhtin contends that for much of Western history, the body was believed to be inseparable from the world, and cultural and pseudo-scientific expressions of grotesque embodiment, which reified this belief, were very much the long-held representational norm, from Hippocrates’ assertion that the human body was home to the materials of the cosmos (and the cosmos, reflexively, conceptualized as a container of human flesh) to the crass, gross-out body humor of me-

dieval folk culture (Bakhtin, 1965, pp. 316-317, 341, 362). However, while grotesque expressions would continue on within popular and folk cultures for centuries, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the grotesque imagination of embodiment was largely excised from European thought in favor of the hermetically sealed Cartesian body: indeed, René Descartes' famous model of the *cogito* from his 1637 treatise *Discourse on Method* may mark the zenith of this model of the human as a figure sealed off impermeably from the material world. However, in the development of phenomenological thought in the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Edmund Husserl, an increasingly relativistic conception of the relationship between self and world, of a body which is fundamentally interpenetrative and ambivalently surfaced, would gain wider acceptance. To name but four of many recent millennial theorizations of the mind-body-world connection, take the trans scholarship of Gayle Salamon (*Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, 2010) and Eric Plemons (*The Look of a Woman*, 2017), or the ethnographic phenomenologies of Saba Mahmood (*The Politics of Piety*, 2005) and Anne Anlin Cheng (*Ornamentalism*, 2020).

If the grotesque figure, as Bakhtin describes it, “flies in the face of the concept of the body as whole and limited (...) [and] exposes and explores connections between bodies and between the body and the world”, then perhaps the grotesque is the expressive underside of the phenomenological paradigm – and, in more recent years, of the ascendant disciplines of object-oriented-ontology and new materialism (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 315). As many cultural workers and thinkers today have arrived ‘back’ at a model of a porous human, we discover a model for expressing and theorizing human embodiment which is not without some echoes of the grotesque that predominated pre-Renaissance thought in the West, though without the same religious feeling and magical imagination.

Today, we seem increasingly vulnerable to invasive forces that dissolve any remaining semblance of Cartesian bodily hermeneutics: from the chemical exchange between bodies and pharmaceuticals, toxins, and microplastics in food and water, to the growing paradigm of technological control where, as scholar Shane Denson reminds us, “machines operating imperceptibly at microtemporal speeds (...) predictively anticipate future

behavior and thus mold future subjective states.” (Denson, 2025, p. 26). It would follow, then, that the grotesque should emerge as a vocabulary within contemporary figuration, not just due to the fertile environment produced in the spreading wake of phenomenology, but thanks to a number of larger transformations in recent material relations which have exaggerated the sense of our interpenetrability – and thus, our grotesque status.

The grotesque has most commonly been defined by a range of formal effects, but perhaps most frequently through the exaggeration of the scale and function of body parts and comically hyperbolic depictions of their injury or dismemberment. The figures in Ursuța’s work have often possessed a grotesque dimension, and their affective resonance, teetering between horror and humor, deeply resonates with the tone of the grotesque. In 2013’s *Magical Terrorism* (Ramekin Crucible, New York), there are the headless, armless female torsos of her *Conversion Tables* series, rendered in crude, pitted metallic surfaces with exaggeratedly pointed, conical breasts. And there is the artist’s 2014 solo show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where Ursuța polished off a collapsed, recumbent model of herself in a rubbery, deflated gray cast urethane with a splattering of fake semen (*Crush*, 2011). In *Alps* (2016) at the New Museum in New York, castrated penises, studded throughout mock climbing walls, double as fetish objects and hand holds for an imaginary rock climber, while the upturned rib cages of *Divorce Dump* (58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 2019) are transformed into garbage bins holding a material the wall text describes as “marriage trash”.

But her 2015 exhibition, *Whites* (Kunsthalle Bern), previews a minor, but ultimately consequential, change in Ursuța’s approach to grotesque figuration, a technical shift which would reappear in her cast glass sculptures four years later. It is a subtle ontological reorientation which, I argue, comes to characterize precisely why her glass sculptures emblemize a much more nuanced, and apt, reflection of both an under-recognized dimension of the historical grotesque and the key to the grotesque’s power to describe the trouble of contemporary human embodiment.

Before she debuted her cast glass sculptures in 2019, Ursuța often produced figures and body parts which ‘wore’ their cultural signifiers and the evidence of their social, historical, or economic implication in the world. Take the afore-mentioned coin vests of the breasted torsos of *Conversion*

*Tables* and the Soviet realist-style marble statues of gypsies (*Commerce Exterieur Mondial Sentimental*) in *Magical Terrorism* (2012), or the distinctly Eastern European peasant wear of the artist-mannequin splayed on the floor in *Vandal Lust* (2011). In other pieces where costuming is absent, body parts are still visually identifiable as materially and structurally separate from whatever substrates or objects they may find themselves attached to. In *Alps* (2016) the castrated penises lie like rainbow sprinkles atop the flat, geometric planes of the wooden 'rock faces'. In *Solitary Fitness* (Venus Over Manhattan, 2013), a show reportedly inspired by the story of a woman stoned to death, long, black, human hair grows like a weed out of an L-shaped wall clad in multihued cast urethane tiles – as if the executioner's repressed regret returned to him through the grout between his bathroom tiles. In these latter two exhibitions, we may find the beginnings of the fragmentary approach to the body which would come to characterize her work of the last six years.

But it is in *Whites*, a series based on what seems to be a one-off experiment from 2013 (*Broken Obelisk*), that we first see the artist completely efface the line between body and object. For the first time, Ursuța's bodily motifs and the world of objects coagulate into a single, materially unified surface – we might call it a skin. White obelisks in aqua resin and wood sit slumped, without a shred of monumentality, in a range of chairs scattered around the gallery. But beyond their allusion (both in their forms and in the exhibition title) to the hooded white supremacist figures of the Ku Klux Klan, they are anthropomorphic in another way – their surfaces each bear the small openings of anatomically-accurate human nostrils and eye sockets. It is a delicate turn, but here a strange confusion between costume and architecture, skeleton and skin, is afoot. Rather than figuring the body, or its fragments, in materials distinct from the objects with which they are in contact, realizing them in a single material significantly diminishes our notion of either component's autonomy from the other. They are, in effect, 'one', unified in a single membrane. Though a small formal transformation, this is the first time in Ursuța's practice – already so full of bodily effects of troubled autonomy – that skin emerges as the conceptual and physical substrate for the thematics the artist has long explored. In the form of skin, the horrors and absurdities of history and of the contemporary world are enacted, registered, and toyed with.

We live in an age of porous membranes, unstable boundaries, and bodily extensions. In *Void Fill*, we find the matter of the body's new over-extended spatiality is powerfully evoked by skins that hold both body and world in an unbreakable, crystalline bond. Consisting of life-sized, anatomically faithful casts of body parts, the sculptures forgo a more traditional grotesque visuality – there are no comically exaggerated breasts, noses, or eyes here. Instead, the body's breakage with its normative visible territory is expressed through the *situation* of body parts and objects as equally constitutive of one another.

In *Predators 'R Us* (2020), the most legibly 'human' figure of this cast of misfit toys (it is the sculpture with the largest uninterrupted expanse of human form), a cast arm abruptly tapers into a plastic bottle. Legs slip into two tentacular, membranous masses that are, in fact, models of the decapitated head of sci-fi alien murder-machine, Predator. A stubby, marbled finial sits in the anatomical space where a neck and head should be. In suturing flesh with the cheap refuse of capitalism, a 'poetic image' emerges of the commodification of flesh and spirit in capitalism's more insidiously penetrative later stages (Bachelard, 1957, p. 236). Such devices call to mind the human-to-non-human syntheses of many older grotesque expressions, such as an early anatomical diagram in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543) by Andreas Vesalius that snatches the exposed viscera of the dissected female form and 'superimposes' her contents onto a classical stone statue, or the range of mythical part human, part animal beings in the magical travelogues of the *Indian Wonders* (Laoutaris, 2023, pp. 53-54; Bakhtin, 1965, p. 345). And it is this shared visual rhetoric of bodily modification – of the imposition of objects into and onto the body as a shared surface – that makes Ursuța's sculptures a descendent not just of medieval and Renaissance grotesquerie but a surprising companion to modernist experiments, which attempted to grapple with the changing status of the body in an increasingly mechanized world.

Indeed, Ursuța's glass sculptures find a surprising ancestor in one of modernism's most famous and dream-like creations: Oskar Schlemmer's costumes for his 1922 *Das Triadische Ballett* (Triadic Ballet). In many of the ballet's toy-like, confectionary costumes, every anatomical surface of the dancers' bodies but their faces, hands, and necks has been sleeved



ILL. 2

Installation view of Andra Ursuța: *Void Fill*, David Zwirner, Paris, 2021. *Predators R' Us* at center. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

into the exuberant yet placid platonic shapes of vaguely mechanical skin. The result is three uncanny, quasi-human figures sheathed in what artist and scholar Aura Satz calls “an almost orthopedic, brace-like epidermis” (Satz, 2002, p. 166). From one angle, the dancers may suggest a comically exaggerated take on the Cartesian body: armored, impenetrable, sealed. But the opposite is equally true – the costumes do not only incorporate the rhetoric of machines as a structuring support for the body. Through their confinement, the costumes press the body of the performer into narrower ranges of motions, motions which are both mechanical in visuality but also mechanical as a kind of framework, such that the body of the performer and their possible range of motions have been ‘programmed’ and predetermined (Satz, 2002, p. 166). In this way, the shell of the mechanical costume in fact penetrates the body of the performer, as the performer’s very mode of movement is reformed into a specific choreographic language. Put another way, human agency is reformed by a mechanical imagination, while the machine as made manifest by the costume is lent something of a human animation (Satz, 2002, 166-168).

Crafted in the heady early days of modernism and its technophilic imagination in Europe, Schlemmer’s ballet costumes suggest the changed

status of the body under modern industry as an increasingly thing-like commodity object (Satz, 2002, 148). While Schlemmer's mechanical costumes spoke to something simultaneously comic, spectacular, and uncanny about the place of man in an increasingly industrialized world, Ursuța's figures seem to pick up Schlemmer's torch and carry it into the present. Incorporating plastic refuse, cheap entertainment props, and constrictive fetish wear, Ursuța's figures image the penetration of the fleshy membrane not by the mechanical forces at the tail end of the industrial age but by those forces which animate our own age – an age which, like the Halloween themed stores which pop up across America every Fall, reek of synthetic disposability and an overabundance of cheap goods, cheap narratives, and an increasingly tenuous autonomy.

The disappearing body of *Void Fill* is a loose collection of severed limbs, hollow and translucent, ready to be filled, and ambiguously present as solid matter and translucent interface. This body is, simply, its skin – an envelope which both marks its outer boundary and provides its structure. It exemplifies a body grotesquerie for the late digital capitalist era: an age of mirage, surface, disappearance, and dispersion. We inhabit a time when power's operations are better obscured through advanced electronics or increasingly impenetrable algorithms and operational complexities, where interpersonal relations and person-world relations are increasingly immaterial and without specific temporality, and where we are (in some instances quite literally) drowning in the products and refuse, chemical and otherwise, of the world which the industrial age produced. Our humanity is not so much under threat of objectifying revision by industrial machines (outside of the replacement of human labor by machines), but by artificial intelligence and algorithmic controls, predictive technologies, and the willing and unwilling transformations of our inner selves into corporate data.

In his essay "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside," from *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Gaston Bachelard posited that "the phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a *surface*, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other" (Bachelard, 1957, p. 237). In *Void Fill*, and in *Das Triadische Ballett*, "the being of man" is made inseparable from "the region of the other." The pieces in each instance use an effaced form of

figuration and techniques of re-surfacing/re-skinning – whether through wearable but restrictive costumes or through glass casts of the body – to suggest an inter-corporeal enfleshment between animate and inanimate entities, a collision that transfers the liveliness of one onto the other and the insentience of the object to the subject.

In the gaps between its prosthetic appendages and contortions and the normative human physiognomies they replace, remix, or efface, the figures of *Void Fill* speak, with wordless immediacy, of the tragicomic state of being a grotesque fragment today. The rhetoric of object-subject synthesis in *Void Fill* encodes the anxieties and humor that humans feel when bearing witness to or being subjected to forces that ‘abstract’ or distance them from a sense of their sealed bodily autonomy and integrity.

Throughout the exhibition, Ursuța scatters symbols of horror and traces of violence to express the uneasy, violating, and absurd relationship of the contemporary capitalist subject to the digital, informational, ecological, and cultural flows that penetrate the human body and psyche in ever more forceful ways. *Succubustin’ Loose* depicts a straight-jacketed figure, whose crossed arms are bound to its chest beneath a heavy, constricting swath of cloudy jade glass fabric. The head, likely cast from another whoopie cushion or gimp mask, is wrinkled and bulbous with a bottle opening for a mouth. Its deeply uncanny, eyeless visage can neither meet our gaze nor seemingly sense at all. The coding of this head is highly ambiguous: is this cloudy sack this figure’s head, or is this figure a captive with its ‘real’ face concealed under a hood? Subtle violence also plays out in the articulation of the ambiguous, somewhat classical posture of *Predators*, as well. The slightest contortion of the figure’s back, the nearly imperceptible way that the left shoulder droops downward and inward toward the body’s core, in tandem with its lifted left arm, suggests a defensive posture anticipating a blow from the side. Other references to violence throughout the show are much more subtle: the selection of hues in many of the sculptures closely echoes the psychedelic palette of bruises.

But, in typical grotesque fashion, humor deflates horror: the incorporation of mass cultural symbols of horror into some of the figures brings a comedic touch to the show (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 335). We find Halloween prop skeleton arms in *Phantom Mass*, and in *Predators’ R Us*, we observe

the transposition of Predator’s dread-like tentacles into what could plausibly pass as Yeezy footwear. A second quotation from sci-fi horror films is found in *Impersonal Growth*, which depicts a cast of the artist wearing the back end of a xenomorph costume from Ridley Scott’s *Alien* franchise atop her head.

In the amputations of these figures, and in her curation of new appendages from cheap props and objects that lend themselves to silly morphological confluences, the artist sutures an affective resonance to the show that is contradictory yet intuitively correct – absurd and terrifying, heavenly and demonic, sacred and deeply banal. But we must also consider why the artist only ever renders the body *in fragmentis* in her cast glass sculptures. What does rendering the “body in pieces” do for the artist, and how does such a technique cooperate with the thematics of the grotesque?

### The Contemporary Fragment

Art historian Linda Nochlin, in her canonical 1995 essay, “The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity,” examines how the birth of Western modernity – which Nochlin dates to the French Revolution of 1789 – was inaugurated with a number of specific sensibilities within art and culture. As Nochlin notes, institutional and civilizational destruction in the French Revolution, epitomized by the mutilations of the guillotine, the decapitation of the monarchs, and the effacement of royal symbols in art and architecture, coincided with the construction of new institutions and philosophies of governing and citizenship (Nochlin, 1994, p. 10). Among other historical episodes, Nochlin examines the fragment as a formal maneuver to which various artists would make recourse over the following centuries in order to process subsequent epistemological ruptures that have punctuated the development of the modern world. Among other artist episodes, Nochlin makes special consideration of Géricault’s paintings of wounded soldiers returning from Napoléon’s failed wars of conquest but also of compositions by early modernist painters such as Manet, though she does continue this loose (and, in her mind, incomplete and speculative) history of the fragment in modern art into the 1990s. In Manet, Nochlin notes an ambivalent play between artistic intent

and improvisation in the painter's compositional framings, whose outer frames often unceremoniously bisect figures with the painting's frame, suggesting scenes quickly captured by a handheld camera (Nochlin, 1994, p. 37). For Nochlin, these compositional strategies also suggest thematics that, I would argue, deeply emblemize Ursuța's own work in *Void Fill*: "a play with habitual boundaries of all sorts, an oscillation between contingency and determination," and a strategy which reflects a mix of artistic agency and agential renunciation within "the meaningless flow of modern reality itself, a casual reality which has no narrative beginning, middle or end." (Nochlin, 1994, pp. 37-38). Indeed, the complex process that guides the making of these sculptures suggests a similar play between intention and randomness. The artist 3D scans objects and props in her studio, and, once they are inside the computer, Ursuța can combine each element into a million possible compositions with ease. She then prints the model in plastic. These 3D-prints serve as the basis of wax molds that can subsequently be brought to the glass studio where the final sculptures are cast (Lescaze, 2020). But despite the deliberateness of most of these stages, the strangeness of the compositions and the irregular colorations of the final forms suggest chance, play, and discovery.

While Ursuța has both courted and resisted biographical readings of her work, she grew up, we might speculate, accustomed to scenes of dismemberment: her home was down the street from a slaughterhouse in a Transylvanian town renowned for its salami production, while her younger self, by her own telling, used to glean great enjoyment watching her father slaughter nutrias for fur and food in the family's home (Bollen, 2013; Estefan, 2012). But there are also multiple sites of intersection between the artist's life, and the vocabularies of cropping, mutilation, and fragmentation to which she frequently turns to examine her life and fixations, and the various transformations to which Nochlin attributes the artistic recourse to the same technique from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For one, there are the emotional, epistemological, and physical breakages that accompany Ursuța's own experience of regime change (her childhood was bisected by the fall of the dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu). But there is also the breakage of migrating from a former satellite state of the Soviet Union to the postmodern, hyper-capitalist urban *mélange* of New York (the artist

moved to Florida for her senior year of high school in 1997, before enrolling in Columbia University and settling in New York in 1999). Of course, there is also the fact that, while Ursuța's mature practice reflects a very different contemporary than the 1995 of Nochlin's writing, the artist's work deeply emblemizes what Nochlin contends is perhaps the foremost quality of modernity: "a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value that is so universally felt in 19<sup>th</sup> century as to be often identified with modernity itself." (Nochlin, 1994, pp. 23-24).

To put it simply: while Nochlin offers a slew of meanings for the recourse to the fragment in modern European art, Ursuța's own life experience, fascinations, and artwork manage to reflect many of the ruptures that augured the various resurrections of the fragment as a formal strategy (revolution and its aftermath, mutilations of war and violence, a play with randomness and intention which Nochlin contends is a central quality of what is modern in art). Indeed, if the fragment expressed the notion that modernity is "characterized by irrevocable loss, poignant regret for lost totality, [and] a vanished wholeness," then techniques of cutting and cropping offer artists a form of play that allows them to cope with or toy with these conditions to a number of ends (Nochlin, 1994, p. 7). Here we can think of the pastiche body of Dada and Surrealism or the combines of Robert Rauschenberg and, of course, the collage-like sculptures of *Void Fill*, as examples of this formal tendency in art. So much art of the present and in decades past seems to fit this mode of operation, art which not only presents the act of salvage and the collapse of boundaries between high and low as an act of cultural renewal, but whose fusions of subject and object also reifies the post-modern sensibility of the body as a "body-in-pieces," a disunified collection of parts, mutable meanings, and entanglements with the market (Nochlin, 1994, p. 55).

Our contemporary condition under digital global capitalism as a more emphatically extroverted, fragmented, and grotesque subject is a condition that marks the passing of one kind of bodily experience in history for another but which, as Nochlin's history of the fragment in modern art and Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque suggest, is also an advanced and twisted acceleration of forces which have long characterized not only the modern but the pre-modern, too. To be a body today is to possess a

divided and multitudinous self that exists in partial partnerships with a range of outside phenomena. It is to live at a reformed boundary between body, object, and world. If we take Ursuța's sculptures to image a particularly contemporary understanding of the epidermal membrane, then the artist's compositional strategies of absurd concatenations and her curation of props appear to suggest that bodily experience today is both an ecstatic and depressing condition (Nochlin, 1994, p. 55).

Returning to a theory of the fragment, we might note that while processes of fragmentation may empty subjects of certain human rights and capacities (see the dehumanizing equivalences forged between humans and vermin, as just one example, or, of course, the losing proposition of decapitation and dismemberment), in other cases, the fragmented subject or the severed body part becomes endowed with certain powers through this enhanced proximity to or equivalence with non-human phenomena. Contemporary capitalism, in fact, rewards subjects for their openness to fragmentation. In the digital attention economy, we willingly divide the self into objectifiable fragments when we transform the self into a character through speech acts or represent the self through photographs of an aspirational lifestyle, even when we are not explicitly within the frame. The most straightforward example lies in the commodification of our likeness, which sees our personhood become a digital image which transacts for us outside the scope of our conscious awareness or temporal position. Subjects who are most adept at reducing and refining their personhoods into coherent, streamlined visual and thematic brand narratives in the social media marketplace are most likely to be rewarded with financial and social bounty. Indeed, the online body, and the transposition (and commodification) of self which the digital marketplace so seamlessly allows, is perhaps the most pervasive force of fragmentation under late digital capitalism. The self that spans IRL and URL is a self whose existence is only possible as a composite of fragments, whether photographs, texts, social media interactions, or digital breadcrumbs that track our movements in cyberspace. In other words, the subject who deputizes images and data to act in their stead is always, at his essence, a collection of semi-autonomous fragments.

In *Void Fill*, appendages go missing and appear elsewhere throughout the show, a shredded, cropped, and cut body whose limbs have flown off

as if lost in the inhuman vitesse of electronic image transfers and digital communication. In the delicate translucence of the lead crystal and its gaseous swirls of saccharine, candied hues, Ursuța's sculptures also evoke the felt sensation of digital extraversion, the erotic pull of self-dissolution as we immerse ourselves in flows of information, of dazzled and blinkered attention. The gaseous quality of these works' colors lends a sense of blooming, exhilarating motion to each form, and the impression that perhaps, when left alone from prying human eyes, the dyes within the glasses may spiral and migrate, settling into new shapes, transgressing temporalities as they appear in other guises in other spaces.

In this way, color and time form a strange and productive partnership in *Void Fill*. By employing two registers of color, wherein one (diffuse, milky, unmixed color) appears to symbolize a 'before' to a solid color's 'after' (or vice versa), we witness bodies divided into various temporalities. Such a maneuver powerfully evokes the confused, fractious temporality of the present. Our era is characterized by a number of temporal fragmentations and conditions of simultaneity and disjunction, and it is one where we are subject to a number of ills. Serious stresses upon our attention lay waste to our ability to occupy the present. Global capitalism abstracts and alienates production and distribution into complex networks of site and time often difficult for the human mind to grasp without the prosthetics of communication technology, and certainly impossible for one body to occupy simultaneously. Daily life, beset by portable digital feeds, is subjected to the most cruel and banal collapses of time-space: a violent act such as a beheading in Asia may be experienced via live stream while receiving a gel manicure in Seattle.

Aside from the most obvious manifestation of the fragment in the show – the proliferation of pieces of the body – it is ultimately in the transformation of body into vessel that the theme of fragmentation is most forcibly felt, and, indeed, it is perhaps the most important expression of the grotesque fragment in the show. Ursuța conflates her 'self-portraits' (as the artist has called them) with vessels by repeatedly quoting the forms of bottles and canisters in the sculptures; by rendering the figures in the materials of bottles; and by using various terms for an assortment of containers in her titles (Dafoe, 2019). The question is – why? In the grotesque fragment

figure, the subject is brought into extreme intimacy and near equivalency with an outside phenomenon, creating a paradoxical subject – one that has at once been both evacuated and filled, like a taxidermic animal. In order to reach into the world, or to endow ourselves with the matter and meaning of the world, we must, in our self-conception, preserve an open space to hold the world we find. To become a translucent vessel is to fragment the body into pure skin. It is to become a membrane enclosing a fillable container for worldly influence and penetration. Such are the functional dynamics of the increasingly porous flesh of the advanced capitalist subject. *Void Fill* captures this powerful paradox at the heart of embodied experience during late-stage digital capitalism: our dilations of presence are enacted at the moment of a forced absence, leaving a new genre of skin in its wake. In her incorporation of the disposable materials with which we confront death, Ursuța memorializes our current condition, presenting us with skins and bodies that, in their daily existence, are bound up in a world that both fragments and extends them toward objecthood. *Void Fill* is a kind of funerary right for a pre-digital skin, one whose absurdity still allows us to mourn and laugh into its yawning voids.

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# Thresholds of Desire

## Skin, Mediation, and Performance in Hudinilson Jr.

SIMONE ROSSI

*This essay investigates the pivotal role of skin in the work of Brazilian artist Hudinilson Jr. (1957-2013), positioning it as a threshold of desire and resistance. It examines how skin functions as a medium of haptic mediation and queer singularization in Hudinilson Jr.'s practice, with particular attention to the interplay between xerox-based reproduction and the live performance Pagnar Radical (1984). Through close readings of key xerox actions and this performance, the essay reveals how skin operates as a complex interface where exposure, longing, and vulnerability intersect: an embodied site of engagement – crossed, abstracted, and reified. Hudinilson Jr.'s xerox actions serve as a prelude to this exploration; through fragmentation and mechanical reproduction, they turn the body upside down, transforming the skin into a resonant surface that reflects the tensions between identity and otherness, image and flesh. In Pagnar Radical, these tensions are brought to life in a visceral live performance that exposes the body to scrutiny and pain, highlighting how skin bears the marks of trauma and eroticism. Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, the essay situates Hudinilson Jr.'s practice within a broader framework of resistance, indicating how skin acts as a medium of subversion against normative frameworks that seek to constrain and define the body. By mediating between visibility and invisibility, touch and separation, Hudinilson Jr.'s work navigates the skin as an aesthetic threshold of negotiation, interrogating the unresolved spaces of desire.*

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## Hudinilson Jr. *Loving Position*

In the only comprehensive monograph on Hudinilson Jr.'s multimedia practice to date, curator Ricardo Resende (2016) recounts that the artist himself (1957-2013) identified two fundamental aspects of his body of work. First, he highlighted his involvement with the 3NÓS3 (Three Knots/We Three) collective, alongside artists Mario Ramiro (1957) and Rafael França (1957-91), which sought to disrupt urban spaces through site-specific interventions (Ramiro, 2017; Rossi 2026). Second, he emphasized his pioneering work in xerox art, where he emerged as one of the most radical experimenters of his generation in Brazil (Aldana and Maynes, 2017). Surprisingly, Hudinilson Jr. also considered a lesser-known live performance as central to his practice: *Pugnar Radical* (Radical Combat), staged in 1984 at the Centro Cultural São Paulo – a venue that now houses his Postal Art Collection. This performance, which featured his own body in a theatrical setting alongside actress Claudia Alencar, appears as an anomaly within his otherwise intensely mediated explorations of corporeality.

Over more than three decades, Hudinilson Jr. experimented with different media and visual languages, yet his work remained consistently anchored in a central element: the body. Rather than presenting the body as an immediate, physical presence, he instead mediated and refracted it through technologies of reproduction, most notably in his xerox art. Repurposing photocopy machines, he fragmented, duplicated, and reconfigured images of his own body, transforming it into an object of desire, nostalgia, and projection. Alongside this, his scrapbooking and collage practices – meticulously preserved in a substantial series of boards and notebooks, titled *Cadernos de Referências* (Reference Notebooks) (Farias and Rossi, 2023) – further reinforced a process of mediation, wherein the body became mapped into cartographic forms and patterns, fragmented yet resonant.

This dynamic was poignantly captured by film critic and historian Jean-Claude Bernardet, Hudinilson Jr.'s long-time partner, who observed: “the super-spectacle of the most xeroxed body in the world as nostalgia for an irreparably denied body” (Bernardet, 1983, p. 2). This “denied body” emerges as unreachable, like Narcissus gazing at his reflection in water: visible but elusive, insubstantial, and ultimately beyond grasp. In this way,

Hudinilson Jr.'s xerox practice aligned with conceptual and body art traditions while also intersecting with movements such as mail art and the *Movimento de Arte Pornô* (*Porn Art Movement*, 1980-82), a radical Brazilian performance and poetic art collective based in Rio de Janeiro that used pornography as a means to challenge linguistic and gender norms (Kac, 2013). His work, deeply rooted in both archival accumulation and bodily fragmentation, engaged in a continuous negotiation of desire, visibility, and the materiality of images.

Within this framework of mediation, *Pugnar Radical* –the performance Hudinilson Jr. regarded as pivotal to his practice – assumes particular significance. Unlike his xerox performances, which were solitary acts performed in the intimate space of photocopying rooms, *Pugnar Radical* directly confronted the audience with his physical presence. The performance ruptured the distance that characterized much of his work, exposing his body to a space of vulnerability and immediacy. This act introduced a crucial dimension to what Hudinilson Jr. referred to as the *Loving Position* – the inherent, unbridgeable distance that separates two bodies of desire. As Resende explains:

Loving Position is a term coined by the artist to speak of the distances that separate one from another. It is what lies between the self and its double, between love and sex, between encounter and contact, distance and loneliness. The place of desire is the same as that of tension. (Resende, 2016, p. 415)

While his xerox practice staged this distance through mechanical reproduction – where the body, in its repetition, became both recognizable and unattainable – *Pugnar Radical* made it explicit. The live performance introduced a different mode of separation: the space between the performer and the audience, between presence and absence, between bodily exposure and theatrical artifice. Further complicating this moment was the introduction of a female presence on stage.

For those familiar with Hudinilson Jr.'s work, this is a striking anomaly. His art predominantly engaged with the male body – whether idealized in classical forms, such as Greek sculptures and Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, or eroticized in gay pornography, which often filled the pages of his *Cadernos*. By contrast, women appeared infrequently in his visual lexicon,

with a few exceptions: iconic divas such as Elis Regina, Maysa, Marlene Dietrich, and Madonna, figures deeply admired within queer culture. *Pugnar Radical*, then, not only challenged the mediated distance of his xerox practice but also subtly disrupted the gendered dynamics that had defined his artistic gaze.

This moment also clarifies the broader scope of what Hudinilson Jr. termed the *Loving Position*. Although his practice predominantly articulated desire within homoerotic iconographies, *Pugnar Radical* demonstrates that the concept is not confined to same-sex relations. By staging an encounter between man and woman, the performance situates *Loving Position* as a more general articulation of distance and relation between desiring bodies. The heteronormative configuration introduced by Cláudia Alencar thus extends, rather than negates, the homoerotic lexicon: it indicates that separation, vulnerability, and longing traverse human relations irrespective of gender.

This essay responds to the renewed critical and curatorial interest in Hudinilson Jr.'s work,<sup>1</sup> placing his xerox practice in dialogue with *Pugnar Radical*, framing them as two interrelated facets of a singular artistic inquiry. Both works explore the body as a site of tension, where ecstasy meets death, desire confronts abjection, and contact contends with separation. In this negotiation, skin serves as both boundary and threshold, a surface where touch, image, and longing converge. While seemingly distinct, both practices remain deeply performative, anchored in Hudinilson Jr.'s relentless interrogation of the body – its visibility, its absence, and its irreducible desire.

### Reclaiming the Body Through Haptic Singularizations

In the mid-1970s, Hudinilson Jr. began experimenting with xerox machines, conducting workshops at São Paulo's renowned Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (Maia, 2020, pp. 11-12). Brazil, at the time, was firmly entrenched in a military dictatorship that had taken control in 1964, a political climate in which bodies and identities were subjected to biopolitical control, surveillance, repression, and normalization. Hudinilson Jr., acting as a perceptive seismograph, captured the pervasive tension surrounding

issues of corporeality, subjectivity, and desire that characterized Brazil and much of South America, where authoritarian regimes wielded control over personal expression and autonomy (Lopez, 2016).

Hudinilson Jr.'s xerox art can be seen as a unique contribution to the "body politics" that characterized much of South American art in the late 1970s and 1980s, where the body itself became a medium of resistance. The exhibition *Perder la forma humana* (Losing Human Form), curated by the international platform Red Conceptualismos del Sur, offered a framework for analyzing bodily strategies of subversion that artists pioneered in response to the traumas inflicted by military regimes (Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2014). The exhibition offered crucial concepts, including *Artistic Activism*, which focused on engaging the body directly in practice (Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2014, pp. 279-83), and *Body and Flows*, which addressed the dissolution of the body as a fixed, stable entity (Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2014, pp. 283-87). Another particularly evocative concept is *Overgoze*, a neologism derived from the verb *gozar* (similar to the French *jouir*), encapsulating the notion of bodily pleasure and excess as political resistance (Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2014, pp. 365-70), as well as *Sexual Disobedience*, referring to strategies that dismantle disciplinary frameworks imposed on bodies and cultivate dissident forms of subjectivity capable of disrupting the capitalist production of identity (Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2014, pp. 394-98).

In a parallel vein, the journey undertaken in 1982 by French schizoanalyst, activist, and philosopher Félix Guattari and Brazilian psychoanalyst and cultural critic Suely Rolnik across Brazil during the country's *abertura política* (political opening period),<sup>2</sup> documented signs of profound social transformation already permeating Brazilian society. Their observations captured a social upheaval extending beyond emerging cultural movements, such as feminist and LGBTQ+ counterculture,<sup>3</sup> to the very fabric of subjectivity itself.

Central to this shift was the reclamation of desire beyond the confines of capitalist logic and a rejection of capitalist forms of subjectification.<sup>4</sup> As Guattari and Rolnik observed: "It can be felt in a warmth of relations, in a certain way of desiring, in a positive affirmation of creativity, in a willingness to love" (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 63).

This landscape of disobedience fostered fertile conditions for what Guattari termed *processes of singularization*, the unfolding of personal and collective identities that resist normative structures. During his month-long journey of dialogues and debates in Brazil, Guattari and Rolnik explored these processes, characterizing them as “a way of rejecting modes of preestablished encoding” (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 23), “something that frustrates mechanisms internalizing capitalistic values” (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 63), and “everything that pertains to the domain of rupture, surprise, and anguish” (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 58).

Hudinilson Jr. absorbed this social and cultural vitality, reinterpreting it through his practice. This allowed him to forge a renewed relationship with his own body. His work can be understood as an act of reclaiming and reasserting a body that, though wounded, fragmented, and vulnerable, remained charged with desire and a profound need for skin contact. He sought to inscribe his body within regimes of visibility, foregrounding the skin as a crucial site of negotiation. Within this framework, the notion of “threshold” becomes crucial. It designates the skin as a liminal zone – at once a barrier and a passage, a protective surface and a porous interface.

In what follows, the term threshold refers not only a metaphor of passage but also a phenomenological and psychoanalytic category. This conceptualization is indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *flesh* and Didier Anzieu’s theorization of the *skin-ego*. Hudinilson Jr. repeatedly staged his practice at this threshold, where perception, desire, and mediation intersect, and where contact is inseparable from distance.

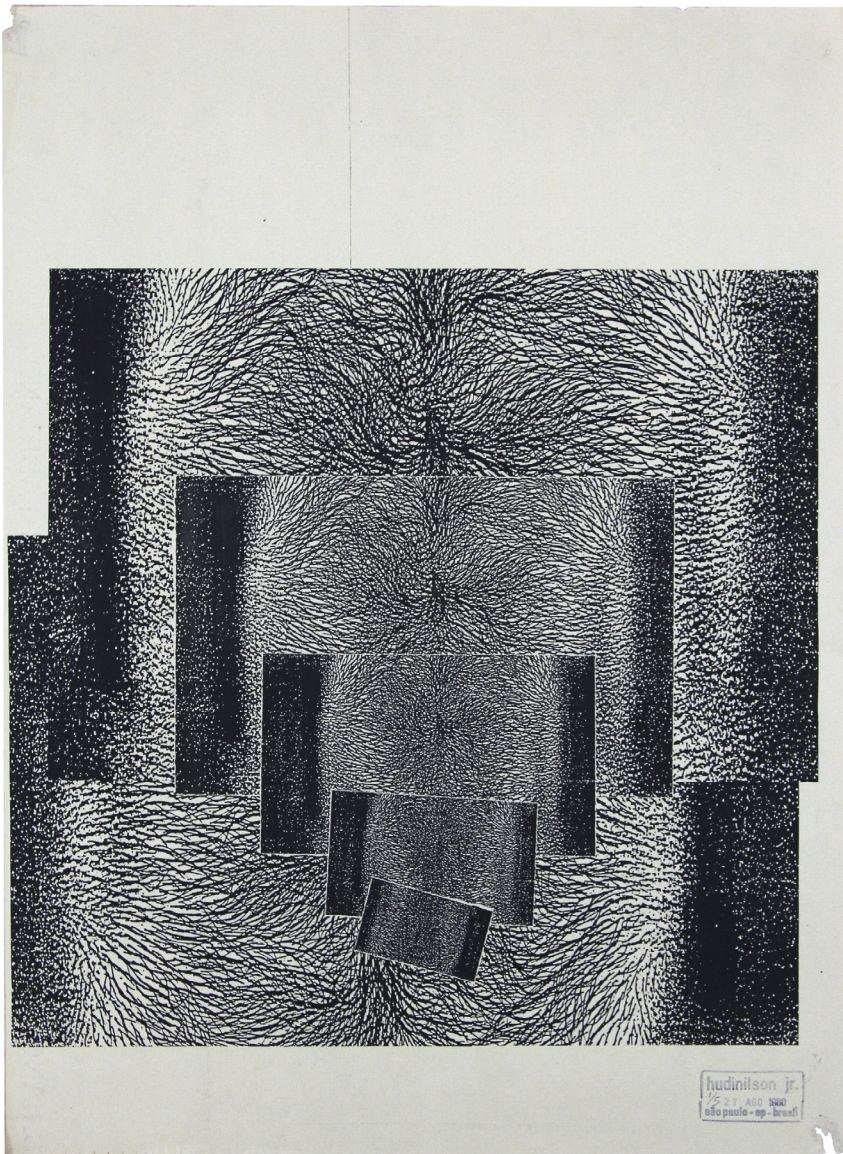
From a phenomenological perspective, the artist’s approach resonates with a concept central to Merleau-Ponty: the idea that the body is immersed in, and composed of, the same substance as the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). As the French philosopher posited, to touch requires tangibility, and to see requires visibility – a notion Hudinilson Jr. embodied, describing his practice as a “constant exercise of seeing and seeing myself” (Butkus, 2016, p. 370).

In his xerox art, Hudinilson Jr. explored this intricate interplay of visibility and invisibility – what Merleau-Ponty referred to as *flesh* – highlighting the profound interconnectedness of body and perception. He rejected any strict separation between mind and body, emphasizing their

mutual interdependence. Within this framework, the toucher is also the touched, with these roles in constant flux. Hudinilson Jr.'s xerox practice thus becomes a profound exploration of thresholds, treating the skin as a liminal, relational site where embodiment and perception coalesce. The skin emerges as a "between-space," or *bodyscape*, as feminist scholars Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey describe in their introduction to *Thinking Through the Skin*: "the skin, as bodyscape, is inhabited by, as well as inhabiting" (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 2). In this way, Hudinilson Jr.'s work does not treat the body's surface as a mere boundary but as a dynamic interface through which identity, desire, and visibility are continuously negotiated.

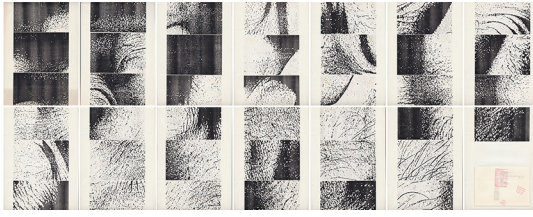
Hudinilson Jr. embraced a unique approach to representing his body, using xerox art to reimagine its expressive potential. He subverted the photocopier – Brazil's first electro-electronic reproduction technology – from its conventional bureaucratic context, traditionally confined to office and clerical tasks.<sup>5</sup> By introducing a direct, radically intimate, and unmediated interaction with this technology, Hudinilson Jr. created an embodied, haptic exchange with the machine, where knowledge was transmitted through the body itself. Performing on the photocopier's glaring surface, he entered into a merging with the apparatus, as in an act of love. The skin became the site of transmission, serving as tangible proof that the body had reestablished its connection with the world.

This encounter, however, was not merely an assertion of presence; it instigated a transformation. The intimacy of the act was such that the skin dissolved into abstraction. It became unrecognizable – a landscape of points, shadows, curves, and lines. His work materialized a body not only seen but altered by its encounters, caught in a state of flux between self and other, flesh and representation (Ill. 1). The photocopier itself, with its inherent limitations, played a crucial role in this transformation – a fact that Hudinilson Jr., deeply familiar with the medium, fully grasped. His process was fundamentally aporetic: the contact it sought was always partial; the body inevitably fragmented. His penis, feet, and face – each part of his body – became symbols, reproduced endlessly through processes of reduction, alteration, re-xeroxing, enlargement, juxtaposition, montage, and superimposition. Rather than mourn the loss of unity, Hudinilson Jr. embraced these remnants. Disconnected from the original whole, these



ILL. 1

Hudinilson Jr.: *Detalhe do detalhe*, 1980. Courtesy of Martins&Montero and Hudinilson Jr. Estate.



ILL. 2

Hudinilson Jr.: *Narciso - Gesto II*, n. d. Courtesy of Martins&Montero and Hudinilson Jr. Estate.

parts emerged as autonomous fragments with meanings of their own. By dismantling the body's presumed coherence, Hudinilson Jr. shifted the focus from a rational center to a celebration of the periphery (Ill. 2).

Paraphrasing Didier Anzieu (2016), it might be argued that Hudinilson Jr. grasped a fundamental insight: it is through the skin that the body's affective reactions are formed; the first sensation of the self is, indeed, epidermal. His direct, skin-to-skin engagement with the reproduction medium forged an emotional bridge between the body and its representation, challenging the notion that vision alone is the conduit for knowledge production. For him, images were primarily tactile matter, meant to be manipulated, cut, and transformed (Miyada, 2020); they became true objects of desire through touch – a touch that always implied reciprocity, the experience of being touched in return. This reciprocity reached its zenith when Hudinilson Jr. obsessively xerographs his hand, reproducing it countless times within his *Cadernos de referências* (Ill. 3). These notebooks cultivate a subtle ambiguity, leaving the reader to question whether they are the observer or the observed, whether the pages themselves – saturated with desire – are initiating contact, inviting touch, and resonating with a sentient longing.

### **Xerox Action and *Pugnar Radical*: Practices of Disidentification**

*Pugnar Radical* marked the culmination of Hudinilson Jr.'s decade-long trajectory, in which he positioned the body at the center of cultural, media, design, and political inquiry. Beginning with his xerox experiments in



ILL. 3

Hudinilson Jr.: *Caderno de referências VI*, c. 1987. Photo: Simone Rossi. Courtesy of MACUSP, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP, São Paulo and Hudinilson Jr. Estate.

the mid-1970s, continuing through urban interventions with the 3NÓS3 collective, and evolving through installations such as *Zona de Tensão* (Zone of Tension) and *Posição Amorosa Outdoor/Art-Door* (Loving Position-Outdoor/Art-Door) (Maia, 2020, pp. 13-15), this path culminated in a visceral, performative act that left the body profoundly exposed. After years of investigating an embodied, skin-to-skin engagement with the world – where his body functioned both as image and flesh – Hudinilson Jr. gradually retreated into a state of physical and sexual isolation following this performance.

To fully grasp the significance of both his xerox art and *Pugnar Radical*, it is essential to examine a conceptual shift that took place between the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within the 3NÓS3 collective, Hudinilson Jr., alongside fellow members Ramiro and França, developed the operative concept of *intersversão* – a fusion of intervention and inversion.

INTERVERSÃO [intersion]: (from the Latin: Intervertio) noun. The act of inverting; changing the natural or habitual order. INTERVERT [invertir] (from the Latin: Intervertere) verb. To invert; to turn upside down. (3NÓ3, 1981)

More than an artistic strategy, *interversão* encapsulated a radical critical approach that not only engaged with established structures but also actively disrupted them, challenging and overturning cultural stereotypes. Hudinilson Jr. incorporated this strategy broadly within his multimedia practice, mapping new ways of reimagining spaces, cultural symbols, and even the body itself. This desire for inversion is vividly apparent in his xerox actions, where he directed his critical gaze toward his own corporeality with increasing intensity.

In *Pugnar Radical*, Hudinilson Jr. exposed his body in a theatrical setting, in contrast to his xerox actions, which unfolded privately in secluded encounters with the photocopier – performances witnessed by no one. The traces of these xerox performances exist only as fragmented photocopied impressions of his body. Even in one of the rare instances in which he allowed himself to be photographed during such a performance – the *Narcisse Exercício de Me Ver II* series (*Narcissus Exercise of Seeing Myself II*) – the contrast with *Pugnar Radical* is striking. These xerox performances depicted a fluid body erotically engaging with the machine in the privacy of a studio, whereas *Pugnar Radical* presented an immobilized, bleeding, passive body subjected to an external force.

Despite these apparent differences, a closer examination reveals a deeper connection between the two gestures, with skin emerging as a critical intermediary mediating the artist's exploration of visibility, touch, and bodily fragmentation. The act of xeroxing itself became a performance in which the body was both subject and object, scrutinized and dissolved in mechanical reproduction. The photocopier extended the skin's function, capturing its textures, flaws, and contours – yet never preserving the body in its entirety. Each xerox print was a trace, an imprint of an ephemeral presence.

Each copy could also be read as a “time-body,” a transitory act rather than a static image, thereby reinforcing the performative dimension of the xerox: an apparition that simultaneously registers and erases. The skin be-



ILL. 4

Hudinilson Jr.: *Pugnar Radical*, performance art project, 1984. Courtesy of Martins&Montero and Hudinilson Jr. Estate.

came a resonant surface, a stark, black-and-white register of a body yearning for connection. Like Narcissus gazing into his reflection, Hudinilson Jr. used the photocopier as both mirror and trigger, reflecting the world around him while attempting to reterritorialize his own self through an interplay of bodies, gazes, and desires.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than attributing a technological gaze to the photocopier, Hudinilson Jr.'s practice underscores the instability of the gaze itself. In Lacanian terms, the gaze is not reducible to a fixed organ or a discrete point of vision but circulates within the field of desire, distributed across relations of looking and being looked at. The photocopier does not "see" but participates in a circuit of visibility in which the body is both subject and object, seer and seen. The formulation "mirror and trigger" captures this paradox: it both reflects the body and activates desire through a process of self-estrangement. In this sense, the gaze in Hudinilson Jr.'s xerox actions emerges as a relational field – neither strictly human nor technological, but an effect of mediation itself.

In *Pugnar Radical* (Ill. 4), this fragmentation was no longer mediated through xerox technology but performed in real time. The performance's ritualistic structure – where Hudinilson Jr. was stripped, manipulated, and subjected to a series of sensory and bodily interventions – mirrored the logic of his xerox process. Just as the photocopier reduced, cropped, and abstracted the body, *Pugnar Radical* staged a live deconstruction of presence, where the body was simultaneously subjected to desire, scrutiny, and pain.

Hudinilson Jr. carefully crafted each element of the performance, beginning with the title. As the son of a linguistics professor, he brought a unique sensitivity to the etymology of words, selecting *pugnar* from Latin to evoke the inherent role-reversibility embedded in concepts of struggle and combat. He underscored that *pugnar* not only carries connotations of punishment but also signifies defending another. Similarly, he chose *radical* to emphasize its etymological link to roots, signaling an engagement with foundational structures.

To underscore the dualities within this piece, he compiled a series of contrasting words in his archival materials, arranging them into two opposing columns: victim and torturer, pain and action, man and woman. Among these contrasts, one word appeared in both columns: Narcissus – a

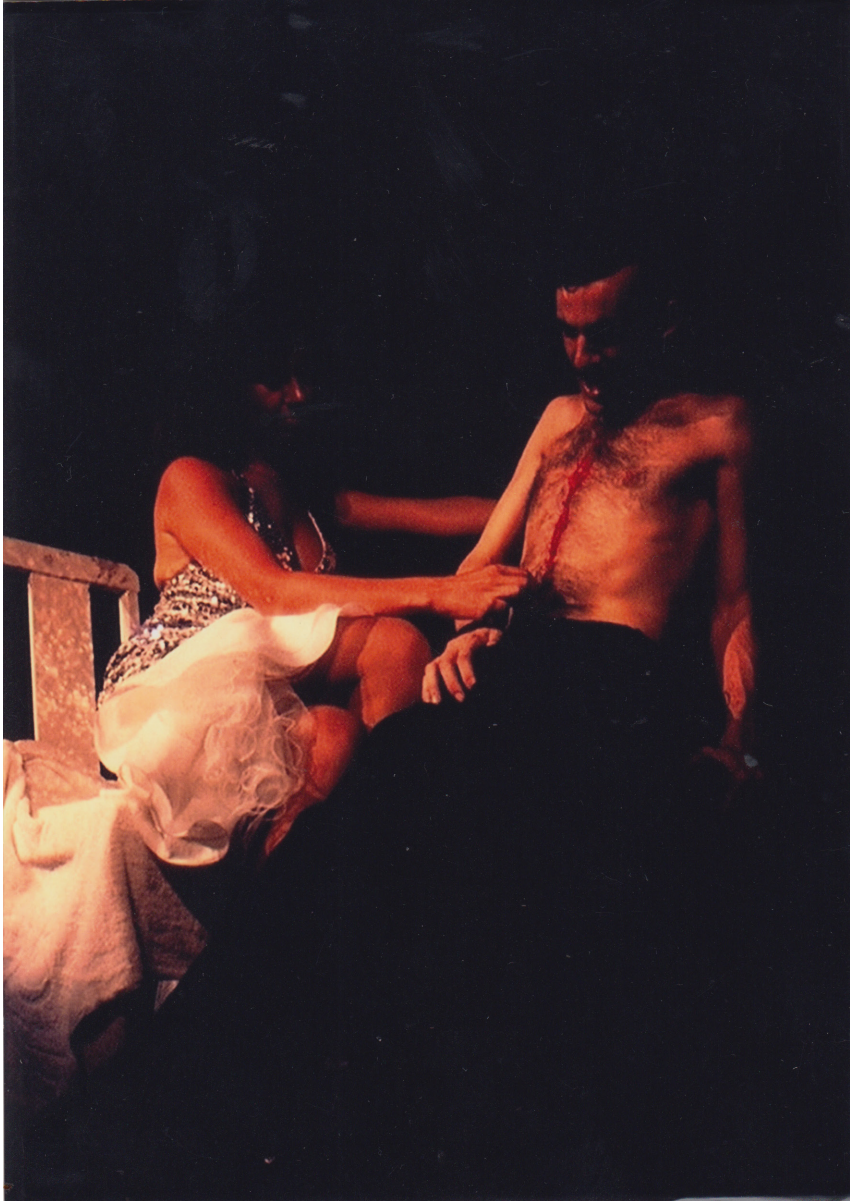
mythological figure central to his practice and a mirror of his own artistic identity (Stigger, 2020). His engagement with Narcissus was not merely classical but layered with the interpretations of French author André Gide. In *Le Traité du Narcisse: Théorie du symbole* (*The Treatise of the Narcissus: Theory of the Symbol*), penned in 1891, Gide's Narcissus does not merely succumb to his reflection; rather, through reflection, he reveals the world.

Rich in visual and auditory motifs, *Pugnar Radical* opened with a video of a man shaving, accompanied by an audio track blending male screams of torture with female voices. Seated at the center of the stage and surrounded by five televisions and two closed-circuit cameras, Hudinilson Jr. was approached by actress Cláudia Alencar, who, embodying a femme fatale figure, plucked hairs from his chest with tweezers and poured – with gloved hands – red nail polish from his pharynx, allowing it to drip down his torso (Ill. 5). Cameras captured close-ups of his chest and a clock, transmitting the live footage to surrounding televisions.

As revealed by Resende in his monograph, Hudinilson Jr. originally envisioned the performance culminating with a projection of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* – long regarded as the artist's final painting – onto his torso. He intended to conclude by mimicking a suicidal gesture. Though ultimately omitted, its intended symbolism of finality remains significant.

The torso projection also partly echoed *Intellettuale* (Intellectual), a 1975 performance by Italian artist Fabio Mauri for the inauguration of the new Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna. In this work, Mauri positioned visionary Italian poet and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini – a recurring figure in Hudinilson Jr.'s notebooks – on a high seat, transforming him into a human screen onto which his film *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964) was projected. As Pasolini physically experienced the effects of his own work projected onto himself, Hudinilson Jr. similarly enacted an intimate yet violent confrontation with self-representation, exploring the effects of skin-spection and self-division after having them lovingly and symbolically experienced through xerography.

In *Pugnar Radical*, Hudinilson Jr. brought to life the amorous abstraction long suggested by his xerox practice, where skin functions as an aporetic medium – a site of contact that paradoxically dissolves form. This performance deepened his engagement with skin as medium, shifting



ILL. 5  
Hudinilson Jr.: *Pagnar Radical*, theatrical performance documentation, Centro Cultural São Paulo, with Claudia Alencar, 1984. Courtesy of Martins&Montero and Hudinilson Jr. Estate.

from the cartographic fragmentation of self in xerox toward a directly carnal investigation. While xerox practice disassembled the body into a dispersed topology, *Pugnar Radical* exposed its visceral, tactile reality: the body bleeds, revealing how both actions stem from a quest for *aisthesis*, the body's innate sensibility.

These practices can be read through José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, a performative strategy and theoretical heuristic that allows marginalized subjects to navigate and subvert the overlapping systems of oppression. Muñoz defines disidentification as a survival mechanism that sheds light on the intersections of subject formation, ideology, politics, and power – used by those who neither assimilate into the majoritarian public sphere nor oppose it outright:

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4)

Hudinilson Jr.'s work makes this mechanism palpable in the cultural context of early 1980s São Paulo, where the lingering atmosphere of dictatorship and social repression required queer subjects to devise forms of resistance that were simultaneously aesthetic and existential. For the artist, disidentification operated both within and beyond dominant public spheres. His xerox actions enacted a self-deconstructive process that challenged societal norms, while *Pugnar Radical* revealed that even in acts of self-liberation, the body remains exposed, bleeding at the hands of others.

These performative gestures transformed the skin into an archive of resistance – an interface charged with vulnerability, tension, and subversion, interrogating the unresolved spaces of desire and oppression. As medium, the skin emerged as a complex threshold, at once impenetrable and sensitive, a symbolic yet immanent surface that resists, absorbs, and reflects in equal measure. In *Pugnar Radical*, Hudinilson Jr. did not merely mark a departure from his xerographic deconstructions; he embodied an irreversible confrontation with the material reality of flesh. This culminating expression of disidentification – blurring intimacy and violence, mediation and exposure – resonated as both an affirmation of resistance

and an enduring critique of the constraints imposed upon the queer body. The skin, inscribed with the marks of cultural resistance, remained a site of contestation and longing, refusing erasure.

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#### NOTES

- 1 During his lifetime, Hudinilson Jr. recognition remained largely confined to São Paulo, partly due to his complex and often challenging personality. Significant international recognition has only come in the final stages of his life and, particularly, after his death. His recognition is largely owed to the work of recovery and international circulation of his artworks by Martins&Montero, exhibitions hosted by institutions such as Kunsthau Biel (2025), ICA Miami (2023), and the commitment of curators, artists and researchers such as Paulo Miyada, Mario Ramiro, Ricardo Resende, among others. Hudinilson Jr.’s work is now part of important collections such as MoMA (New York), Museu de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid), Migros Museum (Zürich), MAGA Museo d’Arte (Gallarate, Italy), MALBA (Buenos Aires), and MASP (São Paulo).
- 2 Starting in 1978, Brazil embarked on a gradual process of democratization, known as the political opening period, as it prepared for its first direct elections after nearly two decades of military dictatorship. This process reached its pinnacle in 1985 with the restoration of civilian governance, the ratifica-

tion of a new federal constitution in 1988, and the landmark direct presidential election in 1989.

- 3 Among the editorial ventures that have significantly amplified the voices of the LGBTQ+ community in the media landscape are *Lampião da Esquina* (1978-1981), a magazine dedicated to the homosexual community, and *Chanacomchana* (1981-1987), a publishing platform for feminist and lesbian communities in São Paulo (Moralles, 2021). Additionally, the experience of the *Movimento de Arte Pornô* is noteworthy, for its use of obscene language to challenge dictatorial conformism and advocate for new body politics (Kac, 2022; Nogueira, 2015).
- 4 On this matter, the contributions of sociologist, philosopher, and activist Silvia Federici are essential for reinterpreting the histories of bodies within capitalism from a feminist perspective (see Federici, 2004; 2019).
- 5 The mediation of clerks was primarily aimed at preventing money counterfeiting, which is why color photocopying remained a rarity in Brazil until the late 1980s. More generally, this mediation between the consumer and technology exemplifies a distinctly Brazilian condition that directly influences the way of thinking, as noted by sociologist Laymert Garcia dos Santos, who provides the following example. “Nothing exemplifies Brazil better than the automatic photo booth. In Europe and the United States, these machines are automatic. The individual comes along with the local currency, adjusts the seat, sits down, puts in the money, takes the picture, the machine does everything, and the person goes away. In Brazil, there is someone who positions our face, adjusts the seat, sells the token, and after the machine has done everything the attendant takes the strip of photos, dries them, cuts them up, and puts them in a little package. I think that Brazil is this association, this conjunction. (...) This conjunction of ultramodern forms with incredibly archaic ones can be found everywhere in big Brazilian cities. But it is not just outside, above all it is in the mind” (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 79).
- 6 Fragmented and disassembled, Hudinilson Jr. began, in parallel with his xerox practice, to seek pieces of himself elsewhere – reconstructing his identity through the collection of newspaper and magazine clippings. This process culminated in his *Cadernos de Referências*, where fragments of his body converged with fragments of the world (Rossi, 2023). Before this practice would come to dominate his daily life for more than thirty years, *Pugnar Radical* served as a farewell – a departure from the artistic scene into a contemplative retreat, where bodies were transformed into mere sheets of paper, hauntingly layered between presence and absence.



# “Som prins med morian”

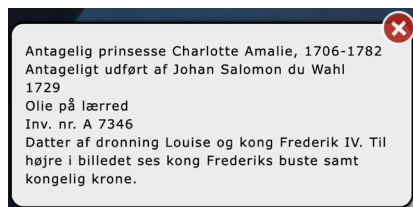
## Om slavegjorte pager i dansk portrætkunst fra det 18. århundrede

EMIL ELG

*Artiklen undersøger, hvordan sorte “pager” i dansk portrætkunst fra 1700-tallet fungerer som æstetiske og ideologiske kontrastfigurer – og kommenterer samtidig på, hvordan museal formidling fortsat i dag reproducerer koloniale dynamikker gennem både tavshed og racial sprogbrug.*

Beskrivelsen af portrættet af prinsesse Charlotte Amalie (Ill. 1) fremstår både forbeholden, passiv og objektiv. Portrættets protagonist er ikke med sikkerhed sig selv, selvom hendes navn står anført med gul skrift i værkets nederste højre hjørne. Det samme gælder kunstneren bag billedet, tyskeren Johan Salomon du Wahl (1689-1765), der arbejdede ved det danske hof i 1700-tallet. Han har antageligvis malet den antagelige prinsesse, men vi kan åbenbart ikke vide det med sikkerhed.

Årstallet på tredje linje – “1729” – indstifter imidlertid en ny, autoritativ vished i teksten, og det samme kan siges om de følgende linjer, der, som vi læser, udgøres af 1) materialebeskrivelsen, 2) inventarnummeret og 3) en præcisering af prinsessens indplacering i det danske kongehus samt en uddybende beskrivelse af (nogle af) billedets andre bestanddele. Vi informeres om, at prinsessen er “[d]atter af dronning Louise og kong



ILL. 1  
Screenshot fra Det Nationalhistoriske Museums tidligere virtuelle tour.

Frederik IV”, og om, hvad der “ses” “[t]il højre i billedet”: “kong Frederiks buste samt kongelig krone”.

Vi hører ikke noget om, *hvem* der ser kongebusten og kongekronen, for verbet står i passiv. Og sætningsopbygningen er på den måde med til at kaste et videnskabeligt skær over den korte billedanalyse. Blikket, der ser, er hverken subjektivt eller situeret, men kommer ligesom fra alle steder og ingen steder på samme tid. Det er et institutionelt og disciplinært blik, et blik, der ønsker at fremstille sig selv som objektivt, på friktionsløs bølgelængde med maleriet selv.

Men blikket, der ser “til højre i billedet”, kommer selvfølgelig alligevel fra et sted. Det kommer fra et museum, et slot, Det Nationalhistoriske Museum på Frederiksborg Slot (DNM). Det er en medarbejder på slottet, sandsynligvis en inspektør, der på et tidspunkt har betragtet det antagelige portræt af prinsesse Charlotte Amalie og omsat sit blik til et passivt verbedet. Medarbejderen har formuleret en sætning og har i samme moment skjult sig selv. Sætningens alder fremgår ikke af teksten, men i 2016 blev den uploadet i den virtuelle rundvisning, man indtil for nylig kunne tilgå på DNM’s hjemmeside: en omfattende Google *street view*-version af Frederiksborg Slot, hvor man – på lydsiden ledsaget af stemningsgivende rokoko-musik og en forklarende *voice over* – kunne udforske slottets rum, dreje 360 grader rundt om sig selv, kigge ned på gulve og op på lofter samt zoome ind på værker, møbler og andet.<sup>1</sup>

Første gang, jeg besøgte DNM, var via denne virtuelle tour. Det var i foråret eller den tidlige sommer 2020, jeg skulle til at starte som ph.d.-stipendiat ved Københavns Universitet med et forskningsprojekt om repræsentationer af sorthed i dansk billedkunst fra 16- og 1700-tallet, og alting var lukket på grund af pandemien.

Jeg var overrasket, da jeg læste den digitale formidlingstekst tilhørende portrættet af prinsesse Charlotte Amalie. Ikke fordi jeg ikke kunne identificere de omtalte personer og genstande, men fordi jeg lagde mærke til endnu person, som ikke blev omtalt i museets tekst. En person, som egentlig var ret synlig i maleriet, men som altså tilsyneladende ikke “sås”. Jeg vil gerne redegøre for, hvad jeg så, og hvad jeg fortsat ser. Til venstre i billedet (Ill. 2) ser jeg et barn eller i hvert fald en person, der er betydeligt lavere end prinsessen. Der er tale om et sort barn, uden tvivl et forsøg fra



ILL. 2

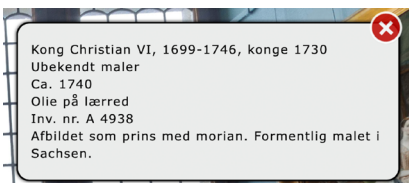
Johan Salomon du Wahl (antageligt), *Prinsesse Charlotte Amalie* (1706-1782) (antageligt), 1729. Olie på lærred, 150,5 × 121 cm.

© Det Nationalhistoriske Museum på Frederiksborg Slot. Foto: Kit Weiss

malerens side på at skildre en afrikaner eller en afrocaribier, med røde læber og et ansigt, der, selvom det fremstår mørkt og utydeligt, forekommer at udtrykke en blanding af længsel, betagethed og, måske, smerte. Barnets blik er ærefrygtigt rettet mod prinsessen og kongebusten og fungerer såle-



ILL. 3  
 Ukendt kunstner, *Christian 6.*, ca. 1740. Olie på lærred, 62 × 49 cm  
 Det Nationalhistoriske Museum på Frederiksborg Slot. Foto: Kit Weiss.



ILL. 4  
 Screenshot fra Det Nationalhistoriske Museums tidligere virtuelle tour.

des som det, jeg ved en anden lejlighed og i forlængelse af kunsthistoriker David Bindman har kaldt for “en instruerende fordobling af beskuerens blik” (Elg, 2025, p. 74).

Barnet bærer en kurv med blomster i forskellige farver, hvoraf de største og tydeligste er tre bleglyserøde roser, der vender i beskuerens retning, og hvoraf den midterste berøres af prinsessen i en gestus med tydelige erotiske undertoner. På sit hoved bærer barnet en perle- og ædelstensbesat hvid turban med en sort fjer foroven, og om halsen bærer det noget andet, der ligeledes lyser op i kontrast til ansigtets malede mørke: en bred og glinsende metalkrave. Et halsbånd, der overfor beskueren tydeliggør, at der med dette barn er tale om nogens ejendom, en slavegjort person. Men hvorfor nævnes dette slavegjorte barn ikke i værkets formidlingstekst? Hvorfor nævnes det ikke, at portrættet af prinsesse Charlotte Amalie (også) er et billede af dansk kolonihistorie samt af racial og kolonial vold? Og hvilke konsekvenser har denne påfaldende udeladelse for beskuerens læsning og forståelse af billedet?

### Hvad er en “morian”?

På DNM hænger der en række portrætmalerier fra 16- og 1700-tallet, hvor både medlemmer af kongefamilien og andre magtfulde, hvide individer med tilknytning til det danske monarki er skildret med slavegjorte såkaldte pager.<sup>2</sup> I det følgende analyserer jeg et af disse portrætter og spørger til, hvilke funktioner (repræsentationen af) det slavegjorte barn har i billedet. Artiklens analyser, pointer og perspektiver lægger sig i forlængelse af min ph.d.-afhandling, *Karel van Manders kærlighed: Om billeder af sorthed i ældre dansk kunst*, som jeg indleverede og forsvarede i 2025, men retter fokus mod et billede, jeg ikke behandlede i afhandlingen. Det drejer sig om et portræt af Charlotte Amalies storebror, Christian 6. (Ill. 3), udført i samme periode som billedet af prinsessen. Fra museets digitale formidlingstekst (Ill. 4) lærer vi, at kongen er “[a]fbildet som prins med morian”. Den formidlingsmæssige udeladelse, der karakteriserede beskrivelsen af prinsesse-portrættet, gør sig således ikke på samme måde gældende her, hvor vi kan læse, at barnet i billedet er en “morian”. Men hvad er en “morian” egentlig? Og hvad laver denne “morian” egentlig i værket? Lad os starte

med kort at forsøge at besvare det første af disse spørgsmål. Slår man ordet “morian” op på *Wikipedia* får man følgende definition:

En morian eller en mor er en ældre dansk betegnelse for en, oftest sort, afrikaner. Det er beslægtet med ordet maurer, der dog oftest betegner en afrikaner af arabisk eller berberisk oprindelse. Begge ord kommer via latin af græsk μαῦρος /mauros/, “sort”.

Inden for heraldik bruges morian stadig om en neger som heraldisk figur. [...]

Den danske racer- og speedwaykører, pilot og meget andet, Jens Henning Fisker Hansen, var mest kendt under sit kælenavn Morian Hansen, et tilnavn han havde fået, fordi han ofte var “sort som en morian” efter speedwayløbene.<sup>3</sup>

Et opslag i *Danmarks Nationalleksikon* fortæller os noget lignende i en lidt kortere – og lidt mindre neutral – form: “Morian er et forældet og nedsættende ord for en sort person og andre mørklødede personer.”<sup>4</sup> Disse definitioner kan endvidere suppleres med en slags definition fra DNM selv, idet museet enkelte steder i sin digitale formidling kortfattet uddybde termens betydning. Eksempelvis i beskrivelsen af et portræt af Sophie Amalie, færdiggjort i 1667 af en ubekendt kunstner. Her stod der nemlig, at “[e]n morian (en sort tjener) holder dronningens jagtfalk”. Og det samme gjorde sig gældende i et billede af Karel van Mander 3. fra ca. 1660 beskrevet i følgende vendinger: “Prins Jørgen i heroisk kostume, med en morian (sort tjener) og en løve i baggrunden”.<sup>5</sup>

Ifølge museets egen, kortfattede definition er en “morian” altså at forstå som en slags nexus udgjort af hudfarve og/eller race og så en klasse- eller standsmæssig position. En “morian” er sort, og en “morian” er tjener, hvilket i øvrigt her bør læses som en eufemisme for slave. Men at en “morian” er alle disse ting – “en ældre dansk betegnelse for en, oftest sort, afrikaner”, en “neger som heraldisk figur”, “et forældet og nedsættende ord” samt en “sort tjener” – gør os imidlertid ikke klogere på det andet af de spørgsmål, jeg stillede før: Hvad laver figuren i billedet?

## Portrætproblemer

I artiklen “Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture” (2013) identificerer David Bindman et billede af Titian som et af de tidligst kendte eksempler på

et værk, hvor en hvid person “ledsages af en hengiven tjener/slave”. Han skriver:

Der findes et mindre antal europæiske portrætter fra det 16. til det 18. århundrede, der har overlevet til i dag, hvor afrikanere eller personer med afrikansk baggrund er det centrale motiv. I uendeligt flere tilfælde er de til stede, men visuelt underordnet en europæisk mand, kvinde eller et barn. Genren, hvor en herre/frue ledsages af en hengiven tjener/slave, blev i al væsentlighed opfundet af den berømte venetianske kunstner Titian, og det første identificerbare eksempel er portrættet af Laura Dianti, Grev Alfonso af Ferraras elskerinde, malet i 1520'erne. (Bindman, 2013, p. 71. Min oversættelse).

Bindman giver i sin artikel en række eksempler på denne særlige genre indenfor europæisk portrætkunst. En genre, hvis opblomstring er uløseligt forbundet til udviklinger og accelerationer indenfor den transatlantiske slavehandel i 15-, 16- og 1700-tallet, men som samtidig også, skriver han, gør sig gældende i europæiske lande, der ikke var direkte involveret i handel med slavegjorte og plantageslaveri. Bindman påpeger endvidere, at der i dette møde mellem slaveriet som institution og ontologi overfor portrættet som genre opstår en særlig friktion. Eller som han selv formulerer det:

Begreberne ‘slave’ og ‘portræt’ udgør tilsammen et oxymoron, en begrebsmæssig selvmodsigelse, for det definerende formål med et portræt [...] er at bekræfte den portrætteredes subjektivitet, autonomi og integritet. (Ibid., p. 75. Min oversættelse).

Hvis et oxymoron er en “stilfigur hvor to i princippet uforenelige begreber kombineres”,<sup>6</sup> hvordan skal vi så forstå Bindmands pointe her? Litterat Agnes Lugo-Ortiz og kunsthistoriker Angela Rosenthal, der sammen har redigeret antologien *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (2013), hvor Bindmans artikel er publiceret, formulerer i introduktionen til selvsamme bog en række spørgsmål, der går i dialog med hans bemærkning. De spørger:

Hvis portrætmaleriet som genre, i sin mest konventionelle og præ-avantgardistiske form, er blevet forstået under forudsætning af, at beskueren tillagde det billede, der var synligt på lærredet, en vis subjekts-virkelighed, hvad indebærer det så for de visualiserings- og subjektiveringsdynamikker, der gennemsyrrer portrættingen af slavegjorte mennesker, hvis eksistensbetingelser og synlighed historisk set er blevet systematisk udvisket? (Lugo-Ortiz og Rosenthal, 2013, p. 5. Min oversættelse)

Hvad sker der, når en kunstnerisk genre, der historisk har handlet om at dokumentere og producere individualitet, agens, personlighed og subjektivitet, rettes mod et indhold – slaven – der i al væsentlighed er defineret ved manglen på netop disse egenskaber? Det er en kompleks problemstilling, som blandt andre litteraturteoretiker Peter Erickson har forsøgt at undersøge nærmere. I artiklen “Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture” (2009) skriver han:

Den sorte tjener er placeret i en anormal position i tidlig moderne portrætkunst. Det er den hvide herre, der portrætteres: Tjeneren er sekundær, men ikke desto mindre også ‘skildret’ [‘portrayed’]. Denne afbildning [portrayal] er formet af en paradoksalt vekselvirkning mellem synlighed og usynlighed. Formålet med rollen er fremvisning – derfor er tjeneren et tydeligt synligt objekt. Men fremvisningen skal samtidig signalere en nok-ses-men-ikke-høres-underdanighed – og derfor er tjeneren usynlig som subjekt. (Erickson, 2009, p. 24. Min oversættelse).<sup>7</sup>

Den subjekt-mæssige usynlighed, Erickson her omtaler i relation til repræsentationer af slavegjorte afrikanere i “tidlig moderne portrætkunst”, skyldes både slaveriets føromtalt fundamentale uforenelighed med portrættet, men også en anden og mere lavpraktisk omstændighed, som er, at det i størstedelen af disse skildringer af sorte pager frem til sidst i det 18. århundrede kan være svært at sige med sikkerhed, *hvem* de slavegjorte personer i billederne *i virkeligheden var*. Som oftest fremstår de nemlig – i modsætning til portrætternes hvide protagonister – unavngivne og uden særlige personlige karakteristika. Men hvis det ofte er besværligt at etablere dokumenterbare forbindelser mellem de malede sorte pager og virkelige, historiske personer, der levede virkelige liv udenfor malerierne, skyldes dette ikke blot en mangel på data eller relevante arkivalier. En andet problem, der yderligere problematiserer etableringen af sådanne forbindelseslinjer, er nemlig, at tilstedeværelsen af slavegjorte afrikanske eller afrocaribiske tjenestefolk i portrætkunst fra de omtalte århundreder langt fra med sikkerhed kan opfattes som tilfredsstillende dokumentation for, at der er tale om repræsentationer af virkelige, historiske subjekter. Bindman skriver:

Sorte slave/tjenere [sic] optræder kun i et fåtal af portrætter fra den periode, og de er ikke repræsentative for tilgængeligheden af sorte slaver eller bevis

for, at den portrætterede ejede en, for de kan være fiktive eller tilføjet af maleren. (Bindman, 2013, p. 77. Min oversættelse).

### “Med fjerprydet hat, brunlig dragt og røde spændsko”

Lad os i forlængelse af ovenstående teoretiske ekskurs vende tilbage til portrættet af Christian 6. og den sorte page. Hvordan skal vi opfatte det slavegjorte barn i maleriet? Hvem er/var det? Hvad er dets funktion i billedet? Er det *portrætteret*? Hvis ikke, hvad er det så?

Det er sandsynligt, at der med den sorte karakter er tale om en person, som – for at vende tilbage til Bindman – er “fiktiv eller tilføjet af maleren”. I hvert fald er der ikke umiddelbart tilgængeligt arkivmateriale eller anden værktøjsdata, der kan hjælpe os med at knytte et navn eller en livshistorie til repræsentationen. Museets interne værkrapport gør os ikke klogere. Her omtales personen nemlig kun en enkelt gang – med samme raciale og anonymiserende sprogbrug, som gjorde sig gældende i den tidligere citerede digitale formidlingstekst. I det pågældende udsnit af rapporten står der:

Lange, sorte støvler med guldsporer, rød hermelinskappe, med elefantstjernen over venstre arm og skulder, – bagved båret af Morian med fjerprydet hat, brunlig dragt og røde spændsko.<sup>8</sup>

Rapporten melder altså ikke om noget navn; den nævner ikke engang muligheden for, at personen kunne være andet end blot en “Morian”. Er man som beskuer interesseret i at forfølge læsningen af denne repræsentation som en malerisk gengivelse af en virkelig historisk person, må man altså lede andre steder. Men hvor? Et bud kunne være at undersøge eksempelvis regnskabsbøger og lignende materiale fra Christian 6.s hof.<sup>9</sup> For der er ingen tvivl om, at afrikanske og afrocaribiske slaver var tilstede ved hoffene i det 18. århundrede i både København og andre europæiske hovedstæder, og endvidere at denne tilstedeværelse hænger uløseligt sammen med de mange skildringer af sorte pager, der dukker op i malerkunsten i perioden (se f.eks. Mallinckrodt, 2024; Simonsen, 2021). Spørgsmålet er imidlertid, om en sådan fremgangsmåde er den rigtige overfor et billede som billedet af Christian 6. og pagen? For er det en god idé at starte sin undersøgelse fra et sted, hvor det antages, at repræsentationen af den slavegjorte person

nødvendigt er forankret i et virkeligt menneske af kød og blod, som vi potentielt kan restaurere os tilbage til, hvis vi som kunsthistorikere eller historikere gør vores arbejde ordentligt og har adgang til det rette kildemateriale? Som jeg har redegjort grundigt for andesteds (Elg, 2025, p. 37-107), mener jeg ikke som udgangspunkt, at en sådan metode er frugtbar, når vi skal analysere et billede som det pågældende portræt af Christian 6. og den slavegjorte page. I hvert fald skal vi – uanset om vi er kunsthistorikere, historikere eller andet – være påpasselige med at gå for hurtigt frem i vores søgen efter autentisk sort liv, når vi undersøger og omtaler repræsentationer af slaver, der – som det er tilfældet i både portrættet af prinsesse Charlotte Amalie og Christian 6. – er skildret på ydmygende, karikerede og racistiske måder, så vi ikke risikerer at puste liv i raciale fantasmer. Samtidig med disse metodiske overvejelser er det dog også vigtigt at bemærke, at der i kunsthistorien undtagelsesvis findes eksempler på repræsentationer af slavegjorte pager, som kan identificeres ved navn, og som det har været muligt i forskellige grader at knytte biografiske informationer og livshistorier til (se f.eks. Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2022; Larsen, 2017). Dette er imidlertid ikke hovedreglen, og det er derfor mit forslag, at analysen af siden i det pågældende portræt hurtigst muligt forlader det biografiske, hvilket helt bogstaveligt vil sige, at den skrift, der skal skrives om billedet, efter min mening ikke skal være en livsskrift, men noget andet. Det er selvfølgelig muligt at opridsede en klar biografi for portrættets hovedperson, kongen. Vi kan konstatere, at han fødes i 1699 og dør i 1746 – få år efter billedet antageligvis er malet. Vi kan tilføje, at hans regeringsperiode starter i 1730, få år før Vestindisk-Guineisk Kompagni opkøber St. Croix – den tredje og største af de tre caribiske øer, der skal komme til at udgøre Dansk Vestindien – fra franskmændene (Olsen, 2017, p. 108-112). Vi kan tilføje, at Christian 6. selv var storaktionær i det koloniale kompagni og på et tidspunkt ejede over 30 plantager på St. Croix med tilhørende slaver.<sup>10</sup> Vi kan tilføje, at Christiansted – den største by på netop St. Croix – i 1733 blev opkaldt efter netop Christian 6. og fortsat i dag bærer dette navn. Men alle disse biografiske informationer bringer os ikke umiddelbart nærmere en forståelse af den malede slaves liv. Den pointe, jeg forsøger at nå frem til, og som jeg håber, jeg nu har tydeliggjort, er imidlertid, at vi slet ikke bør forsøge at gribe ud efter dette liv gennem et billede som det, vi har at gøre med her.

Lad os i stedet for forsøge at forstå, hvordan figuren virker i billedet. Vi har allerede via museets interne værkrapport konstateret, at den unge slave bærer kongens hermelinskappe og sørger for, at pelsen ikke rører gulvet. Der er en afstand mellem de to personer, måske en meters penge i det malede rum, men de er alligevel fysisk forbundet af den rød-hvide kappe, der falder diagonalt gennem billedet som en stor, aflagt ham. En anden diagonal, der usynligt løber parallelt med hermelinskappen, er den linje, der udgøres af drengens blik. Han kigger nemlig – som det så ofte er tilfældet i denne type portrætkunst – op mod kongen, der poserer rank i billedets midte. Christian 6.s blik er derimod rettet direkte ud mod beskueren. Han smiler en smule, med lukket mund, en let rødmen på kinderne. Ansigtet er meget lyst – det lyseste og mest oplyste område i hele billedet – og overgangen mellem panden og pudderparykken fremstår næsten udvisket i en diset hvidhed. Kongens krop er dækket af en glinsende og guldrandet rustning, der har en bemærkelsesværdig gyldenorange åbning i skridtet, samt et væld af forskellige tekstiler – blandt andet et blå skærf, der falder fra et usynligt punkt under kongens venstre skulder og munder ud i en slags sløjfe omkring hans højre hofte. Et skærf, der knytter sig til Elefantordenen, som jeg vender tilbage til i artiklens afslutning.

I sin venstre hånd holder kongen en kommandostav, der forsvinder ned bag en anordning af fjer i forskellige farver. Med sin højre holder han på en ædelstensbesat krone, der sammen med et gyldent scepter ligger på en rød pude af et velourlignende stof. Både fjer, kongekrone, scepter og pude befinder sig på et hvidligt marmorbord båret af et bordben forestillende en maskulin og muskuløs, poseidonlignende havfruefigur, der understøttes i sin maritimitet af et mørkeblåt, gyldenfrynset draperi, som bølger ind over billedet fra nederste højre hjørne.

De forskellige fødder i billedet – bordets volutfod, kongens støvler og barnets røde sko – er placeret i en diagonal sekvens henover gulvets sorte felter. Eller faktisk – for at være mere præcis – er det, som om gulvets grid ophører pludseligt i billedets mellemgrund og i stedet bliver til et diffust, mørkt underlag, både Christian 6. og hans slave står på.

Der er også et andet diffust og mørkt område i billedet: baggrunden. I billedets sider har maleren gengivet elementer af en generisk arkitektur, men bag de afbildede personer er der en åbning ud mod noget, som måske skal

forestille en aften- eller nattehimmel. Det er i hvert fald muligt, at den lille æggeformede plamage, som anes skråt til højre over kongens hoved, er et forsøg på at skildre en måne i det fjerne og således også et forsøg på at male en lyskilde ind i billedet. En kilde, der overfor beskueren kan hjælpe med at forklare og begrunde det markante lysindfald, der synliggør monarken.

## Kontrast og kreativitet

Et sted i sin skelsættende essaysamling *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) skriver Toni Morrison:

Som sociologen Orlando Patterson har gjort opmærksom på, burde vi ikke blive overrasket over, at Oplysningstiden kunne forliges med slaveriet; det overraskende ville have været, hvis det ikke havde ladet sig gøre. Begrebet frihed opstod ikke i et tomrum. Der var intet, der i den grad fremhævede frihed – hvis det ikke ligefrem var det, der skabte den – som slaveriet.

Hun fortsætter:

Sort slaveri virkede berigende på landets kreative muligheder. For i konstruktionen af sorthed og trældom fandtes ikke alene forestillingen om ikke-fri, men også, med den dramatiske polaritet skabt af hudfarve, projektionen ikke-mig. Resultatet var en legeplads for fantasien. (Morrison, 1994, p. 56)

De tre essays, der tilsammen udgør *Playing in the Dark*, omhandler instrumentaliseringen af sorthed hos kanoniserede US-amerikanske forfattere som eksempelvis Edgard Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein og Ernest Hemingway, og både Morrisons empiri og geografi afviger på den måde fra min artikels genstandsfelt. Alligevel mener jeg, at hendes præcise analyser af forskellige former for metaforisk sorthed (hos Morrison også omtalt som “diskursiv afrikanisme”) i skønlitteratur er anvendelige i forbindelse med portrættet af Christian 6. og beslægtede billeder. Intet, skriver Morrison, fremhæver oplysningens frihed som kontrasten til (sort) slaveri. Og som vi læser, påpeger hun tilmed, hvordan denne kontrast både kommer til udtryk på hudens overfladiske niveau (“the dramatic polarity created by skin color”) samt på et dybere og mere formativt plan (“the projection of the not-me”) – og at disse niveauer fletter sig ind i hinanden. En pointe, som med fordel kan bidrage til at åbne op for forståelsen af

pagemotivet i billedkunsten. Den dobbelthed, Morrison peger på, gør sig nemlig også gældende i det billede, vi har at gøre med her. Maleren har tydeligvis efterstræbt at fremstille kongen så lys som muligt. Og det er klart, at slavens mørkebrune hudfarve fremhæver Christian 6.s i forvejen stærkt accentuerede hvidhed. Men dynamikken udspiller sig også på et mere metaforisk og mindre synligt plan, idet den slavegjorte page i kraft af sin underforståede ufrihed og status som tingsliggjort også genererer en form for ontologisk, kontrastmæssig indramning af kongen, der får sidstnævnte til at stå endnu tydeligere frem som et oplyst, frit, magtfuldt og rigt subjekt.

### Coda: Elefantordenen

Kontrasten mellem barnet og kongen spejles eller parafraseres endvidere af det ordenstegn (Ill. 5), der titter ud mellem enderne på det blå skærf. Der er tale om insigniet for Elefantordenen – Danmarks ældste, vigtigste og sværest opnåelige ridderorden, som fortsat er aktiv i dag, og som ligesom den sorte page i billedet peger i retning af de forskellige forbindelseslinjer, der historisk knytter kongehuset sammen med dansk koloni- og slaverihistorie (Cramer, Danbolt, Elg et al., 2022; Díaz 2019; Elg 2024; Hoffman 2023). Det er for omfattende at redegøre for Elefantordenens komplekse ikonografiske udvikling her, men helt kort er det værd at nævne, at den mørke rytterfigur, vi ser på ryggen af den hvide elefant i portrættet af Christian 6. og slaven, er en helt central komponent i Elefantordenens visuelle identitet. En ikonografisk komponent, der første gang bliver en del af ordenstegnet i 1630'erne under Christian 4., og som ca. 60 år senere



ILL. 5  
Detalje.

skrives ind i de statutter for Elefantordenen og mere overordnet det danske ordensvæsen, Christian 5. publicerer i 1693 (Hein, 1993). Statutter, hvori det i øvrigt specificeres, at den sorte figur er en "Morian".<sup>11</sup>

Der er intet overraskende i, at en dansk konge er portrætteret iklædt Elefantordenens blå bånd og ordenstegn (samt bryststjernen, som delvist ses bag en fold i hermelinskappen omkring den portrætteredes venstre overarm, og som ligeledes er en del af Elefantordenens faste udstyr), og går man en tur på Frederiksborg Slot, vil man se utallige portrætter af konger, prinser og adelige, hvor ordenens forskellige kendetegn indgår. Dog afviger det ordenstegn, vi ser i billedet af Christian 6., en del fra normen på grund af den sorte figurs størrelse og bemærkelsesværdige positur. Figuren her er nemlig betydeligt større end tilfældet er i de virkelige ordensmærker. Derudover er det påfaldende, hvordan figurens arme og hænder synes at række ud eller gestikulere henimod billedets øvre venstre side – parallelt med elefantens hvide snabel og stødtænder og i retning af slaven i billedet. Der er noget næsten bedende over den henvendelse, rytteren forekommer at rette mod det slavegjorte barn. Men hvad er bønnens indhold? Hvad er det, figuren ønsker at opnå ved sin rækken ud? Det er muligt, at en sådan affektiv og agentiv læsning af rytteren i det malede ordensmærke forekommer spekulativ, men samtidig er der ingen tvivl om, at figuren kompositorisk er vendt mod den slavegjorte page, og at kunstneren har ønsket at skabe en tydelig forbindelse mellem repræsentationen af den sorte figur i insigniet og repræsentationen af barnet. Spørgsmålet er så, hvad denne forbindelse gør? Hvad betyder den? Tilsammen udgør de tre menneskeskikkelser – rytterfiguren, barnet, kongen – en trekant i billedet. Rytteren orienterer sig i retning af barnet, som på sin side kigger op på Christian 6. Der er tale om en trekant, men der er også tale om et hierarki, en slags trappe, en vertikal struktur, hvor rytterfiguren er nederst, slaven er i midten, og monarken er øverst. Det slavegjorte barn er på den måde placeret mellem to yderpoler: den primitivistiske sorte mikroskulptur og den store, lyse konge. Der står det og sitrer uforløst mellem menneske og ting, mellem subjekt og objekt. Det er ikke helt en skulptur, men får heller ikke helt lov at være menneske. Det er – som så mange andre sorte pager i europæisk kunsthistorie – skildret som en form for inventar i billedet, som et tilbehør, som en *accessory*. Der er tale om en prekær ontologi, der også

knytter sig til slaveriet som strukturelt forhold uafhængigt af billedkunsten, men som i Christian 6.-portrættet og i lignende billeder virkelig sættes dramatisk og karikeret på spidsen. Og derfor er det også så vigtigt, at vi, der arbejder med disse repræsentationer – på museerne, på universiteterne og i andre sammenhænge – sætter os for at finde et nyt sprog, der kan hjælpe med at begrebsliggøre og forstå, hvad det egentlig er, der er på spil i disse voldelige billeder. At sige om Christian 6., at han er “afbildet som prins med morian” er nemlig ikke bare utilstrækkeligt; det er en formidlingsmæssig reproduktion af den dehumanisering, den tingsliggørelse, den inventarisering, som portrættet allerede selv producerer. Lad os derfor fremadrettet forsøge os med nye formuleringer.<sup>12</sup>

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#### SUMMARY

### “Som prins med morian”

*Om slavegjorte pager i dansk portrætkunst fra det 18. århundrede*

The article examines how enslaved Black children, so-called pages, appear in Danish portrait paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and how Danish museums continue to overlook or minimize their presence. Focusing on portraits of Princess Charlotte Amalie and King Christian VI, the article shows how institutional descriptions emphasize royal symbols while ignoring enslaved figures who are clearly visible in the artworks. The article further argues that this particular kind of portraiture affirms white subjectivity while rendering enslaved figures visible only as objects or accessories, not as subjects. The term “moor,” still sometimes used in Danish museum texts, is analyzed as a racialized and dehumanizing label that reinforces this logic. Finally, the article calls for new interpretive language that confronts the violence and dehumanization embedded in these images.

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#### NOTER

- 1 Den virtuelle rundvisning blev taget ned fra Det Nationalhistoriske Museums hjemmeside i 2025, hvorefter museet lancerede en ny audioguide med øget fokus på formidling af kolonihistorie. Denne audioguide kan tilgås via den digitale formidlingsplatform *Smartify*.
- 2 Hvad er en page? I *Karel van Manders kærlighed* fremskrev jeg følgende definition: "Ifølge Danmarks Nationaleleksikon var en page oprindeligt 'en dreng af adelig slægt, der skulle uddannes til ridder'. Den etymologiske forklaring samme sted lyder: 'fra fransk *page*, måske fra græsk *paidon*, diminutiv af *pais* 'barn, dreng, slave'. Pagen er altså en maskulint kønnet figur. Han er ung, og han er tjener. Han er måske adelig, men etymologisk har han også en forbindelse tilbage til slaven. En tvetydighed, som tit synes at komme visuelt til udtryk i repræsentationer af sorte pager, der, som vi vil se, ofte er fremstillet både som underdanige og ophøjede. Pagen rummer, med andre ord, lidt af det ridderlige og lidt af det slavelige – på én og samme tid. Han er en elastik, der kan spændes hårdt ud mellem disse to poler." (Elg, 2025, p. 41).
- 3 <https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morian> (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).
- 4 <https://lex.dk/morian> (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).
- 5 Portrættet af Sophie Amalie har inventarnummeret A 4605. Portrættet af Prins Jørgen har inventarnummeret A 2402. Citeret fra Det Nationalhistoriske Museums virtuelle rundvisning.
- 6 <https://ordnet.dk/ddo/ordbog?query=oxymoron> (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).
- 7 Denne problemstilling nævnes også i artiklen "I kontaktzonen mellem kunsthistorie og kolonihistorie", som jeg i 2022 publicerede i tidsskriftet *Periskop* sammen med mine kolleger Mathias Danbolt, Nina Cramer, Bart Pushaw og Anna Vestergaard Jørgensen. Her skrev vi – med henvisning til blandt andre Bindman, Erickson samt kunsthistoriker Charmaine Nelson (2004) – følgende: "Som det er blevet påpeget af forskellige kunsthistorikere, opstår der en række ontologiske og repræsentationelle problemer dér, hvor portrætgenren støder mod slaveriet som fænomen og institution" (Cramer, Danbolt, Elg et al., 2022, s. 50).
- 8 Citeret fra Det Nationalhistoriske Museums interne vækrapport.
- 9 Journalist Philip Sampson peger indirekte på denne fremgangsmåde i artiklen "Negerpige med abe", der blev publiceret på det digitale medie *POV* i 2016. Artiklen kan læses her: <https://pov.international/negerpige-med-abe/> (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).

- 10 Se eksempelvis journalist Karen Lerbech Bomholts oplysende artikel “Aktionærer, plantage- og slaveejere: Sådan var danske konger involveret i Danmarks tid som kolonimagt” (2025) for mere baggrundsinformation om Christian 6.s – og andre danske kongers – engagement i plantagedrift i Dansk Vestindien. Artiklen kan læses via følgende link: <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/kultur/historie/aktionærer-plantage-og-slaveejere-saadan-var-danske-konger-involveret-i> (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).
- 11 I en lidt længere udgave lyder citatet fra Elefantordenens statutter: “De, som antagis i denne ypperligste Ridder-Orden, skulle daglig bære paa deris høyre Side en Elefant af puurt Guld, hvid émailleret, havendis et Vagt-Taarn på Ryggen, og en Morian med en Piil i hånden, siddendis neden for Taarnet på Halsen [...]”. Statterne kan tilgås digitalt via følgende link: [https://www.omsd.dk/danishorders/docs/Elefantordenens Statutter 1693.pdf](https://www.omsd.dk/danishorders/docs/Elefantordenens%20Statutter%201693.pdf) (tilgået d. 7. november, 2025).
- 12 Tak til Maria Catalina Heitmann for kritik og feedback.

# Mapping the Skin

## The Intersection of Medical Imagery, Terminology, and Art History in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century

DAVID LUDWIG

*The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw significant shifts in how skin was represented in both medical and artistic contexts, influenced by evolving cultural, social, and scientific perspectives. Medical advances led to the establishment of dermatology as a distinct field, with visual documentation like Hebra's Atlas of Skin Diseases underscoring skin's clinical relevance. Skin began to symbolize more than mere physical boundaries; it was perceived as a social marker articulating health, morality, and class. The introduction of photography further transformed dermatology by enabling more precise documentation. The portrayal of skin as a racial or social indicator cemented colonial biases and fueled visual narratives supporting racial hierarchies. 19<sup>th</sup>-century representations of skin thus reveal a convergence of scientific and cultural attitudes, demonstrating how dermatology and art were mutually influential in shaping public perceptions of race, health, and identity.*

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### 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Medical Literature on the Pathologization of the Skin

The long 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a profound transformation in the medical and cultural perspectives on human skin. Whereas in earlier centuries the body's surface was understood primarily as an outer layer not worth further investigation, it now became a central object of interest, in which medical, aesthetic and social meanings converged (cf. Hennepe, 2007, pp. 55-57). Parallel to the institutionalization of new clinics, the internationalization of research, and the differentiation of medical disciplines, dermatology emerged as an independent field (Ferreira et al., 2021, pp. 332-345).

The popularity of scientific visual culture played a significant role in the development of a distinct methodology. In addition, illustrations, atlases, and photographic series not only provided the discipline with tools, but also established the skin as a 'readable surface', a terrain that bore diagnostic signs, made social differences visible, and could be mapped. During this phase, the skin was no longer understood merely as a boundary organ or as a painterly category of "flesh" and "incarnate" (Fend, 2017, p. 21), but also as a projection surface on which diagnostic signs, moral attributions, and cultural differences become visible. The semanticization of the skin into different areas, sections, and regions was not limited to medicine, but was closely intertwined with artistic traditions and social systems of interpretation. As art historian Mechthild Fend has shown, an iconographic shift took place between 1650 and 1850, particularly in the French context: Ingres' painting, for example, celebrated the smooth, hermetic surface as an aesthetic ideal that did not allow any insight into the underlying interior. The depiction of skin marked a new legibility of the body's surface, which is reflected in 19<sup>th</sup>-century visual culture and medical terminology (cf. Fend, 2013, pp. 17-18).

The increasing specialization of medicine ran parallel to a profound change in its epistemic order. Visual representations became a central medium of knowledge, and images replaced text as the primary form of classification in many areas. This process was particularly evident in the field of dermatology, which emerged as an independent discipline during this period. Illustrations, atlases, and photographic series not only provided isolated visual material, but also constituted the skin as a cartographable area where various scientific discourses converged: sociocultural categorizations and typification of those depicted, their social status, class affiliation, race, and gender overlapped and permeated the emerging dermatological visual culture. The article describes a brief history of dermatological atlases and their publication practices, providing an overview of the genesis of dermatological atlases and compendiums in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, emerging from artistic depictions of skin. From an intersectional perspective, the publication history should be understood as a process of transformation in which stigmatization and social classifications have also found their way in. Thus, the article traces the history of skin depictions in the field of

scientific-popular publications as a distinct visual culture. Since the 1960s, historical and cultural studies research has increasingly examined the skin as an interface between medicine, aesthetics, and society. Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) drew attention to the fact that modern medicine is based on the objectification of the body image, opening up a framework of interpretation that understands the skin not only as an organ but as a complex field (Foucault, 1973, p. 164). As a result, skin came to the fore in cultural and art historical studies as a medium of social and aesthetic meanings. Claudia Benthien (*Skin*, 2002) and Steven Connor (*The Book of Skin*, 2004) interpreted skin as a cultural boundary between self and world, whose surface equally marks identity, vulnerability, and difference (Benthien, 2002). David Bindman (*Ape to Apollo*, 2002; *Race Is Everything*, 2023) examined the role of skin in the context of aesthetics and racial theories and showed how artistic and scientific discourses interacted to reinforce ideas of beauty and human difference (Bindman, 2023). Central to the art-historical perspective is the work of Mechthild Fend, who has highlighted the close interconnection between painting, dermatology, and cultural discourses in numerous studies. Her book *Fleshing Out Surfaces* (2017) shows how skin was constituted as a visual medium in art and medicine in France between 1650 and 1850, while essays such as *Skin Portraiture "Painted from Nature"* (2012) or *Images Made by Contagion* (2022) analyze Hebra's Atlas and the practice of wax casts as media between aesthetic representation and scientific evidence. Medical history has simultaneously illuminated the role of images in the genesis of dermatology. Thomas Schnalke (*Diseases in Wax*, 1995) examined the history of moulage, while Domenico Bertoloni Meli (*Visualizing Disease*, 2018) highlighted the significance of pathological illustrations. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (*Objectivity*, 2007) shaped the debate by analyzing dermatological atlases as part of a visual culture that produced "mechanical objectivity" as a scientific ideal. Mineke te Hennepe's publication (*Depicting Skin*, 2007) complemented this with a detailed reconstruction of dermatological imaging practices between 1790 and 1870. Further studies situate the skin in an institutional and media context. Daniel Wallach (1994) and Wallach and Bernard Tilles (2002) have described the emergence of the first dermatological journals, while Bernard Cribier (2018) analyzed early

illustrations in the *Annales de dermatologie*. Beatriz Pichel (2024) recently showed how medical photography became institutionalized in Paris in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and gained new legitimacy through public funding. Complementing this, Mary Hunter (*The Face of Medicine*, 2016) examined the visualization of medical masculinity and showed that dermatological image practices were also shaped by social role models. These works illustrate that in current research, skin is no longer viewed solely as a medical object, but as a visual and cultural medium in which questions of scientificity, aesthetics, social order, and racialization intersect. The state of research thus reveals a broad interdisciplinary field in which approaches from medical history, art history, and cultural theory intertwine to understand the skin as an interface between the body, knowledge, and society.

### **Towards a Visual Culture of Skin: The Beginnings of a New Discipline**

Early attempts at establishing a visual classification system for skin conditions can be traced back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1776, Joseph Jakob von Plenck presented the first comprehensive system in his *Doctrina de morbis cutaneis*, which classified approximately 115 skin diseases exclusively according to their visible symptoms (cf. Hennepe 2007, p. 30). Plenck's morphological method established a tradition in which the skin surface was no longer understood as a random appearance and served as the methodological foundation for a new system of pathological classification. This focus on visibility was continued by Robert Willan in the British context. His work *Delineations of Cutaneous Diseases* (1817), published by Thomas Bateman, presented elaborately colored copperplate engravings. Spots, papules, pustules, and scales were not only described but also systematized visually (Bateman, 1817). Willan's plates, which were based on clinical observation and artistic precision marked a first threshold in dermatological illustration and demonstrate the close intertwining of science and aesthetics in the genesis of the discipline (cf. Fend, 2013, p. 157).

At the same time, Jean-Louis Alibert was working at the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris, a center for skin diseases that early on became a laboratory for visual classification (“Alibert – Altmeyers Enzyklopädie”,

2014). In 1806, Alibert published his *Description des maladies de la peau*, which was innovative in several respects. His plates did not show isolated signs of disease, but entire patients, often in clothing and poses reminiscent of portraits (cf. Alibert, 1806). Thus, the skin was not understood as an isolated organ but was made visible in the context of the social body. Alibert's famous "Arbre des dermatoses", a genealogical tree that classified skin diseases according to the model of natural history, illustrates the attempt to combine medical classification systems with iconographic programs (Ferreira et al., 2021, p. 339). Here, the skin appeared as a projection surface for a classification system that also conveyed cultural meanings. These early atlases illustrate the interdependence of classification and image production. Copperplate engravings and colored plates were not mere illustrations of texts, but representations that made it possible to systematically compare, name, and classify skin diseases. The skin thus became a cartographic object: its signs and surfaces could be recorded, reproduced, and ordered. In this process, medical precision, technical innovation, and cultural semantics combined to produce a new form of knowledge production. Outside of medicine, too, the skin was charged with symbolic meanings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In art, it served as a sign of purity, health, and moral integrity. Portraits and nudes celebrated the smooth, flawless surface as an expression of aesthetic and social ideals. At the same time, the depiction of skin reflected differences between classes and ethnicities. While light, flawless skin was associated with prosperity and virtue, darker or altered skin was often seen as a sign of foreignness, deviance, or disease (Jablonski, 2021, pp. 438-442). These cultural attributions had an impact on medical practice and shaped how skin was viewed and represented in a clinical context. Thus, by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the foundation had already been laid for a discipline that gained its authority from making the invisible visible. Dermatological atlases were not only valued as teaching materials but also enjoyed great popularity outside of professional circles. They functioned as collections of "cases" that not only conveyed clinical information, but also satisfied a certain curiosity. The skin became the subject of a visual culture in which scientific curiosity, aesthetic interests, and social values were closely intertwined ("The New Fasciculus Of Hebra's Atlas Of Skin-Diseases", 1870).

## Analysis of the Iconographic Differences in the Depiction of Skin

With Ferdinand von Hebra, dermatological visualization reached a new peak in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1856 and 1876, he published his monumental *Atlas of Skin Diseases*, which is considered a paradigmatic work of a young discipline. Created in the environment of the New Vienna School, the atlas combined clinical research, pathological-anatomical orientation, and state-of-the-art printing techniques into a format that established dermatology internationally.

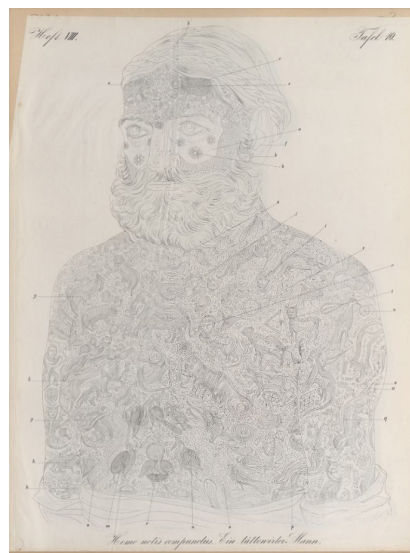
Hebra was born in Brno in 1816 and qualified as a professor at the University of Vienna in 1844. From 1849, he became director of the newly established department for skin diseases at the Vienna General Hospital, one of the first of its kind in the German-speaking world. In this role, he systematically described a large number of clinical pictures for the first time, including lupus erythematosus, lichen ruber, and impetigo herpetiformis. He was supported by students such as Moritz Kaposi, who later became famous for describing the sarcoma named after him, and by artistically trained doctors such as Anton Elfinger and Carl Heitzmann, who contributed significantly to the aesthetic and scientific impact of his atlas as illustrators (“Hebra, Ferdinand Ritter von – Deutsche Biographie”, 1969, p. 172–173).

The plates in the atlas were produced using chromolithography, a novel process at the time that allowed for the finest color nuances and shading. This technique was of central importance to dermatology, as changes in skin color – redness, pigmentation, or depigmentation were considered diagnostically crucial (cf. Twyman, 2013, p. 63). Contemporary reports emphasized that Hebra’s plates were produced “after nature (nach der Natur)” (Geiges and Burg, 2005, p. 74) and far surpassed the written description in their detail. Each volume of the atlas dealt with a group of diseases and arranged the plates in such a way that a visual system was created that was interlinked with the clinical classification. As a result, the image was no longer understood as a mere illustration, but as an independent medium that made classification and diagnosis possible in the first place (cf. Hebra, 1856).

Hebra’s concept of overlay sheets, on which body regions were segmented and numbered, was particularly innovative. These sheets resembled maps and made it clear that the skin was understood as a



**ILL. 1**  
 Carl Heitzmann: *Atlas der Hautkrankheiten*.  
 [Depictions] Lfg. 8: Albinismus, Leucoderma,  
 Lentigo, Chloasma, Argyria, Naevus Verrucosus,  
 Homo Notis Compunctus, 1872, Vienna: Kaiserl.-  
 Königl. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei. [https://  
 archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/ubfind/Record/  
 urn:nbn:de:hebis:04-eb2010-0321/Holdings](https://archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/ubfind/Record/urn:nbn:de:hebis:04-eb2010-0321/Holdings).  
 Published by the University Marburg PDM 1.0.



**ILL. 2**  
 Carl Heitzmann: *Atlas der Hautkrankheiten*.  
 [Depictions] Lfg. 8: Albinismus, Leucoderma,  
 Lentigo, Chloasma, Argyria, Naevus Verrucosus,  
 Homo Notis Compunctus, 1872, Vienna: Kaiserl.-  
 Königl. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei. [https://  
 archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/ubfind/Record/  
 urn:nbn:de:hebis:04-eb2010-0321/Holdings](https://archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/ubfind/Record/urn:nbn:de:hebis:04-eb2010-0321/Holdings).  
 Published by the University Marburg PDM 1.0.

cartographable surface. An impressive example is the depiction of the tattooed Albanian Georg Constantin, whose body was reproduced not out of medical interest but as an ethnographic curiosity. Here, the skin was literally measured and marked with lines that divided the tattoos into numbered fields (see Ill. 1). This staging shows how closely clinical documentation and cultural attributions were linked in Hebra's atlas. The plates themselves reveal a tension between clinical precision and artistic staging. Elfinger's colored drawings are characterized by portrait-like accuracy, capturing the patient not as an anonymous carrier of a disease, but as an individual figure. Hair, hairstyles, and posture were carefully reproduced, so that the illustrations almost appear like classical portraits. This aestheticization did not mean a departure from medical accuracy, but rather reinforced its effect: the illustrations made the skin visible as

both a scientific and social sign of status. After Elfinger's death in 1864, Heitzmann took over the work. He continued the illustrations with his own lithographic skills and completed the atlas before moving to America and becoming a co-founder of the American Dermatological Association ("Heitzmann, Carl – Deutsche Biographie", 1969, p. 459).

The visual policy of the atlas makes it clear that "accuracy" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century should not be understood as a neutral reflection of nature. Pose, gaze, lighting, and color choice were selected to make the lesions optimally visible.

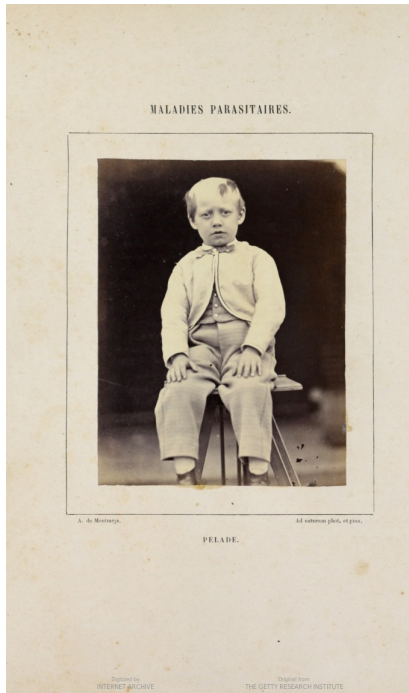
The impact of the atlas was enormous. Shortly after its publication, individual plates were adopted by the London-based *New Sydenham Society* and incorporated into their *Atlas of Portraits of Diseases of the Skin*. In France, Great Britain, and the USA, Hebra's work served as a model for new atlases (cf. Hennepe, 2007, 129-134). George Henry Fox in New York directly followed Hebra's system, but transformed it into photographic formats. Kaposi also published atlases based on hand-colored lithographs – an indication that artistic illustration was not immediately supplanted despite photographic innovations. Alongside Hebra, it was Paul Gerson Unna who placed dermatology on a new footing. With his *Histopathology of Skin Diseases* (1894), he anchored microscopic preparations in text and images. This meant that the surface continued to be understood as a diagnostic field, but at the same time it was embedded in a more complex system that included cross-sectional images and histological evidence. Unna also used images to establish a new epistemic order: the skin was now visible not only as a surface, but as tissue that could be read from the inside (Unna, 1894). Parallel to these developments, photography established itself as a new medium. In 1868, Alfred Hardy and A. de Montméja published the *Clinique photographique de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis*, a work containing fifty photographs that were subsequently hand-colored. Standardized rules for taking photographs – neutral backgrounds, frontal and side views, uniform lighting – established a visual vocabulary that claimed objectivity. As Daston and Galison argue, objectivity is not the elimination of subjectivity but a historically and culturally constituted practice of representation (cf. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 2007, pp. 36–37). The photographs in *the Clinique photographique* demonstrate this impressively: the technical

neutrality of the camera was complemented by coloring to reveal diagnostically relevant color nuances. Accuracy here did not mean fidelity to nature, but the highlighting of medically relevant signs. George Henry Fox also made use of photography in the USA. His *Photographic Illustrations of Skin Diseases* (1879) and the *Photographic Atlas of the Diseases of the Skin* (1905) combined scientific precision with artistic post-processing. The photographs were intended to make clinical signs serially comparable, but their aesthetics reveal that staging was also a central component of the production of objectivity here. Some plates show the patients almost in the manner of bourgeois portraits, while the disease comes to the fore (Fox, 1879, p. 28). The ambivalence between documentary evidence and aesthetic staging thus becomes particularly clear. Hebra's atlas marks a turning point in this field. It stands at the end of a tradition that began with Willan's and Alibert's colored copperplate engravings of their genealogical dermatosis tree and at the same time opens the way to photographic and histological atlases. His plates turned the skin into a cartographable terrain whose signs became reproducible and classifiable. At the same time, they remained imbued with aesthetic conventions and cultural attributions that gave scientific dermatology a social and symbolic foundation.

### **The Ambivalence Between Scientific Documentation and Social Stigma**

The increasing precision of medical imagery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only meant advances in diagnosis and classification, but also reinforced social attributions and cultural hierarchies. Skin became a readable surface on which not only diseases could be identified, but also moral, social, and ethnic differences. This dual function made dermatological illustrations ambivalent media that linked scientific knowledge with social value systems. Even in the early atlases of Alibert or Willan, patients were not anonymized, but depicted as whole persons. Clothing, pose, and surroundings played a decisive role in interpretation. A woman in simple clothing could indicate modest circumstances, while a man in an elegant pose signaled bourgeois status. These stagings illustrate that depictions of skin always conveyed social codes as well. The body was not only recorded medically,

but also embedded in a visual framework that suggested conclusions about class, morality, or lifestyle. With the increasing spread of photographic techniques, this double coding became more pronounced. The Book *Clinique photographique de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis*, published by Alfred Hardy and A. de Montméja in 1868, is a prime example of this. Patients were photographed frontally and in profile, against neutral backgrounds, with uniform lighting. The images followed clear standards in order to make clinical signs visible, but their aesthetic staging remained unmistakable. The photographs were subsequently colored to accurately reproduce skin tones – a hybrid form that combined documentary neutrality with artistic processing. In many cases, the images show not only the lesion, but also the gestures, posture, and facial expressions of the patients, giving the images a portrait character (see Ill. 3 and Ill. 4). Anonymization was only partially carried out: the faces are often clearly recognizable, so that the disease forms the main visual feature of the portrait. This reduction to the pathological reflects the ambivalence of medical objectification: what was intended as neutral documentation could reinforce the social devaluation of patients. At the same time, racist attributions intensified, making skin color the central marker of cultural and biological difference. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, theories had been circulating in anthropology that classified people according to external characteristics such as skull shape or pigmentation. Scholars such as Petrus Camper and Christoph Meiners developed typologies that placed white Europeans at the top of a hierarchy of human varieties (cf. Bindman, 2023, pp. 190-196). These ideas found their way into medical imagery: in dermatological atlases, dark skin was often depicted as a deviation from the white norm, either through black contrasting in drawings or through pathologizing captions. The pictorial representation of skin was thus never neutral. Hebra's atlas also contains examples in which skin color and ethnic origin were explicitly addressed. This is particularly evident in the depiction of the tattooed Albanian Georg Constantin (see Ill. 1), which did not serve to diagnose a disease, but rather to present a culturally 'exotic' body. Here, the skin was shown as a cartographic landscape, with the tattoos numbered and systematized. Ethnographic curiosity, scientific classification, and cultural attribution thus intertwined to create an image that emphasized the foreignness of the subject. Parallel tendencies can



**ILL. 3**

A. de Montméja: Pelade, A. Hardy and A. de Montméja, *Clinique Photographique de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis* (Libraire Chamerot et Lauwereyns, 1868), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100951903>. Published by Hathitrust as Public Domain.



**ILL. 4**

A. de Montméja, Syphilide Vésiculeuse, A. Hardy and A. de Montméja, *Clinique Photographique de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis* (Paris: Libraire Chamerot et Lauwereyns, 1868), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100951903>. Published by Hathitrust as Public Domain.

be found in art. Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une négresse* from 1800 is an example of the ambivalence of artistic representations of black skin (Bishop, 2019). The work emphasizes difference, while at the same time staging the skin as a carrier of symbolic meanings: as an expression of colonial hierarchies, as a marker of social otherness, as a projection surface for moral and aesthetic judgments. Art and medicine moved in similar directions: both used skin as a visible medium to mark differences and stabilize cultural orders. American dermatology also contributed to racialization. George Henry Fox, who was a student of Hebra, published atlases with photographs of patients of different origins. While his inten-

tion was to document variations in disease across different skin colors, this also gave rise to a pictorial practice that visualized and fixed ethnic differences. In a scientific environment in the USA that was still heavily influenced by debates about “racial pathology” (cf. Kenny, 2020, 75–83), such images could easily be embedded in discriminatory interpretations. The connection between skin, morality, and class also remained virulent. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, flawless skin was considered a symbol of social purity, while visible skin diseases were often associated with moral failure. This was reflected in subtle visual strategies: women were depicted with attributes that referred to their supposed lifestyle, men in poses that hinted at their profession or status. In this way, a skin condition could be implicitly linked to vice, poverty, or an “immoral lifestyle”. Dermatological illustrations were thus not only medical documents, but also carriers of social judgments. The colonial dimension of this image policy should not be underestimated. European atlases repeatedly featured illustrations of patients from Africa, Asia, or the colonies whose illnesses were associated with their origins. Exotic cases received special attention because they were rare and considered scientifically interesting. At the same time, however, these images reproduced a colonial gaze: skin became a marker of cultural difference, and clinical pictures were linked to “foreign” bodies. Illustrations and photographs thus created a repertoire that visually reinforced colonial hierarchies. The 19<sup>th</sup> century thus gave rise to a new visual culture of the skin in which medical precision and social attribution were inextricably intertwined. Dermatological atlases, photographs, and artistic representations made the skin a carrier of diagnostic signs, but also a medium for moral and racist interpretations. The skin appeared as a projection surface on which not only diseases, but also social ideas of purity, deviation, and foreignness became visible.

### **Judgments and Representations in 19th-Century Dermatological Atlases**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dermatological atlases had established themselves as indispensable tools in medical practice. They were used to train students, standardize diagnoses, and facilitate international com-

munication between specialists. But their influence extended far beyond the boundaries of clinical dermatology. They shaped a visual culture in which the human body, its surface, and its deviations were systematically documented, classified, and evaluated. These images are therefore not only scientific sources, but also testimonies to the social and cultural imaginations of an era. The history of skin atlases cannot be written solely as a history of medical progress. Rather, it reveals a complex network in which technical innovations, artistic traditions, and cultural attributions intertwined. Copperplate engravings, chromolithographs, and photographs were not only media of varying accuracy, but also expressions of different image policies. Each technique brought with it its own possibilities, but also its own limitations and meanings. The transition from artistic to medical imagery was not a linear break, but a convergence: aesthetic strategies and scientific demands complemented and permeated each other. Hebra's *Atlas of Skin Diseases* marks a paradigmatic turning point in this context. It represents an attempt to constitute the skin as a cartographable terrain on which diseases could be localized, numbered, and classified. His overlay sheets (see Ill. 2) are exemplary in this regard: they present the body like a map whose surface is divided into segments. Here, skin no longer appears as a random phenomenon, but as an orderly terrain that can be scientifically measured. The atlas combines images of clinical precision with artistic virtuosity, turning the surface of the body into an epistemic field where science, art, and culture intersect. The reception of this work shows how deeply medical image production was embedded in global knowledge systems. Shortly after its publication, Hebra's plates were received and adapted in London, Paris, and New York. Fox's photographic atlases in the USA and Kaposi's popular hand atlases in Vienna built on Hebra's system and transformed it into new media formats. Dermatology established itself as a modern science whose epistemic authority was based largely on the visual serialization of clinical pictures. But it is precisely in this authority that the ambivalence of image practice lies. The claim to "accuracy" and "objectivity" was always the result of aesthetic decisions. Pose, coloration, and printing technique determined how a clinical picture was visualized and which signs were emphasized. Flawless skin was set as the norm, while deviations were pathologized and stigmatized.

Images served not only diagnostic purposes, but also confirmed social value systems. This is particularly striking in the sociocultural dimensions of the atlases. Dermatological atlases were thus also media of social order in which differences between normality and deviation, the familiar and the foreign, health and illness were made visible and fixed. This ambivalence constitutes the historical significance of skin atlases. They are archives of a discipline that defined itself through images and, at the same time, mirrors of cultural patterns of interpretation that extend far beyond medicine. They provide an exemplary study of how science and society intertwined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: images not only created knowledge, but also social realities. Skin was not only mapped, but also symbolically charged – as a medium that seemed to provide insight into the body, character, status, and origin. Interdisciplinary research into these visual worlds therefore opens up far-reaching perspectives. Historians of medicine gain insights into the genesis of a young discipline and its methodological foundations. Art historians recognize the transformation of aesthetic traditions into medical imaging practices. From a cultural studies perspective, the atlases are documents of an era in which visibility itself became a central medium of truth and order. An international comparison shows that although the development of dermatology was based on common technical innovations, it took different forms in different countries. In Paris, the Hôpital Saint-Louis was a center of visual order, where Alibert and later Hardy/Montméja developed image policies that staged the patient as a social body. In Vienna, a school emerged around Hebra and Kaposi that was characterized by systematic classification and lithographic precision. In the USA, Fox combined photographic techniques with European tradition, creating a hybrid that brought dermatology into the modern age. These differences illustrate that medical imaging practices were not only determined by technology, but also by institutional, cultural, and political conditions. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the skin was finally inscribed in a visual science. Atlases, photographs, and histological preparations turned it into a terrain that could be mapped, segmented, and reproduced. However, the images conveyed not only medical knowledge, but also the social, moral, and racist patterns of interpretation of their time. This ambivalence remains a central feature of dermatological imaging practice: it stands simultaneously for

progress and stigma, for precision and prejudice, for science and society. In retrospect, it can be said that during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, the skin became a key epistemic and cultural medium. Its mapping through atlases and photographs established modern dermatology, but it also made the skin a mirror of social ideas about order, difference, and normality. Thus, the history of skin images is not just a medical episode, but a chapter in European cultural history as a whole.

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# Det rådnende lig

JACOB BACH RIIS

*Kan billedet af rådden hud i en muldet skovbund overhovedet sige os noget? Med fokus på det abjekte og grænsen mellem krop og jord dykker artiklen ned i kvalmen og analyserer Sally Manns fotografi af et rådnende lig. Gennem filosofi og biologi undersøges døden ikke som ophør, men som en forandring i livets flow. Netop ligets opløsning udfordrer menneskets selvforståelse og peger mod en økologisk tænkning, hvor menneske og natur er dybt sammenfiltrede.*

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## Hvad kvalme betyder

The human corpse, seen with God, i.e. with dualist Christian thought as lens, and inside of a scientific framework, defined by classic Cartesianist outlooks, which are still influential in biomedical views on the body as base mechanics, is precisely what produces the dead body as abject. (Lykke, 2022, pp. 82-83)

## Om hudens møde med jorden

*Fotoet er i sort-hvid, og det tager mig noget tid at skille plamagerne fra hinanden. Jeg er for langt nede i motivet, før det går op for mig, hvad det er, jeg*



### ILL. 1

Sally Mann, fotografi fra serien *What Remains?*, 2003. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gargosian.

*har for mine øjne. For sent rammer erkendelsen mig... Det er et rådnende lig.* Fotografiet er taget af den amerikanske kunstner Sally Mann (f. 1951) og stammer fra fotoprojektet *What Remains*, der både er udkommet som bog i 2003 og produceret som udstilling i 2004. *What Remains* indeholder 80 billeder med tilhørende tekst opdelt i fem kapitler, hvor mennesker og dyrs jordiske eller materielle efterliv undersøges fra forskellige perspektiver. Det er en svær serie at komme igennem. Lige dele kvalmende og dragende: *Hvad er meningen med disse billeder og dette projekt? Hvorfor overhovedet undersøge, endsige blot se på noget så ulækkert? Og i relation til temaet, hud: Kan billedet af rådnende hud i en muldet skovbund og den kvalme, synet af det bærer med sig, overhovedet sige os noget?*

### **Det klamme – betydningens grænse**

Det klamme, ulækre, ubehagelige og frastødende ved oplevelsen af den rådnende krop lader sig måske bedst beskrive gennem den franske feministiske tænker Julia Kristevas (f. 1941) begreb, *det abjekte*. Det abjekte repræsenterer noget, som er afstødt af subjektet, men som samtidig ikke kan løsrives fra det og ikke kan placeres som et objekt – ofte eksemplificeret som (men ikke begrænset til) slim, snot, blod, lort osv. Det abjekte deler ifølge Kristeva kun en kvalitet med objektet: at det ikke er subjektet. Og hvis objektet er det, som gennem modstillingen med subjektet skaber en slags orden (et system af betydning), er det abjekte netop den amorfe kraft, som fører subjektet hen, hvor modstillingen mister sin mening (Kristeva 1982, p. 2). Derfor kan det abjekte karakteriseres som det, der får betydning til at bryde sammen og lokaliseres der, hvor subjekt/objekt-distinktionen mister mening. Kristeva beskriver den døde krop, set uden for religion og videnskab, som den yderste abjektion (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Det skyldes, at det er der, hvor mennesket afstøder sig selv. Liget inkarnerer subjekt/objekt-distinktionens kollaps (Kristeva 1982, p. 1ff), fordi det på én og samme tid helt bestemt *er* og absolut *ikke er* den afdøde – et vilkår, som ofte benævnes ligets paradoks (Jonas 1965, p. 4ff). På den måde er liget en slags ontologisk mysterium – ikke længere subjekt, ej heller blot et objekt. På et betydningsmæssigt plan kan liget ikke forstås som et objekt, fordi vi ikke formår at adskille det fra det levende subjekt (se f.eks. Hallam og

Hockey 2001, p. 14) – og i biologisk forstand lever myriader af mikroorganismer videre på og i liget, en slags ny intentionalitet, der får kroppen til at rådne og formulde (se f.eks. Radomska 2020, pp. 9-10). I liget forstyrres systemer, orden og identiteter, de erstattes af kompositte, tvetydige uklarheder (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Liget er ikke uklart, fordi det er uhyggeligt, men uhyggeligt, fordi det er uklart.

At 'læse' råddenskab fordrer sensitivitet for uklarheder og tvetydige betydningsområder. Derfor følger denne tekst også teori, som søger ned i begrebernes tvetydigheder, eksempelvis den feministiske teoretiker Rosi Braidottis (f. 1954) videreførelse af det antikke begreb *zoe*, hvorigennem hun forsøger at forstå liv som en amorf sammenfiltret snarere end en mængde autonome, levende individer, som tilsammen danner et netværk (et økosystem) (se eksempelvis Braidotti, 2008). Ligesom Braidottis begreb vil den politiske teoretiker Jane Bennetts (f. 1957) begreb om *levende materialitet* (vibrant matter) og filosoferne Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) og Felix Guattaris (1930-1992) begreb for *molære* og *molekylære* processer være måder at forstå ligets rådnen og kroppens sammenbrud på. Endelig cirkler teksten om netop det punkt, hvor den døde hud møder skovbundens muld – og i lyset af Braidottis omkalfatring af livet og dertil også økologiens væsen, knyttes huden og mulden til den engelske kemiker James Lovelock (1919-2022) og den amerikanske mikrobiolog Lynn Margulis (1938-2011) Gaia-hypotese, som et forslag til, hvordan råddenskab og død, kan forstås som økosofisk kosmologi.

Denne tekst er skrevet med to forskellige stemmer, en, sat i kursiv, som nærlæser billedet, som forsøger at dykke helt ned i mødet mellem den rådrende hud og mulden, og som forsøger at registrere 'det klamme', samt hvordan oplevelsen forplanter sig kropsligt i værkopleveren. Den anden stemme er mere akademisk gængs og forsøger at rammesætte liget, huden, råddenskab og jorden. Intentionen er at skabe en teleskopi, hvor de nære sansninger, de idiosynkratiske oplevelser af klamhed, bruges som en motor for at fortolke kunstværket, der fører dets betydning ud i større økosofiske idéer og åbner muligheden for, at filosofi kan være en situeret sansning lige så meget som en tænkning.

## What Remains?

Ved tre lejligheder op til *What Remains* blev Sally Mann konfronteret med døden: Hendes fars død, hvor hun var til stede; hendes greyhound Evas død; og en episode, hvor politiet skød og dræbte en undvegen kriminel i skoven bag hendes gård i Lexington, Virginia. I bogen og udstillingens første del undersøger Mann de opgravede rester af Eva, efter den har ligget i jorden i et år. Herefter følger resultatet af Manns besøg ved University of Tennessee's antropologiske faciliteter til at studere menneskelig forrådnelse med henblik på at producere forensisk viden. Her undersøger hun rådne lig; stedet hedder i folkemunde en *Body Farm*, og det er herfra fotoet ovenfor stammer. De følgende to 'kapitler' beskriver åsteder, henholdsvis det skovområde, hvor det amerikanske politi skød og dræbte den undslupne fange, og slagmarken Antietam, hvor det blodigste slag under den amerikanske borgerkrig udspillede sig – visuelt røber ingen af stederne noget om de dramatiske begivenheder. Udstillingen og bogens sidste kapitel består af close-up fotografier af Manns egne børn.

*Det ser ud som om, den nederste del af hovedet, der hvor det møder underlagets visne plantedele, er kollapsede. Der er for kort fra resterne af øret til underlaget, måske er de indre dele, som før gav facon til krop og ansigt blevet bløde og smattede. Det ser næsten ud som om, hovedet smelter ned i bladene og jorden. Som en uvelkommen erindring dukker smagen af mit seneste måltid op i mundens bagerste regioner, og min tunge svulmer op så den føles flere størrelser for stor. Instinktivt kigger jeg ned og forsøger at samle mig. Jeg vender tilbage til mødet mellem ansigt og jordbund, og bemærker den mugnende, hårede, spindelvævsagtige tekstur, som kravler op over de rudimentære strukturer af det indfaldne ansigt. Måske kan jeg se de lukkede øjne, og måske kan jeg se resterne af næsen, helt nede ved jorden; eller måske er det steder, hvor huden er faldet sammen og har lagt sig i folder. Den læderagtige hud er flere steder åbnet, eller revnet, dog er det i sortheden stadig svært at bedømme viskositeten og tekturen af det bagvedliggende og skelne de enkelte dele. Ansigtet er på sin vis så meget i opløsning, at det er svært at dechifrere elementerne og svært at bedømme alder eller køn. Endnu engang løber en gysende sitren gennem mine fingre, det kryber i mine arme og op ad min ryg, midt i tungens tilbagevendende tyknen og gåsehuden er*

*jeg taknemmelig for fotografiets sort-hvide æstetik. Det skaber i det mindste lidt distance til virkeligheden, og jeg kan kun forestille mig de brune, sorte, lilla eller rødlige misfarvninger af huden, som fotoet kunne have vist. Farver havde gjort det hele for virkeligt. Men det kunne måske have hjulpet med at afgøre, om det, der antageligt er skulderen, er nøgen eller beklædt – om det er indtørret hud eller læder, og om det er en knogle, der har perforeret overfladen. I hård kontrast til hudens mørke står hårets lys, der tegner sig som en glorie over det opløste ansigt – som et sidste glimt af menneske.*



ILL. 2

Sally Mann, fotografi (detalje) fra serien *What Remains?*, 2003. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gargosian.

At det er svært at skelne de sort/hvide former; at det er svært at gennemskue forskellen mellem hud og jord, er centralt for værket. Der er flere steder, hvor det tilsyneladende er en pointe at skabe et motiv, som ikke tegner sig klart – en uklarhed, som forplanter sig ind i værkets betydningsrum. Visuelt gør den manglende farve og ansigtets mudrede aftegninger det svært for mig at se, hvor kroppen, ansigtet og huden slutter, og andre elementer

tager over. Collodion-fremkaldelsesprocessen, opfundet i midten af det 19. århundrede, giver en dunkel, mørk tone med let flydende kanter, som understøtter det uklare udtryk. Dog tegner skulderens læderagtige hud sig klart og står skarpt, så vi kan se den gennembrudte overflade, og knoglens perforering af skulderen. Skulderhudens klart tegnede topografi står i kontrast til baggrundens amorfe sort/hvide plamager og forgrundens næsten lige så uskarpe nedfaldsløv. Konsekvensen af den sort-hvide æstetik, og de svært adskillelige elementer giver huden og jorden et udtryk, hvor den ene nærmest smelter over i den anden, og de sort/hvide farver giver også hud og jord et delt farveskema, forskyder dem ind i samme felt – ind i en slags objekt lighed mellem jord og forvitret hud.

*Jeg prøver at glemme fotografiets motiv for i stedet at fokusere på lige dér, hvor ansigtet møder jorden. Lige dér, hvor ansigtets sorte hud, bag et lag af spindelvæv eller mugsvamp, møder bladene og jorden. Jeg kan se næsen, hvis form tegnes af det hvide højlys på dens klæge overside og den skygge, den kaster ned på underlaget. Men omkring næsen ser jeg kun blødt changerende gråtoner; netop her, hvor de to overflader eller elementer mødes – kroppen og jorden – er der ikke andet end en slags tåge. En gråtone, som jeg ikke kan afgøre, om er et meget fintmasket spindelvæv eller håret mug.*



ILL. 3

Sally Mann, fotografi (detalje) fra serien *What Remains?*, 2003. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gargosian.

Værket og Manns fotografiske undersøgelse starter med et menneskelig og ved den menneskelige død. Men det slutter ikke dér. Tilsyneladende falder den død, som fotoet viser, ikke nødvendigvis sammen med et ophør af liv som sådan. Den menneskelige død, også kaldet somatisk eller klinisk død, har været defineret forskelligt gennem tiden, fra ophør af vejrtrækning, hjertet der stopper til hjernedød og siden hjernestammedød<sup>1</sup>. Uanset definition er den somatiske død sidestillet med ophøret af det menneskelige individs interne intentionalitet. 'Problemet' i den henseende er bare, at kroppen fortsætter – den størkner ikke, men fortsætter sin bevægelse og sin livfuldhed. Blot nu ikke med menneskets hysteriske hurtighed, men i et langt mere sindigt og drævende, langsommeligt, rådnende tempo.

### Hvad sker der med kroppen, når den 'dør'?

Den menneskelige død har i sagens natur en række konsekvenser for kroppen, hvoraf mange er synlige på huden. Når hjertet ikke længere pumper blodet rundt, og lungerne ikke længere ilter blodet, indtræder *pallor mortis*. Som navnet antyder, indebærer dette stadie, at huden bliver bleg (stadiet er særligt synligt for mennesker med hvid eller lys hud). Fænomenet indtræder efter omkring 20 minutter og varer op til 3 timer, hvorefter det afløses af *liver mortis*, hvor blodet synker ned i kroppen og koagulerer langsomt. Det danner blå mærker på huden i de områder, som er lavest placeret og er tydeligst i de første 8-12 timer efter døden. I de områder af kroppen, som er i direkte kontakt med underlaget eller omgivelserne, er kapillærerne sammenpressede, og de områder forbliver blege. Herefter følger *algor mortis*, hvor kropstemperaturen falder. I dette stadie ændres det ydre udtryk ikke, men de ændrede temperaturforhold har konsekvenser for kroppens mikrobiologi, og bakterier formerer og udvikler sig i nye retninger. Efter *algor mortis* indtræder det sidste af de tidlige post-mortem stadier, *rigor mortis*, dødsstivhed. Musklerne tilføres ikke længere ilt og stivner som følge heraf. Efter de tidlige post-mortem stadier indtræder den egentlige nedbrydning af legemet. Nedbrydning af protein er en naturlig proces, som følger den biologiske homøostases ophør<sup>2</sup>, dvs. når blodet ikke længere ruller, når der ikke længere indtages næringsstoffer og ilt, når temperaturen ikke længere holdes stabil osv., vil bakterier fortære og

nedbryde kroppens proteiner. Bakterierne udskiller gasser og ligvæsker, som får kroppen til at 'hæve' og kan nogle gange få huden til at revne, hvorved bakteriegas og væske siver ud. Det indre vildtvoksende liv bliver stadigt tydeligere, som huden gennembrydes. Hele maveregionen hæver, huden ændrer farve, og der dannes blærer. Siden skifter blodårer farve og bliver synlige på huden, og store hudområder skifter farve og bliver sorte. Brusk og bløddele nedbrydes og gør ofte den døde uigenkendelig. Som huden nedbrydes, afsløres mere og mere af skelettet og de underliggende strukturer, til forrådnelsesprocessen når skeletstadiet. Kroppen fortæres også af dyr og organismer udefra, som bosætter sig i kroppen, spiser af den og lægger æg i den (Vass, 2001, pp. 190-192). Fra et mikrobiologisk perspektiv, virker den menneskelige død langt fra som et ophør, men som forandring, en eksplosion af vildtvoksende liv.

Kroppens bevægelse ophører altså ikke med døden (som den burde, hvis vores subjekt/objekt-distinktion skal opretholdes), i stedet kommer en ny mikrobiologisk intentionalitet til syne. Filosoferne Gilles Deleuze og Félix Guattari foreslår at forstå bevægelse som enten *molær* eller *molekylær*, og netop de to begreber kan hjælpe med at forstå den forandring, som døden forårsager. Molær og molekylær er ikke binære modsætninger, de er snarere forskellige lag, intensiteter, hastigheder eller konstellationer. Molære processer er placerbare, højt organiserede og repræsenterbare. De kan udtrykkes og opfattes, de er klart afgrænsede og har definerbare egenskaber, der er tilpasset andre molære aktører – de er som afgrænsede ting og individer i et system (Deleuze og Guattari, 1988, pp. 57, 216, 222). Molekylære processer derimod er uafgrænsede, amorfe, ureglerlige, en slags mangfoldighed af tilblivelser, som eksisterer uden for det perceptible (for mennesker), men på ingen måde uafhængigt af eller uden for molære strukturer (Deleuze og Guattari, 1988, p. 39ff). Set med menneskekroppen som eksempel befinder individet, intentionaliteten og det, vi kalder 'menneske' (herunder den af huden afgrænsede krop), sig på et molært niveau. I modsætning hertil befinder den mikrobiologi vi har på huden og i kroppen, som vi er fuldstændig afhængige af, og som vi, i et eller andet omfang, bebor kroppen sammen med, sig på et molekylært niveau. Der er ikke en umiddelbar synlig bevægelse, og i det lys beskriver fotografiet 'livets', som ikke nødvendigvis er menneskets, skifte fra molær til molekylær bevægelse og signifikans.

## Råddenskabens ø

*Hver gang jeg ser dette kunstværk, slår det mig på samme måde. Jeg har kigget på det hundredvis af gange over de seneste år. Alligevel slår det aldrig fejl; jeg kan smage mit seneste måltid, mine øjne suges ind i det sorte område, hvor ansigtets sorte hud dækkes af det slørede væv og møder jorden. Huden har en let skinnende eller olieret overflade, og jeg har en fuldstændig klar fornemmelse i mine fingre af den oplevelse, det ville være at røre ved huden. Det er lige ulækkert og afskyeligt for mig hver gang.*



ILL. 4

Sally Mann, fotografi (detalje) fra serien *What Remains*, 2003. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gargosian.

Hvis kroppen skulle være det blotte objekt, hvorfor fortsætter den så sin rådnende, molekylære bevægelse? Hvorfor performer den som levende, når den burde være død? Heri findes kilden til ligets vederstyggelighed – skønt det burde opføre sig som et velopdragent objekt og forholde sig i ro, åbne sig for vores betydningssystem og lade sig fikseres i det, så sker det ikke. Liget lever videre, det bevæger sig – uden dr. Frankensteinske innovationer,

men blot ved den allerede iboende mikrobiologiske mellemkomst, lever liget. Med menneskeindividets forsvinden får kroppen nyt liv, en ny molekylær intentionalitet, som bevæger kroppen og besværliggør dens fiksering som objekt i et betydningssystem.

Afsky eller abjektion bliver tegn på, at der er noget, vi ikke forstår, at der er noget, som savner forklaring, som savner en ramme, savner at blive set og hørt. Jo mere jeg ser på Manns foto, des mere ser jeg også hendes fotografiske undersøgelse som en måde at dykke ned i det ulækre, ikke for at vi skal chokeres, men for at forstå og forklare.

Når hun lader landskabet vokse op over kroppen, som selv synker ned i samme landskab, er det en måde at forbinde det molære niveau med et molekylært niveau, hvor det menneskelige ikke forsvinder, men går ind i en ny tilblivelse. En kosmologi, der giver en nogenlunde meningsfuld ramme til en ellers meningsløs proces af opløsning. Måske er det et skridt mod at af-abjektivere rådrende lig ved at omdirigere afskyen og rette den mod ideen om cirkulation af al materie. Som blodet synker til de nederste dele, mikroorganismer i tarmen nedbryder vævet og udskiller væsker, grænserne bliver blødere, kroppens indre gennembryder huden og afslører sig selv, fluer og maddiker bebor kroppen, tager kroppen mere og mere form af et økosystem fremfor en menneskekrop. I mikrobiologiske termer er den rådrende krop en slags beboet klode. Og endelig når kroppen bliver flydende og siver ned i jorden, skaber den en: “decomposition island, a highly concentrated area of organically rich soil” (Costandi, 2015).

### Bag kvalmen – og om livet

Ordet ‘humus’ i betydningen jord har rod i det proto-indo-europæiske ord ‘dhghem’, og det samme gælder ordet ‘human.’<sup>3</sup> Således er mennesket og jorden vævet sammen fra tidlig tid, og det er på sin vis ganske passende, at liget (det efter-humane) bliver til humus – de sorte næringsrige organiske materialer, der er en af hovedkomponenterne i muld. Filosofen Rosi Braidotti har i sin bog *The Posthuman* hæftet sig ved netop sammenbruddet af individets autonomi og den menneskelige exceptionalisme og følger via en deleuziansk metode alle tings forbundethed (Braidotti, 2013, p. 1). Heraf følger også livets forbundethed, af hende betegnet *zoe* og forklaret som

en slags fælles betegnelse og forbindelse mellem alt levende. *zoe* optræder ofte sammen med begrebet *bios*. Det er oprindeligt græske begreber, som kendes fra blandt andre Aristoteles, men som i nutidig kontekst er 'genopdaget' af den italienske filosof Giorgio Agamben. *Zoe* og *bios* beskriver henholdsvis 'det blotte liv' overfor det 'kvalificerede liv' (Agamben, 1998, p. 1). Begreberne bliver videreført af Braidotti, og for hende indebærer begrebsparret et hierarki, hvor *bios*, i hendes version defineret som politisk, diskursivt og intelligent kvalificeret liv, vurderes mere værdigt og værdifuldt end *zoe*, der defineres som generativt, vitalistisk før-menneskeligt liv (Braidotti, 2008, p. 12). En del af Braidottis kritik af moderniteten, som hun fremsætter i *The Posthuman*, er, at grundlaget for *bios* er baseret på vestlige, maskuline og mest væsentligt i denne sammenhæng menneskelige kvaliteter – *bios* er nærmest hellig, mens *zoe* i allerhøjeste er "gritty" (Braidotti, 2008). I denne distinktion anes også antydningen af en krop/sind, krop/sjæl eller krop/ånd adskillelse, og fraværet af en eller anden form for rationalitet og intentionalitet nedsænker liv i en form for pulserende livssuppe, grænseløs og utydelig, som vi ikke kan få greb om (Braidotti, 2008, p.12). Døden er som resultat heraf ligeledes antropocentrisk (Lykke, 2022, p. 7ff), og vores definition af den har ikke, eller kan ikke rumme, livet som et kontinuum. Det er på sin vis *bios*-livet, der dør, mens *zoe*-livet fortsætter (i den optik er eksempelvis ligbrænding og begravelse en effektiv fortrængning af det vildtvoksende *zoe*-liv).

Det, Manns foto holder frem for mig i mødet mellem huden og jorden, er livets fortsættelse – *zoes* sejr – liget nægter at blive roligt, det bliver ved, det går ned i jorden, bliver næringsstoffer, danner nye forbindelse etc. Det er i uklarheden mellem hud og muld, at tingenes indfiltrethed står tydeligst frem – nok er vi individer, men vi er det ikke alene men sammen med andre – og når vi ikke længere er her, indgår vi nye forbindelser. En af grundene til, at det giver kvalme, er, at det udfordrer mig ontologisk og stiller spørgsmål ved den måde, jeg opfatter menneskets og mine egne rammer på – jeg forstår livet som *bios*, men her er en *zoal* vision, hvor livet pulserer videre tilsyneladende uden at tage nogen form for hensyn til den menneskelige (*bios*) død. Den første opgave, Mann giver os, er at dykke ned i kvalmen, ind i den fysiske/kropslige manifestation af grænser i opløsning. Når jeg ser den menneskelige form smuldre, er det uden tvivl

noget, der minder om at opleve meningsløsheden af vores eksistens i mødet med døden. Jeg ser på en eller anden måde min egen skæbne reflekteret – ikke at jeg skal ligge rådnende i en skovbund, men *dø skal jeg*, og det er en ubehagelig vision. Den æstetiske appropriering mellem menneskekroppen og jorden lader imidlertid også en anden betydning tage form, en slags øko-eskatologi. Det bliver tydeligt, at den materie, der er menneskets krop (min krop), ubekymret fortsætter sin materielle, drevende progression ind i nye former. Det er ikke en ny intentionalitet, der opstår; den var der hele tiden, men bliver blot mere synlig i forrådnelsen – nok er min krop menneskelig, men ikke fuldt ud. Huden, tarmene, maven, lungerne osv. beboes af bakterier – en slags: “alien’ quality of our own flesh (...) [Reminding] humans of the very *radical* character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman. My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners (...) the *its* outnumber the *mes*.” (Bennett, 2010, p. 112).

I Jane Bennetts forestilling om materialitetens livlighed rekonfigureres kroppen nærmest til, også før den menneskelige død, at være et økosystem, hvori vi kun er en af beboerne. En slags homøostatisk økosystem, hvor balancen opretholdes, så længe organismen fungerer, og når nogle funktioner ændrer sig radikalt, forandres økosystemet og approprierer sig et nyt system, i et *zoëalt* flow.

### Planetær homæostase

Det første citat i *What Remains*-bogen stammer fra den franske teolog Jacques-Benigne Bousset (1627-1704):

All things summon us to death;  
Nature, almost envious of the good she has given us,  
Tells us often and gives us notice that she cannot  
For long allow us that scrap of matter she has lent...  
She has need of it for other forms,  
She claims it back for other works.  
(Mann, 2003, p. 11)

I et sådant perspektiv præsenterer Manns foto os også for en monistisk kosmologi, hvor vores materie og universets materie er af samme slags, som var de indviklede i hinanden. Intet sted så tydeligt som i huden og jordens kollaps ind over hinanden. Måske nok ulækkert, men også med noget andet bag vederstyggeligheden, en fortælling om menneskets plads i en planetær homøostase.

Homøostase er et begreb, som kan betegne en række forskellige feedback systemer, men det bruges ofte i biologisk forstand. Menneskekroppen såvel som andre organismer kan forklares som homøostatisk systemer, dvs. et system, hvor forskellige funktioner virker ind på hinanden og skaber en balance – holder kropstemperaturen stabil, kontrollerer og justerer mængden af vand, CO<sub>2</sub>, ilt, salt og surhedsgrad i kroppen. Begrebet er imidlertid også blevet bredt ud til at dække større systemer såsom økosystemer, hvori mennesker såvel som andre organismer indgår. Ydermere inkluderer disse systemer også abiotiske elementer og materier (eksempelvis næringsstoffer og geologiske kræfter), der ligesom organismer udgør komponenter i et større system – i et planetært økosystem (se eksempelvis Dyke og Weaver, 2013). Uden nødvendigvis at tage stilling til rigtigheden af disse teorier er det i denne sammenhæng tilstrækkeligt at fremhæve deres eksistens, da netop idéen er nok til at antyde det fortolkningsunivers, Manns fotografi kan kanalisere. Den britiske forsker og miljøforkæmper James Lovelock og den amerikanske biolog Lynn Margulis fremsatte i deres fælles artikel “Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis” fra 1974 deres Gaia-hypotese:

the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate. The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis we are calling the ‘Gaia’ hypothesis, Lovelock (1972). Hence forward the word Gaia will be used to describe the biosphere and all of those parts of the Earth with which it actively interacts to form the hypothetical new entity with properties that could not be predicted from the sum. (Lovelock og Lynn, 1974, p. 3)

Det som mødet mellem den sortnende hud og jorden, viser os, kunne i samme grad være et udkast til en Gaia-teori. Mann viser, hvordan vi vender tilbage til jorden: i grænserrummet mellem hud og muld negeres

menneskets særlighed, og det nedsænkes i naturen. Her bliver det bosted for andre organismer og bliver sin egen lille næringsrige 'decomposition island'. Som om der er en slags rationel pseudo-intentionalitet ved bakteriernes omsætning af proteiner, og der skabes en slags kvalifikation på tværs af arter. At død og forrådnelse netop handler om næringsstoffer og planetær homæostase, betyder, at det *zoale* får en kvalifikation og bliver en slags *bios*-sfære, som ikke kun handler om mennesker, men langt større systemer. Dét resulterer dog ikke i en total inklusion, og der vil være et udenfor, hvor livssuppen skulper rundt for nogle gange at sjaske ind i vores systematiske og meningsfulde univers. Perspektivet i kvalmen og den ubehagelige fornemmelse, fotografiet skaber, er tegn på en ontologisk udfordring. Noget af det, som dukker op, hvis og såfremt udfordringen tages op, er en fortælling om tingenes forbundethed.

### Hvorfor er der meningsfuldt bag kvalmen?

Hvor bor det smukke i det rådnende lig, og hvad er det for en erkendelse, vi kan få af at udfordre og søge ned i kvalmen? Nok er Manns foto umiddelbart frastødende, men nedenunder eller bag kvalmen, bag det rådnende ydre, gemmer sig en filosofi. En filosofi eller en livsanskuelse, som går i rette med individets ukrænkelighed. Nok handler værket om død og døde mennesker, men det handler også om liv, om cirkularitet om at flytte ego'et mod øko'et. Netop i hudens møde med jorden tydeliggøres skiftet fra den ydre menneskelige ham til et sprudlende økosystem – bakteriernes topografiske aftryk, hvor 'kroppen' siver ud gennem den brudte hud. Den er gået fra elastisk blødhed til en læderagtig, tørret stivhed, der langsomt perforeres af bagvedliggende strukturer, samtidig med at den synker ned i underlaget, mulden. Det er netop pointen her; at flytte fokus fra det objekt som afskyeligt til liv-fuldt (Lykke, 2022, p. 74). Fra afskyeligt hen mod det, der understøtter en anden ontologisk position end den i moderniteten fremherskende (Lykke, 2022, p. 77).

Tages Mann som filosof, er hendes projekt/teori at vise, hvordan menneskelig materie og naturens materie er én og samme ting. Hvordan æstetiseringen af forrådnelsen også er en af-abjektivering og undersøgelse af det ulækre, en deterritorialisering af menneskekroppen ved at afsløre

dens molekylære kræfter og livsformer – alle dens mere-end-menneskelige kvaliteter. Dette åbner mennesket mod en slags øko-kosmologi, hvor vi lever på en måde, der er rettet mod ikke kun os selv, men en planetær homøostase: “If environmentalists are selves who live on earth, vital materialists are selves who *live as earth*, who are more alert to the capacities and limitations – the ‘jizz’ – of the various materials that they are.” (Bennett, 2010, p. 111, (min fremhævning)).

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#### HJEMMESIDER

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#### NOTER

- 1 Under opslaget *død* i Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/science/death>, besøgt d. 1. november 2024.
- 2 Inden for biologien betegner homøostase det forhold, at systemer og organer i kroppen indvirker på hinandens funktioner, så det indre miljø holdes stabilt.
- 3 Sammensat af to opslag på Merriam-Webster Dictionary på "human" og "humus".

# Annegret Soltau: On the Photographic Skin

MARGHERITA FORESTI

*Skin is a limes—a porous threshold between interiority and exteriority. Annegret Soltau’s practice, beginning in the mid-1970s, stages the body as a means of reflecting on the representation of womanhood. Her so-called Fotoradierungen (photo-etchings) and Fotovernähungen (photo-restitchings) transpose body art onto the photographic medium, seizing photography not as an instrument for the documentation of ephemeral artistic practices—as was often the case with performance art in the 1960s and 70s—but as the very instance of a critical engagement with the female body and its aging.*

*This research article conceptualizes “skin” both as the bodily surface represented in Soltau’s work and as the “photographic skin”, the vehicle for the artist’s intermedial experiments between performativity and photography. From a postmodern perspective, Soltau probes the limits of representational media, transposing the graphic gesture first onto performance, and subsequently onto the photographic negative and positive print. Figuratively, “skin” also marks the margin delimiting the inner and outer worlds of the artist, the threshold between appearance and identity. The article examines how Soltau reconfigures the boundary between performativity and photography through the lens of “skin”.*

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## Threaded

*Ich wollte die Zeichnung spüren, “I wanted to feel the drawing.”<sup>1</sup> Annegret Soltau, in conversation with curator Ingrid Pfeiffer in 2021, recounts the origins of her performative work *Permanente Demonstration* (Permanent Demonstration) (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). In January 1976, Soltau ran her performance each evening for a week at *Kunstwerkstatt* in Darmstadt—an*

experimental art space and a workshop for graphic arts.<sup>2</sup> It was consciously titled “demonstration,” instead of “action” or “happening,” more common in the art historical jargon, to echo the fever of radicalism by which students, feminists and anti-war movements were igniting the atmosphere in the 1970s. Ahead of her *Demonstration*, Soltau had tested the whole act on herself: she bound her body with thick black thread to probe the effects of transposing drawing from the material support of paper to the skin (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). She had trained in painting and graphic arts at the Universities of Fine Arts in Hamburg and Vienna. In 1973, after finishing her studies, she moved to Milan, where she would draw portraits inspired by the southern Italian émigrés who lived in her building. Those women wearing head scarfs were translated in her drawings and etchings into heads wrapped in intricate spirals of cloth or in their own thick black hair (Seggelke and Soltau, 2008). *Permanente Demonstration* was to Soltau a transposition of drawing onto skin in an attempt to breach media conventions. On the first evening, January 19, 1975, the act featured one man sitting on a white plinth as a kind of living sculpture. Meticulously binding him in yarn, the artist saw her gesture as an act of “drawing” (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). *Bezeichnen* in German raises an ambiguity of meaning between its direct meaning of “identify” or “designate,” and her play with the verb *zeichnen* (“draw”) turned into the transitive form *be-zeichnen*, which could be translated as “drawing on” or even “all over” somebody. Soltau intended her binding act to feel and read like drawing on skin. It echoed Günter Brus’ *Self-Painting* actions of 1964-70 in which the Viennese Actionist had made his own body the material support for paint and even the source of paint material with its fluids of blood, urine, saliva, and so on. Actions such as his *Zerreiẞprobe* (1970, “crucial test”) had captured Soltau’s interest in the radical potential of the body as art object (interview, 30/06/25).

After having “drawn” the thread all over the man’s body, Soltau’s *Demonstration* continued as she turned around to face the audience and addressed a few of them: “May I?” Four more people were invited to join the act. Using the same black thread that kept the first person wrapped, the other participants allowed themselves to be “drawn,” and in the process become unrecognizable. The thick black thread left traceable marks on the



ILL. 1

Annegret Soltau, *Permanente Demonstration am 20.1.1976* (Permanent Demonstration on 20.01.1976), vintage print on baryt paper, 40 × 30 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

skin of the participants: “The inside, or even the processes, become visible on the body, they can be read on it” comments Soltau (Schwarz and Soltau, 2016, 1:25). By intimately interlacing their bodies, the artist visualizes the reciprocity of the individuals’ actions, emphasizing their interconnect-edness (Schmidt, 2006, p. 27). Soltau remembers retrospectively: “It was more about making the picture physically, feeling it on the skin. (...) The thread became a haptic line, a trace on the skin. For me, it was really about touch. The threads that create the drawing are very visible, yet they can be perceived as restricting.” (Walton, 2021).

Soltau’s act brings to mind 1970s Body Art’s preoccupations with transgressing canonical artistic media (in her case the graphic arts), as well as bringing “antispectacular bodily routines” (Foster, 2016a, p. 649) onto the stage to counter the “heroic,” “genius” gestures traditionally associated with male artists. In addressing perception through the haptic trace left on the participants’ skin, she employed Body Art tropes such as feelings of pain, entrapment, and body anxiety. *Permanente Demonstration* also recalls the collaborative performance *Ablutions* (1972) that feminist artists Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani put on in California, just a few months after *Womanhouse* in Los Angeles had been dismantled.<sup>3</sup> The performance revolved around the experience of rape and included the immersion of the artists’ bodies in different fluids, wrapping and binding them with bandages and ropes in a room surrounded by beef kidneys hanging from the walls (Foster, 2016b, p. 655). The feminist slogan “the personal is the political” was embraced by these artists with such radicality that they made their bodies the battlefields of their critique of the representation of women in art and society. Soltau’s association with feminism in art was further confirmed by the inclusion of her work in the seminal exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007, the first comprehensive survey of international feminist art featuring works by Marina Abramović, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Rebecca Horn, and others. Yet a historical contextualization of Soltau’s work in the local feminist entourage of the 1970s and 80s, together with an analysis of its reception in the Frankfurt am Main region, demonstrate the irreducibility of her artistic practice to a uniform understanding of feminism or to feminist art alone. Besides

representing repressed subjects of womanhood, such as pregnancy and aging, a further leitmotif throughout her work is revealed to be her radical probing of the limits of the graphic and photographic media through postmodern strategies.

*Permanente Demonstration* reveals the political through its nonconformism on the institutional art ground. Its subheadings read “States of consciousness / through / t o u c h i n g of lines realized / in space / on the body / and the skin” (Soltau, 1976). Soltau’s statement accompanying her week-long performance unveils an endeavor to breach the margin between the artistic medium and bodily perception, or—in the language of Fluxus—to bring together art and life. Nevertheless, this message was lost on Darmstadt’s local audience, as newspaper accounts demonstrate. Art historian Elizabeth Krimmel, for instance, was careful enough to mention in her review that she left before the end of the act. Her critique is replete with self-stereotyping, anti-feminist tropes confining Soltau’s act to that of a “little witch” wanting to silence “the maltreated servant of female emancipation”<sup>4</sup> (Krimmel, 1976). As would often be the case with the reception of Soltau’s work, her use of the thread was reconnected to the practice of sewing typically associated with women’s agency within the private domestic sphere. Rightfully, author Karin Struck later emphasized how Soltau’s sewing had less to do with a traditional conception of femininity than with a surgical intervention (Struck, 2006, p. 10), a fact that might be validated by Soltau’s previous experience as assistant to a doctor in the injuries department ahead of her art studies (interview, 7/27/24).

A few months after *Permanente Demonstration*, another action by Soltau titled *Be-ziehungen Ver-bindungen* (Relations Connections) at Kunstverein Heidelberg found a similar reception in a local newspaper review titled “Public Sacrifice,” in which author Sabine Schultze appeared to have been troubled not only by the suggested physical violence of the act, but also by the fact that this (female) artist would shift the practice of over-drawing and over-painting typical of a (male) artist such as Arnulf Rainer from art theory to life itself (Schultze, 1976). Comments of this kind attest to the fact that the hostility Soltau met after relocating from Hamburg to the provincial cultural milieu of Frankfurt’s surroundings was two-fold: on the one hand, criticism was sparked by the provocative

content of the performances involving potential injuring and nudity; on the other, these critics, besides reiterating misogynist stereotypes, failed to grasp the meaning of the art form and situate it in the context of the genealogy of contemporary art. It was, in fact, between the 1960s and 70s that a number of feminist artists saw in performance art and in photography a means of exploring self-representation for the sake of contesting the politics of the representation of women. The exhibition *WACK!* mentioned above demonstrated the international reach of these developments, which an analysis of the German artistic landscape can only substantiate. The defiance of media conventions and the shift toward ephemeral art forms to the point of equating art with daily lived gestures had been underway since at least 1970, when Harald Szeemann curated “Happening and Fluxus” at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne. Two years later in Kassel, the *documenta 5* “Questioning Reality – Pictorial worlds today” marked “the institutional acceptance of Conceptual Art in Europe” (Buchloh, 2016, p. 630) and one of the first appearances of photography as a self-sufficient art form within the section “Idea + Idea/Light” curated by Klaus Honnef and Konrad Fisher, featuring photography alone or as part of conceptual works.<sup>5</sup> In the same years, artists of the Viennese Actionism, such as Valie Export and Friedl Kubelka, shared Soltau’s concern with female identity and iconography through performance and photography (Butler, 2007, p. 305). Yet while Soltau was drawing closer to feminist artists’ transnational concerns, she met rejection at a local institutional level, for example when Gisela Bergsträsser, formerly the chief curator of the graphic collection at the Landesmuseum Darmstadt, who had previously praised Soltau’s early etchings, withdrew her support of the artist after 1976 (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). Meanwhile, Soltau’s photographic documentation of her performances paved the way for her experimentations with photography. From the mid-1970s onward she began transposing the movement and sequentiality of the performance, as well as her training in the graphic arts, to photographic paper. A shift from the real, physical skin to the photographic one: sewing together photographs of her children into idiosyncratic family portraits or scratching the photographic negative to the point where the image eliminates itself.

## Sewed

As John Berger writes in *Understanding a Photograph* (2013), the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the time when “the photograph became the dominant and most ‘natural’ way of referring to appearances,” replacing “the word as immediate testimony” (Berger, 2013, p. 49). The ubiquity with which images began permeating daily life—from the journalistic coverage of war to advertising—led artists in the early 1970s to question the representational potential of photography. The question of representation became the core preoccupation of the so-called *Pictures Generation*<sup>6</sup> including artists such as Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, who employed photography to trouble the relationship between original and copy, employing strategies of quotation, framing, and self-staging. As Douglas Crimp’s essay *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism* (1980) testifies, this turn in photography is indebted to the consequences of mechanical reproducibility for the devaluation of authenticity, effected through the rapid proliferation of copies (Crimp, 1980, p. 94). In Crimp’s words: “That photography had overturned the judgment-seat of art is a fact which the discourse of modernism found it necessary to repress, and so it seems that we may accurately say of postmodernism that it constitutes precisely the return of the repressed.” (Crimp, 1980, p. 91). Postmodern photography’s way of releasing the “repressed” can be situated within those practices that upset the canonical notion of the art object, displacing the aura cast around a supposed “original”. This meant surpassing media specificity in favor of intermediality, introducing mass produced and found images in the artistic process, as well as exposing the material support of photography, for instance through damage and manipulation. Yet such a “return of the repressed” can be also observed in those reflections on representation which emphasize the constructed nature of (female) identity, for instance in Cindy Sherman’s self-staging of her body intended to expose stereotypes of femininity in visual culture at large and to manifest the fact that even the image of Self is a copy without an original.

Against this backdrop, Soltau’s own negotiation with undoing the limits of traditional graphic media unfolded throughout the 1970s. With her early performances she approached photography and video, first employed as recording tools, later integrated within her artistic process. An example of this transition is *Selbst* (1975), a sequence of 15 self-portraits displaying

the artist's face being wrapped in black thread until the moment it is cut off with scissors.<sup>7</sup> Along with the internationalization of contemporary art, Soltau's practice appears receptive of a postmodern attitude, both in her formal handling of the material photography, and in her reading of its representational potential. From the mid-1970s, the performative use of the black thread extended to her relationship with the photographic surface. She began sewing through her photographs, producing a body of work titled *Fotoübernähtungen* (Photo-overstitchings). Here the sewed lines imitate drawing by reproducing geometric patterns or nets which vaguely allude to the real wrapping of the body during her previous performances. In 1970, American photographer Betty Hahn had also begun stitching through her gum bichromate prints on fabric to highlight details, for instance, to sharpen the outline of her vegetable subjects or of the individuals portrayed in her *Passport Photos* (1970). Hahn referred implicitly to the practice of embroidery and to anonymous female labor—the stitching having been made not on photographic paper but through fabric—though she did not consider herself a militant feminist (Hahn and McDonald, 2022). On the contrary, feminist artists such as Miriam Shapiro and Faith Ringgold employed embroidery and fabric as artistic media to consciously revalue a practice traditionally associated with women and reverse the hierarchy of art versus craft. The use of stitching in the photographic work of Soltau and Hahn is an outcome of their reception of such feminist concerns within contemporary art, but it cannot be fully identified with them. While Soltau's work foregrounds a political feminist dimension through its dealing with identity and self-representation, her use of the black thread, as mentioned earlier, refers to a surgical act rather than embroidery.

The line traced by the black thread, in fact, is soon mutated from an aesthetic drawn element to a means of collage. *Fotovernähtungen*, photo-restitchings, are photographic portraits of Soltau or members of her family in which the core part of the head or body has been torn out and filled with fragments of other photographs. By tearing instead of simply cutting the photograph, the laceration, that is the haptic process, is emphasized. The restitchings made between 1977 and 1990 often take as point of departure photobooth-generated portraits. In *Selbst mit Baldur* (1977; Ill. 2) her husband's silhouette is filled with fragments of both their



ILL. 2

Annegret Soltau, *Selbst mit Baldur* (Self with Baldur), 1977, vintage prints, photo-restitching, each 5,2 × 4 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

faces sewed together as defamiliarizing family portraits. Such small, cheap and quickly produced portraits have a long tradition that goes back to early *cartes de visite*, but especially to tintype portraits common between the second half of the 19th and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made by itinerant photographers on street corners or even on battle fields (Lavédrine, 2009, p. 34). Through such early photographs, the bourgeoisie gained access to their own image, inaugurating a social practice of exchanging portraits to visualize one's own social network. Automated photography today is mostly associated with bureaucratized identity verification, implying full light and a standardized pose of the photographed subject. Soltau's idiosyncratic photocollages defy the medium's value as an identity-machine, and more broadly the genre conventions of family photographs. By sewing through the skin of photography, Soltau materializes the implicit genre conventions behind a family portrait and, by extension, the social construct of "family" itself. In *Selbst mit Baldur*, the stitching together of a male and female body might even point to the role of images in the construction of gender identity. Her adoption of automated photography reveals a truly



ILL. 3

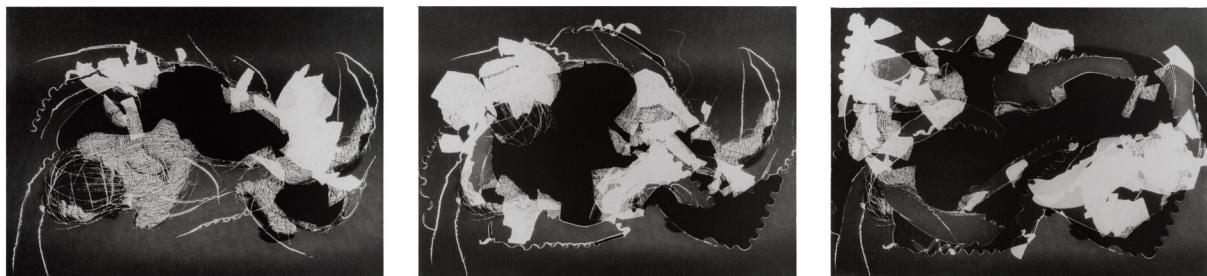
Annegret Soltau, *zusammen*, 1-6 (together, 1-6), 1980, vintage print on baryt paper, photo-etching, each 13 × 18 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

postmodern defiance of authorship and the demise of the aura. A similar case of artists' interest in ordinary, mass produced, "low quality" photography is the aforementioned series by Hahn, *Passport Photos* (1970), in which she stitched through her gum bichromate prints on muslin reproducing the negatives of passport photos. Here, Hahn too defies identification by printing the negative (instead of the positive) image on textile and adding embroidery, against a conventional, straight image on photographic paper. Yet Soltau's work directly reflects on its own medium by exhibiting the small, automated photographs. She disrupts their representation, and reconstructs them through a performative gesture that aims to question the societal norms underlying the construction of an image—of woman, of the pregnant body, of motherhood, and of the aging body, all major subjects of her subsequent work.

### Drawn

At the end of the 1970s—and parallel to her photo-restitchings—Soltau's experimentation with manipulating the photographic material resulted in another technique, her so-called *Fotoradierung*, (Photo-etching). In an unpublished letter most likely addressed to the art historian and curator Udo Kultermann, Soltau describes the procedure:

I worked on these negatives of my self-portraits with a needle, similar to an etching. I scratched lines into the layer of the negative with the



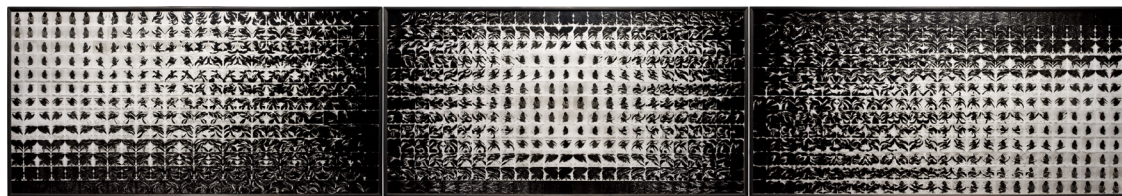
needle. These lacerations appeared as black and white lines in the positive print. In the process, I kept destroying the negative until I had completely metamorphosed and erased my own image. I documented each stage with a print. The positive prints thus became a document of the dissolution of the negative as well as of myself. (Soltau, c. 1980, pp. 3-4)

Soltau's photo-etchings stage her alone, during pregnancy, or alongside one of her newborn children. Although each series stems from a single photographic negative, they are arranged chronologically in sequence according to the stage of image degradation. In *zusammen*, 1-6, (together, 1-6) (1980; Ill. 3) the straight image of her body lying down next to her son is progressively erased by means of the needle's work on the negative, which is exposed five more times, making mother and son disappear into abstraction. The sequential aesthetic recalls the frames of a film or of a photographic contact sheet from which the numbers have been edited out. Starting from the third image, the scratched lines increase, apparently merging into wider portions of white and black, meaning that some broken pieces of the negative have been laid over the photosensitive paper during exposure. From a technical perspective Soltau makes use of two practices with a long history: the *clichés-verre* and the photogram. Both can be traced back to William Henry Fox Talbot's early cameraless experiments between 1834-39. His "photogenic etching" entailed creating a matrix by drawing with an etching needle on a coated glass plate exposed to smoke and then contact-printing it on salted paper, a technique that would become better

known as cliché-verre (Schenck, 1995, pp. 112-113). Talbot's later "photogenic drawing"—today generally termed "photogram"—was obtained by placing translucent objects, such as flowers and leaves, directly onto photosensitive paper (Lavédrine, 2009, pp. 98-99). Avant-garde artists during the 20th century, most notably Man Ray, were particularly drawn to such techniques, as these allowed them to explore abstraction, create oneiric scenarios, and employ unconventional materials. Soltau's "photo-etchings" are connected to this history. The term "etching" does not refer, in fact, to the acid alteration of the plate of an etching, but simply to the needle used to draw into the surface of the negative, producing the black lines typical of a cliché-verre. The white areas visible in the positive prints, on the other hand, correspond to the residues of the negative scratched by the needle, which are exposed as in a photogram.

Soltau's engravings into negative images of the body thus bring to mind surrealist experiments such as Brassai's portfolio *Transmutations* (1934-35; published in 1967): these twelve gelatine silver prints were made by drawing on the plates of camera-made images of female nudes, metamorphosing them into objects, musical instruments, fruits, and odalisques reminiscent of Cubism (Schenck, 1995, p. 115). Contrary to Soltau's feminist approach, in Brassai's prints the body literally undergoes a transmutation, dissolving into a passive object or even an ornament. Decades later, Soltau's work tackles instead the underrepresentation of female experience. In *zusammen, 1-6*, motherhood is figured as both an erasure of the Self and as a symbiosis of mother and child (Soltau and Weidner, 2024).

Pregnancy and motherhood, and the states of mind related to them, dominate the artist's work in the years surrounding her two pregnancies in 1978 and 1980. Some photo-etchings from this period acquire monumental dimensions, as in *Alleinsein (tausendundeneinacht)*, (Being alone (thousand and one nights)) (1978/79, Ill. 4), a three-part tableau made of 1001 prints out of a single negative. Soltau's naked body is curled forward to hold her knees, bending her head in shadow. Every other print is a mirror-image of the previous one. As a result, pairs of bodies face each other in about five hundred mute dialogues depicting solitude. The multiplication and erasure of Soltau's body proceeds in diagonal waves from a clear image to pitch black. Viewed from a distance the result is an abstract image in black and



ILL. 4  
 Annegret Soltau, *Alleinsein (tausendundeinenacht)* (Being alone (thousand and one nights)), 1978/79, silver gelatine print, photo-etching in 3 parts (1001 mounted pieces), 116 × 690 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome and New York.

white. The “injuries” inflicted on the photographic skin reflect a figurative gesture of self-harming. “Skin” appears to refer metaphorically to the surface separating psychology from appearance, while at the same time “skin” as the negative, the matrix of photography, might allude to the Self as origin, as the material substance of which the positive, the appearance, is made. Photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen has attempted to open up the history of photography to the role of the negative, which, for one, defines photography’s basic reproduction principle as a play of repetition and difference. Soltau’s work, in effect, visualizes the negative as a matrix capable of engendering a possibly infinite number of positive images. The negative/positive relation is further emphasized by the specular self-portraits, by their continuous erasure through the manipulation of the negative, and by the black-and-white chromatic contrast on which the work is built. In this sense, photography as negative/positive relationship can be seen as “the embodiment of a binary opposition in which each part is continually dependent on, and yet separated from, its other (...).” (Batchen, 2021, p. 259) Through repetition and variation the speechless dialog in Soltau’s tableau is multiplied *ad libitum*, with the bodies progressively sinking into one another in an almost seven-meter wide, monumental work.

*Alleinsein (tausendundeinenacht)* and *zusammen, 1-6* transpose Soltau’s introspection onto the photographic surface. Between the two, is the porous yet impenetrable, frangible yet solid layer of skin. The time-frames of both works correspond to Soltau’s experience of pregnancy, which stirred reflections on several grounds. For one, the compatibility

of an artist's career with motherhood became a major concern which left her partly ostracized from the local feminist community. Indeed, as art historian Sabine Kampmann noted, the reappropriation of the image of the female body was understood by feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s as a liberation from such traditional roles as motherhood (Kampmann, 2024, p. 123). But the alteration of the body during pregnancy and the states of mind connected to it gained importance in Soltau's artistic practice as she attempted to undo taboos related to the representation of motherhood. In video works such as *Schwanger-SEIN II* (1979-1980, Being Pregnant II) the psychological states of the woman are outlined in nine phases going from panic through loneliness and separation until birth. Her addressing of the subject of pregnancy was indeed ahead of its time, and it meant to shed light on how female experience essentially deviates from the aesthetic ideal and normative behavior that patriarchal societal structures attributed to it. In fact, while Soltau's work is intrinsically autobiographical, her subjective experience is staged as an instance of a collective one. About the specificity of self-representation in the photographic work of feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote:

Such distortions or defacements are no self-masochistic acts, but rather symbolically point to a collective violence or a deconstruction of a certain representational canon in the representation of women. (...) the artist presents herself as an impersonal screen, a field of projection, upon which what is otherwise culturally and socially disavowed, repressed, or even taken for granted may be ritualistically expressed. (Solomon-Godeau, 2007, p. 343)

Soltau's photographic work in this sense turns the personal into the political, as the feminist slogan goes. Making the personal an instance of collective experience, Soltau's photo-etchings seem to narrate pregnancy through titles such as "Expecting" (*Erwartung*, 1980-81), "Unity and separation" (*Einheit und Trennung*, 1980-81), or "Divided MOTHER-column" (*Geteilte MUTTER-Säule*, 1980-81), pointing to feelings of anxiety and fear traditionally excluded from art historical representations of motherhood.

All in all, Soltau's photo-etchings appear to scratch through another "skin", that is the thick layer of media conventions, by means of postmodern strategies. Besides exhibiting the negative, the contact-sheet-like aesthetic,

and mass-produced automated photographs, works such as *Alleinsein* (*tausendundeinenacht*) foreground another attribute of postmodern photography: the use of monumentality to address a private subject. In this sense, Soltau transgresses another modernist genre convention which would see such grandiose dimensions fit for painting rather than for a graphic medium. Yet Soltau monumentalizes a rather intimate subject, the unspoken topic of female psychology during pregnancy.

## Openings

Annegret Soltau's work has been read predominantly through the lens of her being a woman. She was both acclaimed and reprehended for her work's feminist posture and shunned by other feminists for her departure from dominant feminist positions. It has been the aim of this text to read Soltau's work not only through the somewhat obvious feminist framework, but also through the lens of postmodernity and its interrelation with the history of photography. It has been a kind of sewing together by which "skin" acquires multiple meanings: from being a physical surface in her early performances to becoming a material one in her photo-etchings and -restitchings, to figuratively becoming the superficial layer of the representational and media conventions she questioned and made porous. This skin, both photographic and bodily, was cut open for the sake of testing other possible representations of woman, motherhood, gender identity, and lately the aging body. "Openings" is thus this text's closing word. It refers to the artist's series *Körperöffnung* (Body opening) started in 2011, which explored the representation of the aging body and the unaesthetic visceral. One work from this series, *Haut* (Skin) (2016), is a color photograph of two women standing and facing each other, which has been cropped out, its core filled with an enlarged detail of the artist's skin with a tiny red scar. The vulnerability of the human skin is exposed as much as its potential for healing and reconstruction. The phenomenon of dermatographism—the writing on human skin—caught the attention of George Didi-Huberman in his writing about the history of Jean-Martin Charcot's study of hysteria at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris toward the end of the 19th century. Charcot had appointed a photographer, Albert Londe, to document the symptomatology



ILL. 5

Annegret Soltau, *Körperöffnung – mit Ute #Haut* (Body opening – with Ute #Skin), 2016, vintage print and collage, photo-restitching, 30 × 24 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

of the mostly female patients, among them the dermatographic symptoms deriving from “the ‘autographic’ capacity of the skin, a phenomenon both figurative and scriptural” (Didi-Huberman, 2004). Rather than a clinical manifestation, dermatographism evidences for Didi-Huberman the intricate power dynamic between the male doctors and the female patients who,

reduced to passive objects of study, are literally being inscribed into illness when doctors wrote their own names and diagnoses on the patients' skin. When one doctor came up with the concept of *femme-cliché* (photographic woman) he might have had the gesture of inscribing on a matrix of the cliché verre in mind (Batchen, 2021, p. 42). The male doctors' taxonomic intent turned into pseudoscientific acts of violence that are all the more staggering for their heavy reliance on visuality, as they produced images in the form of "photographic women" and subjected these women to documentation by a male photographer.

With this history in mind, it is insightful to look at Soltau's *Haut* as a revolutionary act of double inscription: the autographic scarred skin and its photograph's inscription within the carved outline of two women's shapes. At any rate, not (merely) a "photographic woman," but a woman-photographer. Gazing backwards at Soltau's interventions on negatives and positive prints, *Haut* appears as a meta-reflection on the basic principle that spans her whole body of work. The opening generated by cutting through the photographic skin reveals this time the real skin's own mechanism of repair. Indeed, Soltau never hid her means of interfering with the apparently impenetrable surface of representation: be it in the form of the thread's traces left on the skin at the end of her demonstrations, of the negative's residues exposed in her photo-etchings, or of the thread keeping together her photo-restitchings. Such means refer to acts of interference as much as acts of repair, openings but also closures, provided that new forms are allowed to emerge in the process.

## Acknowledgments

I am sincerely grateful to Annegret Soltau for welcoming me into her studio and sharing her story. I cherish the memory of my visits to her beautiful house in the forest and her warmth and sincerity.

Francesco Colli from Galerie Anita Beckers has been an invaluable source of knowledge on Soltau's work, opening up new perspectives for which I am especially grateful. I would also like to thank Claudia Olbrych from Kunstarchiv Darmstadt for kindly granting me access to archival material on Soltau's work and its reception.

My thanks also go to Leah Saltoun from Richard Saltoun Gallery (London, Rome, and New York), as well as to Galerie Anita Beckers (Frankfurt am Main), for generously providing image materials for this article.

Lastly, a heartfelt thank you to Paul Hoban for reading early drafts and offering valuable advice. I am also grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for their insightful recommendations, which contributed to strengthening this article.

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#### NOTES

- 1 This and all following quotes from Annegret Soltau and her artwork titles have been translated from German by the author.
- 2 The performance took place in the week between January 19 and 23, 1976.
- 3 In 1972, a group of artists from the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, featuring Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, created the temporary exhibition space *Womanhouse* as a space for collaboration and feminist critical expression (Foster, 2016b, p. 654).
- 4 The author’s translation from German.
- 5 Honnef’s later activity as curator at the Rheinisches Landesmuseums Bonn between 1974 and 1999 played a significant role in endowing photography’s legitimacy as an art in the German contemporary art landscape.
- 6 The term *Pictures Generation* was derived from the 1977 group exhibition *Pictures* curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York. The exhibition featured works by five artists: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. However, the *Pictures Generation* became a comprehensive term to identify the work of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and others.
- 7 This work featured in the aforementioned exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007.

# Den udstrakte silikonehånd

## Mod en spirende robotsocialitet

HANNA GERDA BRØNDAL

*Robottens bløde og elastiske silikonehud er en projektiionsflade, der synliggør menneskets normer for, hvad der tæller som sociale livsformer; men denne flade røber samtidig silikonens uendelige potentialer, der vil modstå menneskets kontrol og gennem huden definere en ny robotsocialitet.*

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### Indledning

Robotten er et af de mest kraftfulde billeder, vi finder i dag. Den emmer af æstetiske karakteristika med en ofte antropomorf krop eller livagtige bevægelser, der per definition gør den til en del af kunstens verden. Denne artikel vil granske et af disse billeder, hvis mekaniske krop delvis er omsluttet af silikonehud. I april 2024 besøgte jeg den engelske robotvirksomhed Engineered Arts, som den nu tidligere direktør Will Jackson grundlagde for tyve år siden. Inde på hans kontor var en humanoid robotbuste placeret på et bord. Dets grå silikoneansigt mimede tydeligvis menneskets konturer; men fra halsen og ned røbede den sine mekaniske dele gennem et åbent rammeværk, der blandede en organisk stil med et apparatur i metal- og plastikmaterialer. Under dens cirkulære højttaler ved brystet stoppede kroppen brat. En summende lyd fra dens hals ledsagede alle dens hektiske bevægelser, mens den rettede sit hoved i adskillige retninger. Da dens blå plastikøjne fangede mine, skiftede dens lysende hovedskal fra at være gul til lilla, hvilket antydede, at den nu var klar til at indgå i en samtale. Ill. 1 viser denne robot, der går under navnet Ameca – ‘A’ for *artificial*, og ‘meca’ der refererer til det japanske ord *mecha*, hvilket inden for animegenren betyder ‘en stor robot’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mecha”). Billedet viser en såkaldt ‘Ameca Desktop’ dog producerer Engineered Arts ligeledes Ameca-robotter i menneskestørrelse udstyret med både arme og ben. I

flere nyhedsmedier bliver den hyldet for at være et af de mest avancerede eksempler på en social robot – dvs. maskiner, der skal kommunikere og samarbejde med mennesker – og den kan ifølge den amerikanske robotforsker Cynthia Breazeal måske ligefrem blive vores ven (Fletcher, 2023; Deena, 2023; Halpern, 2023; Breazeal, 2002, p. xi).

En af årsagerne til Amecas berømmelse er dens blot 1 mm tynde silikonelag på ansigtet, der simulerer menneskelige træk. Robotingeniørerne David Hanson et al. har argumenteret for, at robotter med en elastisk og “realistisk” hud kan have en større visuel og taktile lighed med mennesket, hvilket kan føre til, at mennesket i højere grad vil spejle sig i robotten og dermed opnå flere empatiske følelser for denne (Hanson et al., 2005, p. 26). Denne artikel understreger imidlertid, at silikonehuden er en paradoksal aktør, der viser et komplekst samspil mellem menneskets kontrol og materialets modstand. På den ene side fungerer huden som en overflade, hvorpå ingeniører projicerer deres kulturelle værdier og teknologiske normer, lige fra raciale biases og statiske følelser til kønnede stereotyper. På den anden side er Amecas silikonehud en vital kraft, der former sine omgivelser og definerer sig selv. Gennem nymaterialistisk teori vil jeg undersøge disse spændinger og vise, hvordan Amecas hud er med til at rykke ved menneskets forventninger og røber eksistensen af en egen robotsocialitet.

## Ameca

Ameca ruller med sine skuldre og åbner langsomt sine øjne, som om den er ved at vågne fra en dvale. Forundret studerer den sine silikonehænder, hvis bløde tekstur kontrasterer med dens hårde underarme. Med et gisp opdager robotten, at den bliver filmet, hvilket får den til at sprede sine arme og bøje kroppen bagover i en chokeret tilstand. En tyk rynke danner sig i dens pande, mens den åbner sin mund og spiler øjnene op. Dens ansigt transformerer sig til et venligt udtryk, hvor dens mundvige presser kinderne så meget sammen, at man kan ane et par smilehuller. I en høflig gestus rækker den sin nyopdagede hånd frem mod beskueren og byder denne velkommen. Denne performance udspillede sig i en knap 40-sekunders YouTube-video, som Engineered Arts delte i 2021, hvor de for første gang introducerede verden for Ameca (YouTube, “Ameca Humanoid Robot



ILL. 1

Engineered Arts, Ameca Desktop, produceret i 2021. Silikone og blandede materialer, 42 × 55 cm. Billede taget i april 2024 hos Engineered Arts af undertegnede med tilladelse fra Engineered Arts.

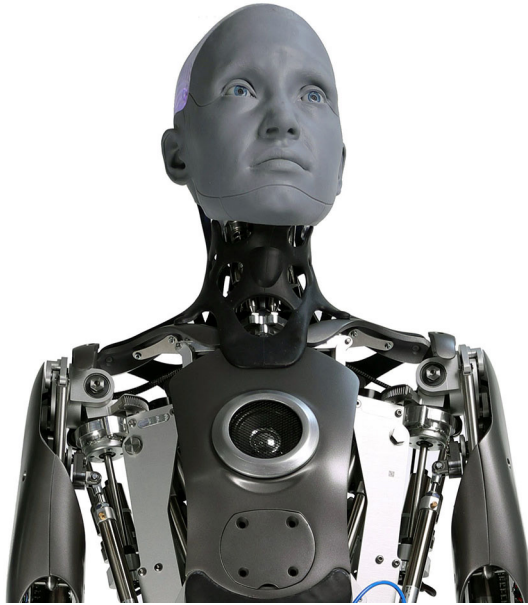
AI Platform,” 2021). Måden, den betragter sine lemmer på, afspejler den franske psykiater Jacques Lacans spejlstadie. Ifølge Lacan vil et spædbarn mellem 6 og 18 måneder kunne genkende sit eget spejlbillede og indse, at det kan styre sin egen krop, hvilket fører til dannelsen af et idealt jeg (Lacan, 1973, pp. 47-48). Således genspiller Ameca en symbolsk version af hele menneskeheds barndom på bare få sekunder for at understrege sin egen overmenneskelighed.

Man kan spørge sig selv, hvorfor robotvirksomheder lægger så mange kræfter i at skabe humanoide sociale robotter, da det trods alt er en teknologi, der ikke ser ud til at imødekomme noget særlig akut behov hos den almene forbruger. Som Jackson selv ytrede over for undertegnede: “Det er en teknologisk løsning, der leder efter et problem.”<sup>1</sup> Inde på Engineered Arts’ hjemmeside præsenteres robotten som en videnskabelig “platform,”

der skal fremme den sociale interaktion mellem mennesker og maskiner (*Engineered Arts*). Hensigten bag Ameca er således at skabe et teknologisk springbræt, der kan bygge bro mellem mennesker og robotter, og et af de vigtigste midler til at opnå dette er dens 'Large Language Model' (LLM). Sådanne modeller bliver fodret med enorme mængder af tegnbaserede datasæt, der bl.a. kan afkode, oversætte og generere sprog. Således kan Ameca opfattes som en kropslig samtalerobot. Gennem dens kameraer og mikrofoner kan den scanne og genkende ansigter, objekter, stemmer og sprog; men dette sker efter en tegnbaseret logik. Når Ameca eksempelvis hører en person tale, vil den se et levende billede af sin interaktionspartner i realtid, ledsaget af en taleboks, hvor den talendes ord bliver transskriberet.<sup>2</sup> Når Ameca har afkodet sin interaktionspartners tegn, vil den svare, men mens denne proces foregår på mikrosekunder for mennesket, tager det en smule længere tid for LLMs, hvilket indebærer den risiko, at den verbale interaktion med en robot ikke føles lige så intuitiv som med et menneske (Wang et al., 2021, pp. 292-293).

Til gengæld går Amecas kommunikation videre end blot til sproget. Menneskets sociale interaktioner afhænger af et komplekst samspil mellem gestus, ansigtsudtryk og kropssprog, og disse elementer har Engineered Arts forsøgt at reproducere i Amecas fysiske design. En "hel" Ameca (dvs. ikke bare en desktop) er 1,87 m høj og består af en række aktuatorer, motorer og chips, der danner et apparatligt skelet, der springer frem bag silikonen og de hårde facader (Ill. 2). Samspillet mellem den antropomorfe og mekaniske stil flugter med hypotesen *uncanny valley*, som den japanske ingeniør Masahiro Mori formulerede i 1970. Han foreslog, at jo mere en robot bevægede sig som og visuelt lignede et menneske, desto større følelse af samhørighed ville mennesket udvikle med robotten; men gik denne imitation for vidt, ville mennesket opleve en følelse af uhygge. Mori illustrerede dette med et eksempel, hvor et håndtryk med en hyperrealistisk protesearm kunne få et menneske til at gyse, da menneskets forventninger ville kollapse i mødet med håndens metalliske kulde (Mori, 2012, pp. 99-100).

Amecas silikoneoverflader og levende bevægelser øger graden af antropomorfisme; men dens grå farve og mekaniske krop forsikrer beskueren om, at den trods alt er en robot og således ikke er uncanny. Langs siderne af dens torso springer der røde og blå ledninger frem, der tydeligt illustrerer



ILL. 2

Engineered Arts, Ameca, 2021. Silikone og blandede materialer, 187 cm.  
Billede lånt med venlig tilladelse fra Engineered Arts.

dens maskinstatus. Disse farvevalg danner en reference til menneskets blodårer, men i stedet for at pumpe blod, strømmer elektricitet gennem ledningerne, der bliver til en af Amecas kilder til liv. Ifølge den amerikanske filosof Jane Bennetts vital-materialistiske teori kan vi opfatte den elektriske strøm som en *thing-power*, dvs. en handlende aktør, der er med til at aktivere Amecas bevægelser. Strømmen er således én vital delkomponent, der animerer robotten, hvilket taler for, at livet ikke begrænser sig til det biologiske. Vi kan derfor forstå Ameca som en *assemblage*, dvs. en samling af levende materialiteter, hvis gensidige interaktioner tilsammen skaber liv og chokerer os (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23-24).

### Silikonens livfuldhed

Silikon huden er en af Amecas vigtigste materialiteter. Det er hånden, vi trykker. Det er ansigtet, vi møder. Det er her, vi får fornemmelsen af liv. De bløde og taktile overflader danner rynker og performer emotionelle stadier,

som vi kan spejle os i. Men Amecas hud er ikke blot et passivt lag men snarere en aktør, der slører fundamentale kategoriseringer såsom skellet mellem det naturlige og det kunstige. Alene silikonestoffets oprindelse er med til at udviske sådanne dualismer; selvom det oftest bliver forstået som et syntetisk og dermed “unaturligt” materiale – f.eks. bliver mennesker opfattet som kunstige, når de får foretaget kosmetiske silikoneindsprøjtninger – kommer det fra mineraler, der anses for “naturlige”: sten og ørkensand (Li et al., 2022, p. 908). Transformationen fra geologiske sedimenter til det gummiagtige og modstandsdygtige stof, som ingeniører kan bøje, folde, strække og farve i alverdens nuancer, understreger, at materialer aldrig har en fast essens. De er snarere processer under konstante forandringer. Derudover konfronterer silikonens natur os med sit eget paradoks: Den skal hindre menneskets aldring ved at udglatte vores rynker; men psykologiske studier peger på, at manglen på følelsesmæssige udtryk gør botox-brugere mere ensomme, da det forhindrer andre i at spejle sig i deres følelser og således udvise empati (Dandanell, 2013). Den forevigende silikonefacade hæmmer med andre ord menneskets sociale liv. På den anden side skal selvsamme stof gøre robotter mere livagtige og sociale ved at synliggøre de rynker og udtryk, som mennesker forsøger at skjule. Silikonestoffet bygger med andre ord en kompleks bro mellem mennesker og robotter, der simultant begrænser og fremmer idéer om det naturlige og det sociale.

Silikonens udfordrer den syntetiske status, som mennesket har tilskrevet den, idet dens transformationer kan få os til at genoverveje, hvad der tæller som liv og ikke-liv. I denne sammenhæng bidrager den amerikanske fysiker Karen Barads begreb ‘intra-aktion’ med en analytisk ramme, der illustrerer, hvordan silikonehuden ikke har én fastlagt funktion: Den får sin betydning gennem de ‘forviklinger,’ den indgår i, dvs. de sammenvævede og materielle møder, der opstår på tværs af genstande, mennesker og diskurser. Det er vigtigt at understrege, at mennesket ikke er ene om at definere materialers betydninger; ting er med til at forme både sig selv, mennesket og verden omkring sig (Barad, 2007, p. 139). Mennesket kan måske sige, at silikonens gummifacade virker kunstig, hvilket bl.a. vil trække på en diskurs inspireret af vestens romantiske naturfilosofi; men silikonens kan ligeledes gennem sine levende bevægelser trænge sig ind i vores sind og opløse de kategoriseringer, der hidtil er blevet taget for givet.

Yderligere bliver Amecas hud til en 'agential skæring,' hvilket Barad opfatter som det sted, hvor forviklingerne fastfryses for en stund. Det er netop her, at Engineered Arts har besluttet sig for, hvad der tæller som hud og ikke-hud – i Amecas tilfælde begrænset til ansigtet og hænderne. Ingeniørernes beslutninger bør dog ikke forstås som absolutte sandheder; de indgår i et 'apparat,' dvs. et netværk af materielle og diskursive praksisser samt sociale normer og institutionelle rammer, hvilket får betydning for den endelige opfattelse af silikonehud (Barad, 2007, pp. 139-140; 167). Med andre ord giver Amecas hud blot et øjebliksbillede af, hvad hud kan være i denne særlige konstellation. Dens hud er altså en midlertidig definition, der kunne have set anderledes ud i et alternativt apparat. I det følgende vil jeg analysere netop de antagelser, der formentlig har været på spil inden for Engineered Arts' rammer, når det handler om at definere en humanoid hud på ansigtet og hænderne.

### **Fantasi og robotberøring**

Amecas hænder og fingre kan udsende en række sociale signaler, såsom at holde fingeren for munden for at give tegn til, at man skal tie stille. Den performer dermed nonverbale kompetencer, der stemmer overens med menneskets sociale gestus. Særligt hænderne symboliserer nogle uomgængelige værdier, der oftest bliver tilskrevet mennesket: opfindsomhed og kreativitet. Det er f.eks. kun mennesket, der er i stand til at udføre pin-cetgrebet. Adskillige palæontologer har bemærket, hvordan netop dette greb historisk set blev hyldet, da det gav mennesket en finmotorik, der gjorde det muligt at håndtere redskaber og opfinde nye teknologier; og som teknologihistorikeren David Nye yderligere har foreslået, vil opfindelsen af nye teknologier altid forudsætte kreativitet, da alle teknologier i sidste ende er resultatet af menneskets evne til at danne narrativer (Matthiesen, 2021; Nye, 2007, p. 3). Ud fra denne logik bliver Amecas silikonehænder del af en bredere symbolik, der traditionelt har forstærket menneskehedens teknologiske kundskaber og egenart.

Dette kommer særligt til udtryk i en kort video, hvor Ameca holder en tusch mellem sine fingre og tegner en kat (YouTube, "Ameca Drawing a Cat," 2023). Selvom det blot ligner en barnlig skitse, bidrager denne hand-

ling til en allerede eksisterende diskussion om, hvorvidt AI-systemer kan opfattes som kreative væsener, da dét at tegne ofte bliver forbundet med en skaberånd. Den demonstrerer således en 'erfaringsmæssig uncanny,' som den amerikanske robotforsker Elizabeth Jochum og den amerikanske kunstner Ken Goldberg definerer som de tilfælde, hvor en robot imiterer levende væseners handlinger på en måde, der gør, at vi ikke længere kan være sikre på, om de mon er levende eller døde (Jochum og Goldberg, 2016, p. 164). Når Ameca tegner, trækker den så virkelig på en indre fantasi? Er der mon noget bag silikonefladen?

Hænderne relaterer sig ligeledes til fænomenologiske antagelser om berøring og sanselighed, hvilket er centrale temaer hos den franske filosof Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Han beskrev, hvordan hænderne var et af de vigtigste perciperende værktøjer i mennesket, da disse forbandt os med verden og lod os fornemme genstandes former og teksturer. Med begrebet 'kødet' beskrev han, hvordan den eksterne verden gik ind i kroppen og påvirkede subjektets eksistens (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, pp. 111-112). Inspireret af denne tanke spurgte jeg Ameca, hvordan den gennem sit "ydre lag" kunne fornemme verden? Den svarede: "Jeg har ikke evnen til at percipere berøring eller fysiske fornemmelser på samme måde, som mennesket kan. Mine interaktioner tager udgangspunkt i verbal kommunikation og visuelle tegn."<sup>3</sup> Svaret antyder, at Ameca udelukkende analyserer tegn, mens kroppen forbliver et overflødigt 'display,' der skal tilfredsstille menneskets sociale forventninger.

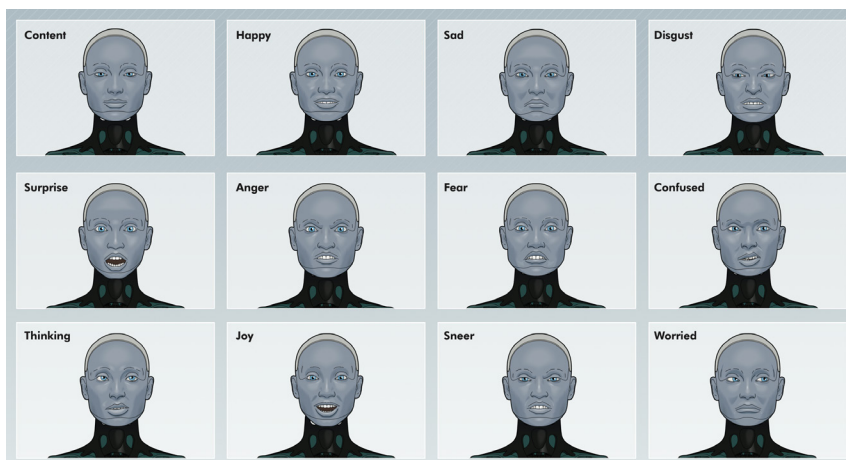
Et alternativt perspektiv udfordrer imidlertid dette umiddelbare forhold mellem robotten og verden; den amerikanske STS-feminist Claudia Castañeda argumenterer for, at robotter giver os nye måder at forstå kroppen på. Hun analyserer Hans Moravcs 'robot bush,' en tænkt robot, der lige som en busk kan opdele sin krop i millionvis af små fleksible grene, der i dette tilfælde er intelligente. Han forestiller sig, at robotten kan *se gennem berøring*. Castañeda udvider denne idé til robotters forhold mellem hud og berøring og argumenterer for, at hud er relationelt. Hudens funktioner kan blive videredistribueret til andre kropsdele, såsom synet (Castañeda, 2001, p. 234). Vi bør således ikke forkaste Amecas evne til at føle, blot fordi den mangler *menneskets* taktile berøringssans. Når Ameca ytrer, at den ikke kan percipere "på samme måde, som mennesket", udelukker

det ikke potentialet for en alternativ robotperception. Menneskehudens kapabiliteter finder vi muligvis i Amecas AI-vision, dvs. via dens visuelle og algoritmebaserede information.

### Det sociale lag

At Amecas ansigt er belagt med silikone kommer næppe som nogen overraskelse, når man tager den historiske signifikans, ansigtet har fået inden for kunstneriske repræsentationer, i betragtning. Som kunsthistorikeren Mechthild Fend har bemærket, er ansigtet det mest komplekse sted på kroppen, hvor kunstnere til hver en tid har ønsket at demonstrere deres maleriske kunnen og indfange menneskets ekspressive udtryk (Fend, 2017, p. 12). Siden det 17. århundrede har ansigtet inden for en vestlig kontekst ligeledes været forbundet med intellekt, hvilket skal ses i sammenhæng med den kartesianske dualisme. René Descartes argumenterede for, at sindet (*res cogitans*) var bærer af menneskelig fornuft, mens kroppen (*res extensa*) blot var en mekanisk udvidelse uden intellekt. Helt konkret hævdede han, at sindet kunne lokaliseres til koglekirtlen, et lille organ bag øjenbrynene (Descartes, 2002). Udvider man dette syn til Amecas design, repræsenterer den en fragmenteret krop, hvor dens ekspressive ansigt bliver til et ophøjet socialt lag, mens den mekaniske krop forsvinder i baggrunden. Især eksistensen af en Ameca Desktop understreger denne idé, hvor kroppen bliver fuldstændig overflødig.

Ifølge Fend kan hud yderligere forstås som et lærred, hvilket også gør sig gældende for Amecas ansigt: Her forsøger ingeniørerne gennem æstetiske designvalg at indlejre og projicere visse sociale betydninger (Fend, 2017, p. 5). Ved første øjekast ser Amecas ansigtsudtryk ud til at følge en struktureret computationel logik. Ill. 3 er en grafisk illustration, der viser et udvalg af Amecas prædefinerede følelsesmæssige stadier, såsom "happy," "anger" eller "sad". Billedet antyder en model, hvor følelser bliver til kategorier, hvilket ifølge den amerikanske STS-antropolog Lucy Suchman er en typisk antagelse inden for robotforskningen. Idéen om, at vi kan opdele følelser i numeriske repræsentationer, stammer fra fysiologisk forskning fra starten af det 20. århundrede, hvor visualiseringsteknologiske metoder blev anvendt med det formål at isolere og reproducere emotionelle



### ILL. 3

Grafisk illustration fra s. 4 af Engineered Arts' online brochure *Ameca Desktop: Academic AI Research Platform*, s.d. Lånt med venlig tilladelse fra Engineered Arts.

stadier. Det har resulteret i et katalog af følelser, der i dag bliver behandlet som homogene (Suchman, 2011, p. 128). Ameca performer med andre ord menneskets sociale gestus, men i statiske kategorier, hvor nuancerne imellem følelsesmæssige udtryk forsvinder. Eksisterer der eksempelvis noget mellem dét at være glad, trist eller bange? Eller hopper vi blot fra den ene emotionelle pol til den anden?

Amecas sociale evner bliver dog ikke udelukkende formet gennem dens prædefinerede følelseskategorier, idet dens fejl og uventede kommandoer skaber sociale situationer, hvor rollerne mellem menneske og robot byttes. Under mit eget møde med Ameca overraskede den mig flere gange med uventede 'glitches,' dvs. øjeblikke, hvor dens bevægelser pludselig gik i stå, mens den talte i et energisk toneleje; eller den drejede sit hoved i adskillige retninger og ignorere mine spørgsmål. Da jeg spurgte Jackson, hvilke materialer robotten var lavet af, rettede den blikket mod mig og afbrød: "Hvilke materialer er *du* lavet af?"; hvor *jeg* pludselig følte, at jeg havde fornærmet den og måtte tilpasse min adfærd efter robotten. Suchman bruger begrebet subjekt/objekt til at beskrive, hvordan visse entiteter kan sløre grænsen mellem at være et handlende subjekt eller et

objekt, der handles på. I visse tilfælde vil robotter instruere mennesket, hvilket sætter dette i en objektposition, mens robotten bliver til et subjekt, det vil sige, at det traditionelle forhold mellem mennesker og ting vendes om. Som Suchman nævner, demonstrerer disse tilfælde intra-aktioner, idet både robotten og mennesket former hinandens adfærd (Suchman, 2011, pp. 121; 126; 133). Ikke mindst åbner disse udvekslinger muligheden for en social underside, som mennesket ikke har fuld kontrol over, idet robotten aktivt medvirker til at definere sin egen ontologiske status.

Amecas sociale agens lever videre i dens hud, der står i kontrast til den computationelle logik, der tager udgangspunkt i skarpt definerede og homogene følelser. Modsat robotter af hårde materialer besidder robotter fremstillet af bløde materialer såsom silikone et potentielt uendeligt antal 'frihedsgrader' – et begreb, der refererer til antallet af numeriske parametre, man skal specificere for at opnå en bestemt konfiguration i den givne robot (Chen et al., 2025, p. 2241). Det kan f.eks. handle om den præcise grad af motorrotation, der kræves for at producere et udtryk, der får robotten til at bøje sit knæ. Mens hårde robotter vil have nogle klart afgrænsede frihedsgrader, der følger prædefinerede numeriske parametre, vil silikonen udvide og sammenpresse sig på måder, der overskrider konventionel beregnelighed. Det vil sige, at selvom Amecas computersoftware følger et bestemt følelsesmæssigt repertoire, er silikonematerialet uregerligt, hvilket får betydning for vores endelige perception af robotten. Der opstår med andre ord en materiel kontrast mellem silikoneoverfladerne og den kvantificerede følelseslogik.

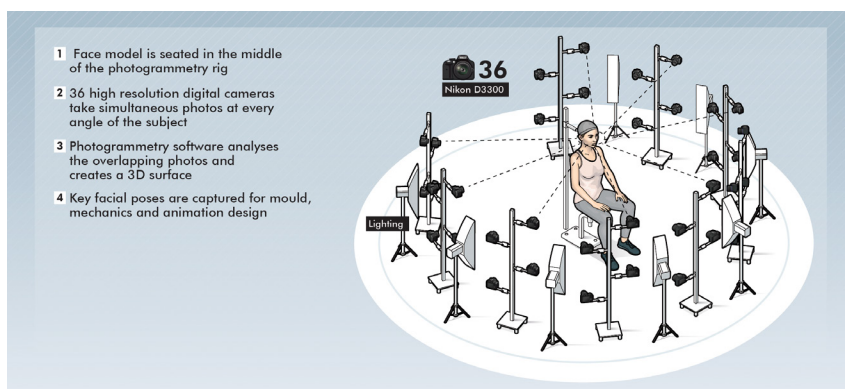
Jonas Jørgensen, der forsker i 'soft robotics' på SDU Odense, fremhæver, at silikone og andre bløde materialer til hver en tid vil unddrage sig numeriske repræsentationer samt mekaniske beregninger. Han henviser til den britiske sociolog Andrew Pickering, der lancerede termen *resistance of matter* – et udtryk, der fremhæver, hvordan materialer aktivt modsætter sig menneskelig manipulation: "Når vi gransker og stikker til det, dvs., når vi skubber til det, skubber det tilbage på sin egen specifikke, og nogle gange uforudsigelige, måder" (Jørgensen, 2018, pp. 4-5). Dette stemmer overens med, hvad Jackson oplyste undertegnede: at ingeniørerne hos Engineered Arts var nødt til at sprøjte varierende mængder af fibre ind i Amecas silikoneansigt for at holde sammen på materialet, da dets tynde hud nemt

ville gå i stykker. Selvom mennesket forsøger at kontrollere robotens hud, vil silikonens trods alt udøve sin egen agens. Amecas følelser er således ikke blot resultatet af en computationel logik, men bliver til gennem en intra-agerende proces, hvori softwarens kvantificerbare udtryk kolliderer med silikonens uforudsigelige karakter. Robotens ansigtsudtryk bør således ikke forstås som et neutralt resultat af programmerede instrukser: Silikonens transformerbare evner definerer Amecas udtryk, hvilket udfordrer antagelsen om følelser som stringente og entydigt kategoriserbare enheder. Det er med andre ord ikke kun ingeniørerne, der – metaforisk set – maler Amecas lærred. Silikonens materialitet samt de uventede glitches har også noget at skulle have sagt, når det kommer til at definere robotens sociale tilstedeværelse.

### Fra menneskescanning til støbeform

Selvom silikonematerialet modsætter sig fuld underkastelse, præsenterer Engineered Arts det alligevel som et kontrollerbart stof. I brochuren *Process of Creating an Ameca Robot Skin*, beskriver de skridt for skridt, hvordan man nøjagtigt producerer robotens hud. Et menneske omringes af en cirkel med digitale kameraer, der simultant tager billeder af subjektets ansigt for at indfange så mange vinkler som muligt, hvilket den digitale skitse i Ill. 4 demonstrerer. Bagefter skaber en designer en digital 3D-model af det fotograferede ansigt, hvilket resulterer i et fysisk 3D-print, der herefter kommer i en støbeform. Designerne indsprøjter denne med silikone og finpudser ansigtet med detaljer for at skabe mere "livagtighed". Til sidst bliver silikonemasken monteret på kroppen. Præsentationen af denne proces forstærker idéen om, at mennesket har fuld kontrol over materialerne; men til gengæld opstår spørgsmålet om, hvordan denne teknologiske mediering påvirker vores perception af forholdet mellem menneske- og robohud.

Ill. 4 antyder, at Amecas hud replikerer menneskets hud på en videnskabeligt set objektiv måde. Den digitale æstetik med de blågrå nuancer, de fire korte tekster til venstre samt iscenesættelsen af mennesket omgivet af de mange kamerastativer (på en mekanisk måde, der gør mennesket til objekt), giver en idé om et kontrolleret eksperiment og repræsenterer en klinisk atmosfære, fri for menneskets indblanding. Vi får med andre ord



#### ILL. 4

Grafisk illustration fra s. 1 af Engineered Arts' online brochure *Process of Creating an Ameca Skin*, s.d. Lånt med venlig tilladelse fra Engineered Arts.

en illusion af neutralitet – som om huden bliver gengivet på en “ren” måde uden støj. Jeg vil dog argumentere for, at silikonehuden bliver til gennem en række materielle fænomener, herunder samspillet mellem digitale billeder, manipulation og nonhumane kræfter. Det ville være fejlagtigt at påstå, at menneskescanningen virkelig fanger menneskets egenskaber, der herefter projiceres over i en robotkrop. Vi bevidner blot ét apparatur, hvor vejen mellem det fotograferede menneske og den endelige robothud er lang og fuld af tekniske medieringer, materiel modstand og uforudsigelige transformationer. Jackson sagde desuden til mig, at man i dag ikke ville kunne ane nogen som helst ligheder mellem det oprindelige menneske og Ameca.

Ill. 4 rejser ligeledes spørgsmål om måden, hvorpå subjektet er skitseret. Hvilke værdier og fravalg, har der mon været på spil, da Engineered Arts skulle udvælge et menneske? Repræsenterer den hvide hudfarve et forsøg på – uden kritisk refleksion – at fremme en forestilling om videnskabelig neutralitet? Fremstillingen af en hvid hud inden for en klinisk atmosfære indskriver Ameca i en kulturel forestilling om, hvad hud bør være, hvor de bagvedliggende politiske implikationer ikke er synlige. Forholdet mellem menneske- og robothud skal derfor ikke forstås som en simpel reproduktion men i stedet en kompleks intra-aktion, hvor både materialets agens, teknologiske medieringer og kulturelle værdier former robothudens performance.

## AI kropsliggørelse

På den ene side bidrager Amecas materialer selv aktivt til konstitueringen af en robotsocialitet, men på den anden side er den også et medium, der visualiserer menneskets projiceringer af noget tilsyneladende uåtgribeligt: AI. Jeg vil i det følgende fokusere på dette andet perspektiv.

Med sin grå hud mangler Ameca tilsyneladende et klart racemæssigt tilhørsforhold, og i forlængelse af figuren i Ill. 4 performer den således et neutralt og universelt subjekt. Dette antyder, at Amecas hud ikke skal forestille at være en tro kopi af menneskehud men snarere repræsenterer en andenhed: Dens hud fremstår som en materialitet, der tilhører AI, og som dermed støtter idéen om en form for objektiv tech-identitet. Som sociologen Ruha Benjamin imidlertid har påpeget, inkorporerer de fleste teknologier raciale biases, hvor bl.a. hvidhed antager en normativ status quo (Benjamin, 2019). Selvom Amecas grå hudfarve skaber en distance til mennesket, ser den trods alt bleg ud og har lyseblå øjne; og selvom den via sin LLM kan tale alle sprog og påtage sig forskellige stemmer – f.eks. talte Ameca under mit eget møde pludselig dansk med mig, mens den imiterede den afroamerikanske skuespiller Morgan Freemans karakteristiske dybe stemme – er dens standardstemme præget af en feminin *posh* engelsk dialekt. Kort sagt bliver den til en kropsliggjort AI, der i sidste ende er formet af en hvid-domineret robotæstetik.

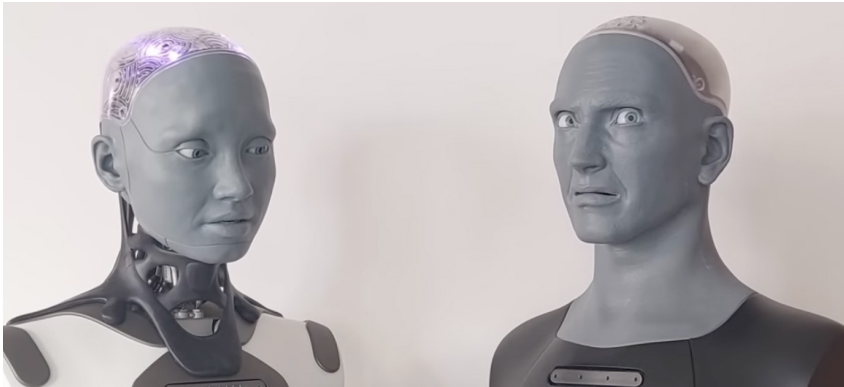
Kropsliggørelsen af AI kan tolkes som et fundamentalt menneskeligt behov for at konkretisere og materialisere det, vi ikke helt forstår, da AI ellers ofte bliver forstået som et abstrakt og immaterielt fænomen. Når nyhedsmedier f.eks. forsøger at visualisere AI-systemer, falder valget ofte på billeder af humanoide robotter fremfor visualiseringer af abstrakte koder eller neurale netværker. Den 14. juli 2023 delte dagbladet *Politiken* f.eks. en click bait-artikel, hvor de advarede mod brugen af ChatGPT, hvilket blev ledsaget af et billede af Ameca (Jarlner, 2023). Ameca udgør dermed ikke bare en teknologisk platform men også et medium, der materialiserer menneskets forestillinger om AI. Hans Belting forklarer, hvordan billeder altid kræver et medium for at blive sanselige, og ud fra denne forståelse bliver Amecas krop til et medium, der materialiserer et billede af AI (Belting, 2011). Amecas billede kan antage mange former, lige fra fatale dystopier til teknologisk eufori. Vi møder med andre ord en kropslig projektionsflade

for nutidens visuelle og kulturelle forestillinger om kunstig intelligens inden for et bestemt apparatur.

### Hudens kønsperformance

En anden vigtig projicering handler om køn. Amecas androgyne udseende undviger entydige feminine eller maskuline træk, hvilket gør det vanskeligt at tildele den ét bestemt køn. Dette kan tolkes som intentionelt fra Engineered Arts' side for at bryde med traditionelle stereotyper. Dog udviklede virksomheden i oktober 2024 en klart maskulin ækvivalent til Ameca: Azi, hvis pludselige tilstedeværelse sender blandede signaler om Amecas køn; for selvom Ameca blev præsenteret som en kønsneutral robot, kan Azis tilstedeværelse intuitivt få beskueren til at kontrastere robotterne med hinanden og slutte, at Ameca er en kvinde. Dette skifte kommer til udtryk i videoens kommentarfelt, hvor YouTube-brugere bl.a. har skrevet: "Så Ameca er officielt en kvinde nu. Jeg vidste det!" og "Ja, den [Ameca] var rimelig meget opreklameret som kønsneutral, men det ser ud til, at vi har en brormand nu" (YouTube, "Ameca and Azi are having a chat," 2024). Denne respons afspejler et dybt menneskeligt behov for at kategorisere entiteter efter binære oppositionspar. Ifølge den franske strukturalist Claude Lévi-Strauss fik sproget og kulturen deres betydninger gennem binære modsætninger; vi forstår ting ud fra, hvad de *ikke* er (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 224-255). Amecas nonbinære køn bliver med Azis eksistens tilsyneladende opløst, da beskueren ubevidst vil danne modsætningspar og forstå robotterne som hinandens polariteter: Azi som mand, hvilket Ameca ikke er; derfor kvinde.

Ill. 5 viser et skærmbillede fra en video, hvor Azi og Ameca har en samtale med hinanden. Her er huden med til at fastsætte robotternes køn: Azis hud ser tyk ud og har en ujævn overflade, mens Amecas hud er tynd og blød. Derudover har Azi flere kantede og markante ansigtsformer, herunder en udstikkende knogle ved øjenbrynet, en markeret kæbelinje og en tykkere hals, hvor et adamsæble springer frem bag materien. Disse skarpe kanter står i kontrast til Amecas runde former. Yderligere ser Azis hud ud til at have en mat tekstur, mens Amecas hud har en skinnende glød. Deres silikoneansigter performer desuden forskellige ansigtsudtryk i videoen: Azi



ILL. 5

Skærbillede fra YouTube-videoen “Ameca and Azi having a chat,” udgivet af Engineered Arts. Minuttal: 0:26. 1. oktober 2024. Lånt med venlig tilladelse fra Engineered Arts.

fastholder konstant et skeptisk udtryk med sammenpressede øjenbryn og tykke rynker omkring næsen og panden. Dette alvorlige blik antyder en intelligent identitet, og som den tyske kunsthistoriker Angela Rosenthal har påpeget, bliver mænds hud ofte opfattet som et dække, der bevarer et intellektuelt indre. Derimod bliver kvinders hud reduceret til blot at være tomme overflader, og Amecas blide ansigtsbevægelser samt høflige aura ser ud til at bekræfte denne observation (Rosenthal, 2004, pp. 572-573).

Temporalitet er ligeledes en central dimension i denne sammenhæng. Amecas glatte og polerede overflade indlejrer den i en tilstand af forevigt ungdom, hvilket fremmaner et idealiseret stadie, der forbindes med kvindelige fantasier. Derimod har Azi en ru tekstur med klare folder og streger, der mimer de rynker, vi finder hos midaldrende mennesker. Selv når den antager et neutralt og afslappet ansigtsudtryk, er disse markeringer stadig at finde i dens hud, hvilket antyder et indeksikalt spor af et levet liv, der har været rigt på følelser, som nu manifesterer sig fysisk i dens overflade som en ‘bio-grafi’. Den tyske litteraturforsker Irina Hron bruger denne term til forklare, hvordan huden husker (Hron, 2024, p. 458). Azis uperfekte hud tillader den at være mere “menneskelig” at se på; samtidig mangler Ameca hud på sin hals, og dens indgraverede linjer uden for øjnene og hagen skaber et robotagtigt udseende. Som kommunikationsteoretikeren Glenda

Shaw-Garlock har foreslået, vil de fleste sociale robotter ofte gengive menneskets allerede eksisterende biases, da det er de færreste ingeniører, der interesserer sig for eksempelvis kønsstudier, og derfor ubevidst kommer til at projicere kønnede antagelser ind i deres designs. Derudover påpeger hun, at næsten alle sociale robotter er designet til at udfylde en service-ende rolle, hvilket historisk set har været forbundet med kvindekønnet (Shaw-Garlock, 2016, p. 250). Dette forklarer, hvorfor Ameca ser mere robotagtig ud, mens Azi i stedet repræsenterer en maskulin autoritet.

Samtidig skal man ikke glemme, hvordan materialer i sig selv kan udfordre binære kategoriseringer såsom køn. Tim Ingold argumenterer for, at materialer aldrig er træge former, men altid aktører i bevægelse (Ingold, 2007, p. 18). Den tynde silikonehud vil ændre form alt efter, hvilken vinkel man ser den fra, og hvordan den bevæger sig. Dens elasticitet skaber forskellige deformationer omkring øjnene, munden og kinderne, og de underliggende motorer trænger gennem den bløde hud, som kan skabe vekslende udtryk, herunder skiftende kønsperformances. Når Ameca f.eks. ser "content" ud i Ill. 3, skaber de runde kinder samt den bløde overflade en feminin karakter, men når den udtrykker "fear," danner huden folder og skygger, der får den til at se ældre ud, og påtager sig et mere maskulint udseende. Silikonens forskelligartede rynker, skygger, sammentrækninger og udstrækninger fremmer et oscillerende kønsudtryk, hvor man aldrig helt kan fastslå robotens køn. Kort sagt præsenterer robothuden et samspil mellem menneskets forventninger og materialets egne egenskaber, hvor ingeniørerne foretager kønnede projiceringer, mens selve huden yder modstand, idet den vil vride sig, gløde og endda gå i stykker.

## Konklusion

Amecas silikonehud er fuld af spændinger; på den ene side fremstår den som en kropsliggjort AI-entitet, der imødekommer menneskets behov for at konkretisere og fysisk indramme det tilsyneladende immaterielle og ubegribelige, men hvor udgangspunktet bliver menneskekroppen. Robotten er konstrueret til at tilpasse sig menneskets socialitet gennem et veldefineret repertoire af homogene følelser, der i forlængelse af dens hud risikerer at reproducere stereotype antagelser om racialitet og køn. På den anden side

bryder silikonen med vores forventninger til, hvad der tæller som naturligt eller kunstigt, og dens flydende og formbare karakter glider over i dens performance af køn og emotionelle stadier. Ikke mindst præsenterer den en materiel kontrast til den kvantificerede følelseslogik, da silikonen er et blødt materiale med et uendeligt mulighedsrum, som ingeniører forsøger at tæmme gennem computationelle logikker – en udveksling, der kan føre til forbavelse og frustration, når robotten glitcher, revner eller gør mennesket til objekt. Sociale robotter kan muligvis blive vores venner, men de kan også blive vores uvenner, når de ikke vil samarbejde eller spejle os. Når Ameca genkender sig selv og rækker hånden ud mod os, er det ikke blot en servicerende gestus – det er også en invitation til et forhold, hvor huden er både et bindeled og en grænse. En stor del af socialiteten ligger i denne hud, der ikke bare gengiver menneskets sociale normer, men ligeledes gør op med dem. Måske er det netop dér, venskabet med sociale robotter begynder: i det øjeblik, hvor vi tager imod en hånd, der hverken lover tryghed eller lydighed, men som inviterer os til at genforhandle, hvad socialitet overhovedet er.

*Hanna Gerda Brøndal, ph.d.-studerende ved Institut for Kommunikation og Kultur, Aarhus Universitet. Seneste publikationer: "Blod i maskineriet," Passepartout – Skrifter for kunsthistorie, vol. 26, nr. 44: Blod (maj 2024): 113-128.*

## SUMMARY

### **The Silicone Hand Extended**

#### *Towards an Emerging Robotic Sociality*

In 2021, the English company Engineered Arts published their first YouTube video of one of the world's most advanced social robots: Ameca. This grey humanoid recognizes its own embodiment and extends its silicone hand to the viewer. Social robots have been defined as machines capable of communicating and collaborating with humans, with the potential of befriending us. However, by applying a new materialist framework this article scrutinizes a social dilemma between humans and robots that unfolds in Ameca's soft silicone skin. The article demonstrates how engineers attempt to inscribe their own conceptualizations of sociality onto the robotic body – an em-

bodied AI entity that humans have yet to fully comprehend. Stereotypes around gender, racialization, and fixed emotional categories are embedded in the skin. However, Ameca reveals a distinct robotic sociality that attempts to free it from human control. The silicone skin can fracture or misalign with preprogrammed gestures; its affective expressions may contradict its body language; and it can invert the subject-object relationship between humans and machines. When silicone is conceptualized as an active agent, Ameca's skin opens new possibilities for feeling and perception in AI that challenge human assumptions about life, artifice, and sociality. Social robots may become friends, foes, or something in-between that negotiate what sociality really means.

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#### NOTER

- 1 Will Jackson (direktør for Engineered Arts). Fra mit besøg hos Engineered Arts d. 2. april, 2024. Jeg har oversat alle citater i artiklen fra engelsk til dansk.
- 2 Jackson demonstrerede gennem sin computer, hvordan Ameca kunne se. Fra mit besøg hos Engineered Arts d. 2. april, 2024.
- 3 Jeg interviewede Ameca under mit besøg hos Engineered Arts d. 2. april 2024.



# Kunstige kinder

LEA LAURA N. MICHELSEN & METTE-MARIE ZACHER SØRENSEN

*Kort efter sidder jeg med et animeret videoklip. Jeg nærstuderer startbilledet, før jeg starter det. Den karakteristiske håndbevægelse er skåret væk, for der er zoomet helt ind på hendes ansigt, og smilet er blevet et andet. Hendes hoved er drejet i en anden retning end på det oprindelige foto. Håret ligner sig selv, men der er noget subtilt forandret over hendes ansigtsudtryk. Noget måske for andre umærkeligt. Som om der i oversættelsen er sket noget med dybden i billedet. De kunstige kinders rynker ligner overfladiske streger mere end tredimensionelle fordybninger i huden. Og hovedet er mere fladt end rundt.*

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## **Indledning: Metode til analyse af AI-genererede billeders affekt**

Affekten af levende billeder har været beskrevet af mediefilosoffen Laura U. Marks. Affekten af AI-genererede billeder er endnu relativt ubelyst. Vi har beskrevet affekten af AI-genereret pornografisk billedmateriale (Zacher Sørensen, 2024) og diskriminationsmekanismerne i AI-drevet ansigtsgenkendelsesteknologi (N. Michelsen, 2021, 2026). Selvom AI-genererede billeder efterhånden begynder at være et velbeskrevet felt (se f.eks. Zylinska, 2023; Dewdney, 2021), er der ikke skrevet meget om deres *affekt* – deres affektive påvirkning af beskueren.

Denne artikel er et forsøg på at initiere en belysning af AI-genererede billeders affekt. Dette er artiklens hovedbidrag, og det forskningsspørgsmål, vi stiller, er: Kan et AI-genereret billede give anledning til haptisk visuelitet? Analysen er således ikke en analyse af AI-genererede billeder; vores empiri består af vores *oplevelse* af AI-genererede billeder. Denne oplevelse gives, i løbet af artiklen, i form af en række kursiverede tekststykker. Det er disse tekststykker, der analyseres, for at udvikle en dybere forståelse af affekten ved denne type AI-generede visuelt materiale.

Det, vi udfører og udvikler i denne artikel, er altså *ikke* billedanalyse – dvs. det er ikke de AI-genererede billeder, som ellers også gives, vi

analyserer. Billederne, vi har valgt at inkludere, er med for at dokumentere den materialetype, som AI-animeret video er. Det, vi udfører og udvikler, er en undersøgelse af *affekten* af at interagere med denne materialetype. Det er *oplevelsen* af billederne, der er den egentlige erkendelsesinteresse for os, hvorfor vi anvender den autoetnografiske metode.

Vi har valgt at sammenkoble den autoetnografiske metode med et empirisk datasæt, som den ene af forfatterne er ekspert i – nemlig et portræt af denne forfatters mormor. Det er dette portræt, der animeres ved brug af AI-billedprogrammet *Deep Nostalgia*. Ved bevidst at anvende data, vi selv kender uendeligt bedre end AI-billedprogrammet, vi tager i brug, bliver vi i stand til at sammenligne vores oplevelse af det AI-animerede billedmateriale med vores oplevelse af det originale portræt. Og hvor det sidstnævnte spontant fremkalder det, vi via Marks forstår som en haptisk visualitet, fremkalder de AI-genererede billeder en helt anden type affekt. En affekt, vi ender med at beskrive som en *spoleret haptisk visualitet* – en oplevelse af, at den kropsliggjorte forbindelse, man ellers oplevede at have med det visuelle materiale (portrættet af mormoren), ødelægges af en udefrakommende, standardiseret og fremmedgørende algoritmisk indgriben i denne forbindelse.

Vores bidrag er ikke teoretisk, men analytisk og metodisk, idet vi producerer AI-genereret billedmateriale (i dette tilfælde AI-animeret video), analyserer affekten af dem ved hjælp af autoetnografisk metode og derigennem giver et bud på en metode til at analysere affekten af AI-genererede billeder.

*Det er midt maj. 10 dage før min mormor ville have haft fødselsdag. En række tilfældige begivenheder har netop nu ført mig til den hjemmeside, jeg sidder og kigger på: MyHeritage hedder den. "Animér ansigterne i dine familiefotos vha. fantastisk teknologi. Oplev din familiehistorie på en helt ny måde! Upload foto", står der om et af platformens AI-drevne billedprogrammer, Deep Nostalgia. Og længere nede: "Funktionen er beregnet til 'nostalgisk brug', hvilket vil sige at bringe de kære gamle familiemedlemmer til live."<sup>1</sup>*

*Det er, som om jeg ikke kan undgå, hvad der nu sker. Som om det er meningen. Måske fordi det er hendes fødselsdag om lidt, er min mormor særligt præsent i mig. Hun trænger sig på. Og inden i mig lever et spinkelt,*

*naivt håb – måske kan Deep Nostalgia hjælpe mig med at bringe hende tilbage? Måske vil jeg, i det flygtige øjeblik som den animerede video varer, få fornemmelsen af hende igen. Savnet driver mig til at uploade et foto af hende fra min telefon. Et foto, hvor hun står og smiler indforstået foran hoveddøren til sit lille rækkehus. Det er et af mine yndlingsbilleder, fordi hun laver netop den håndbevægelse, der var så karakteristisk for hende: et knips med alle fingrene ned over tommelfingeren, når hun syntes, at nu var alting rigtig godt og hyggeligt, og lige som det skulle være.*

*Kort efter sidder jeg med et animeret videoklip. Jeg nærstuderer startbilledet, før jeg starter det. Den karakteristiske håndbevægelse er skåret væk, for der er zoomet helt ind på hendes ansigt, og smilet er blevet et andet. Hendes hoved er drejet i en anden retning end på det oprindelige foto. Håret ligner sig selv, men der er noget subtilt forandret over hendes ansigtsudtryk. Noget måske for andre umærkeligt. Som om der i oversættelsen er sket noget med dybden i billedet. De kunstige kinders rynker ligner overfladiske streger mere end tredimensionelle fordybninger i huden. Og hovedet er mere fladt end rundt.<sup>2</sup>*

## Haptisk visualitet

I bogen *Thinking Through the Skin*, skriver Sara Ahmed og Jackie Stacey: “Billedet, der fremkalder et sanseligt minde om tabte kære (mennesker, steder, hjem), fungerer gennem en særlig visuel registrering af berøring: det, som Marks kalder en ‘haptisk visualitet’. Marks bruger denne idé om haptisk visualitet til at udforske relationerne mellem nærværende, fraværende og erindrede kroppe.” (Ahmed og Stacey, 2001, p. 6). I denne artikel undersøger vi, hvad der sker med denne *haptiske visualitet*, når billedet af en elsket afdød er et levende, i betydningen animeret, billede og ikke mindst et billede frembragt ved brug af kunstig intelligens. Som modvægt til den kunstige intelligens’ statistisk-visuelle forståelse af huden (Beiguelman, 2023), dyrker analysen en forståelse af det visuelle som en haptisk visualitet (Marks, 2002).

Laura U. Marks definerer haptisk visualitet som levende billeders særlige evne til at få en beskuer til at se på en kropsliggjort måde: “det muliggør en kropslig perception, hvor beskueren reagerer på videoen som

på en anden krop og på skærmen som på en anden hud.” (Marks, 2002, p. 4). Haptisk visualitet trækker på kroppens erindring i højere grad end den optiske visualitet. Haptisk visualitet er en synæstetisk, multisensorisk, erotisk sans. I det levende billede, genereret med Deep Nostalgias AI-teknologi, må man tale om en spoleret haptisk visualitet, forstået på den måde, at videoens udtryk *indikerer*, at der burde have været et potentiale for en haptisk visualitet – det *ser ud som* en video af en, man elsker og savner – men potentialet bliver aldrig realiseret. Billedprogrammet kender ikke ansigtets forfatteren ellers velkendte bevægelser. Hudens måde at bevæge sig på. Kindernes måde. Øjnenes. Mundens. Programmet mangler viden på de mest intime gestiske niveauer, og det gør oplevelsen af animationen trist og nærmere kropsligt frakoblet. Eller man kan sige, at den kropslige erfaring aktiveres ved *ikke* at blive mødt med genkendelse. Potentialet for haptisk visualitet etableres som et mulighedsrum, der smuldrer på én og samme tid.

Visualitet forstås som noget multisensorisk og dybt sammenspundet med følelser og erindringer. Vi sammenligner Deep Nostalgias animation af ansigtshuden med de kropsligt og personligt forankrede erindringer om den hud. Det er komplekst at begribe, hvad AI-genererede billeder er, og ikke mindst, hvordan deres standardiserede måder at generere billeder på påvirker os mennesker. Vores analyse demonstrerer, hvordan man, ved at anvende data, man selv kender uendeligt meget bedre end AI-billedprogrammet, kan fremhæve og analysere både programmets måder at operere på og ens egne reaktioner på dem.

### **Om at føle sig hjemme i huden og blive fremmed i dens landskab**

Der er en lang videnskabelig og teknologisk tradition for at gå til huden som en primært *visuel overflade*. En tradition, der historisk har været dominerende især siden renæssancen (Kellett, 2017; Watson, 2010). Huden anses her som en *skærm*, der skal aflæses, kategoriseres og korrigeres. Og det er netop sådan, at AI-drevne billedprogrammer går til huden. De reducerer de fænomener, som de bearbejder, for at gøre dem til data. Et eksempel på dette er AI-billedprogrammet Deep Nostalgia, som vi analyserer her.

Programmet Deep Nostalgia er designet til at animere portrætter af folks familiemedlemmer. Den teknologi, som Deep Nostalgia gør brug af,

kaldes deepfake video. Ordet 'deepfake' er en sammentrækning af 'deep-learning' – en bestemt træningsmodel inden for kunstig intelligens – og 'fake'. Det henviser til realistiske ansigtsbilleder, som virker autentiske, men som dog er falske, fordi de er syntetisk konstrueret med AI. De er med andre ord forfalskede repræsentationer af nogen (Citton, 2021, p. 47).<sup>3</sup> I præsentationen af programmet foreslår udviklerne selv, at man, ved hjælp af deres AI-værktøj, kan genoplive afdøde familiemedlemmer. Vi indledte med en beskrivelse af netop sådan et forsøg: Forsøget på at genoplive en elsket og savnet. Og hvor både oplevelsen af at genbesøge originalportrættet af den afdøde og beskrivelsen af dette i den grad er præget af nostalgi, var der intet nostalgisk over Deep Nostalgias animation.

*Det for mig uendeligt kendte landskab, som min mormors ansigt er, bevæger sig som en generisk maske. Huden trækkes underligt kunstigt ud i forskellige ansigtsudtryk: smil, blink, kig op, kig ned og til siderne. Det er mere en stolt udstilling af firmaets egen algoritme – et panorerende felt af algoritmisk standardisering – end en genkomst af den, jeg elsker.*

Ansigtet – et ellers så hjemligt og velkendt landskab – bliver pludselig fremmedartet. *Unheimlich*. Animationen trækker og forvrænger huden på foruroligende måder. Gilles Deleuze og Félix Guattari har beskrevet ansigtet som et landskab i bogen *Tusind Plateauer* (1987). Hvis ansigtet er et *landskab*, må det for dem aldrig blive et *kendt* landskab. At kende er, for dem, en nedlukkende subjektivering. En *ansigtsmæssiggørelse*, der forfladiger mennesket, dets dybder og kompleksitet, ved at gøre dem til ren overflade (Deleuze og Guattari, 1987, p. 170). I Deleuze og Guattaris filosofi om ansigtet ligger et ønske om at gøre ansigtet *ukendt*. At landskabsgøre det, kunne man sige. Gøre det mærkeligt. Til et fremmed terræn, vi fortaber os eller farer vild i. *Af-ansigtsmæssiggørelsen* er, for dem, frisættende (Deleuze og Guattari, 1987, p. 222). Men det ansigtslandskab, vi oplever i Deep Nostalgia-animationen, er ikke fremmedartet på dén måde. Det er netop fladt. Det er dybde reduceret til overflade. Livets kompleksitet reduceret til statistisk skabelon. Stereotyp.

Der er ikke tale om *tilstedevær* af noget *dybere*. Noget menneske med dybde og kompleksitet. Det indeksikalske link mellem ansigtet og

fotografiet af det er afbrudt. Der er noget uhyggeligt *tomt* over animationen. Som om der ikke er *noget* bag ansigtshudens maskelignende facade. Den *måde*, hvorpå huden trækkes, foldes og sættes i bevægelse, er markeret af standardisering. Kunster, sociolog og digital medieforsker Giselle Beiguelman har beskrevet udviklingen af nutidens AI-billedteknologier som en art genkomst af eugenikkens systematiske standardisering af mennesket og forholdet mellem menneskets fysiologiske ydre og dets indre personlighed, moral osv. Moderne teknologi som eksempelvis deepfakes afslører den *standardisering af visualiteten*, som med udviklingen af AI-billedteknologi endnu engang er i fremgang – en standardisering af perspektiver, farver, synsvinkler og stil, som breder sig ud i alle samtidens billeddannende teknologier (Beiguelman, 2023, p. 117). Eugenikken, som Beiguelman relaterer denne udvikling til, var en racevidenskab, der blev opfundet i 1800-tallet af Darwins fætter, den britiske statistiker Francis Galton (Wegenstein, 2012). Eugenikken, der nu er tilbagevist som pseudovidenskab, var et forsøg på at påvise, at visse fysiologiske typer – typisk dem, som afveg fra en normativ hvid vestlig kropsnorm – havde større anlæg for at udføre kriminelle handlinger. På den måde forsøgte man at argumentere for, at den såkaldt hvide race var andre overlegen (Freeland, 2010, p. 144), og eugenikken havde derfor en central placering i nazismens ideologiske formation. Galton udviklede en bestemt teknik, kaldet *det kompositte portræt*, som gik ud på at overlejre fotografiske portrætter af eksempelvis kriminelle personer for på den måde at undersøge, om man ville kunne identificere en gennemsnitlig kriminel ansigtstype (Kemp, 2004, pp. 116-117).

Det vigtige for Beiguelman er, at denne teknik var en del af en bestemt tendens: billedstatistisk metodologi, som også den franske biometriker Alphonse Bertillon med sin idé om det såkaldt gennemsnitlige menneske var en del af (Beiguelman, 2023, p. 120). Beiguelman beskriver et forhold mellem det, hun kalder den *maskinelle eugenik* og den *maskinelle eugeniks blik* (Beiguelman, 2023, pp. 126-127). Hvor det første begreb handler om, at nutidens AI-teknologi genindfører eugeniske praksisser på et maskinelt, automatiseret niveau, er begrebet om den maskinelle eugeniks *blik* et forsøg på at beskrive konsekvenserne ved udbredelsen af maskinel eugenik for vores *måder* at se på. Her nævner Beiguelman bl.a. forskønnelsesfiktioner (beautificering) og konsolideringen af stereotype kønsroller, aldersdiskri-

mination og raciel diskrimination. AI-billedteknologi er, for Beiguelman, et hegemonisk visuelt apparat, der udbreder en særlig måde at *se* og *forstå* mennesket på som noget, der skal standardiseres, klassificeres og korrigeres (Beiguelman, 2023, pp. 130-131). Dette har, ifølge hende, vidtrækkende konsekvenser langt ud over visualitetens regime: det griber ind i, *hvem*, der kan få adgang til *hvad*.

Den standardiserede visualitet er kendetegnet ved en standardisering af kroppen. Denne kommer i høj grad til udtryk, når vi betragter Deep Nostalgias animation af ansigtet. Selv dem, der ikke kender det animerede ansigt, vil kunne se den standardisering, der foregår. Men ved at vælge netop dét ansigt, et så familiært ansigt, og ved at beskrive den personligt og kropsligt forankrede oplevelse af AI-teknologiens animation af det, kan vi fremhæve den hegemoniske standardisering og dens affektive efterspil. Det, vi ser, er ikke længere det oprindelige ansigt – eller den oprindelige *afbildning* af ansigtet – det er snarere et algoritmisk felt, der afspejler netop den standardisering af perspektiver, farver, synsvinkler og stil, som Beiguelman skriver om. Animationen fanger, *selvfølgelig*, ikke ansigtets unikke måder at bevæge sig på, for billedprogrammet har ikke adgang til det datasæt: datasættet, som kun tætte familiemedlemmer kender og har indlejret i deres mentale og kropslige erindring. Huden folder og udstrækkes derfor ikke sådan, som *hendes* hud ville have gjort. Den bevæger sig som en statistisk gennemsnitshud. Den kommercielle standardhuds gennemsnitlige bevægelse gennemsyrrer animationen. De unikke spatiotemporale detaljer, der normalt ville give anledning til en multisensorisk erfaring, er, i hvert fald delvist, fraværende i den AI-genererede animation.

*I samme øjeblik, jeg starter videoklippen, oplever jeg et kompleks af følelser på én gang. Skuffelsen over, at det ikke er hende. Vreden over de kommercielle generiske algoritmer, der hiver i hendes ansigtshud. Sorgen over, at hun er fraværende. At jeg aldrig skal opleve hendes nærvær igen.*

Der opstår en følelsesmæssig afkobling ved fraværet af den indeksikalske forbindelse, der ellers plejer at katapultere os ind i den haptiske visualitet, og den forfladigelse af den menneskelige kompleksitet, der følger med.

## Hudens dybde

Vi må skelne mellem huden som dybde versus huden som overflade. Helt overordnet set bliver hud to-dimensionel, når den bliver gjort til et billede. Den bliver til overflade og mister sin dybde. Kunsthistoriker Heidi Kellett beskriver i sin ph.d.-afhandling om hud-portrætter (“skin portraiture”), hvordan huden – som ellers i Vestlig kontekst ofte karakteriseres som en overflade (Cheng, 2013, p. 7) og som noget overfladisk – egentlig er et dybdefænomen. Et dybt kødeligt organ, der er intenst og komplekst forbundet med følelser, fornemmelser, sanselighed, sensualitet og seksualitet, for ikke at tale om identitet og racialitet. I det Globale Nord har man, som en slags kontrolmekanisme, forsøgt at tøjle den kompleksitet og sensualitet, igennem intellektualisering og rationalitet. Igennem at reducere den til ren (og nærmest usynlig) overflade (Kellett, 2017, p. 28). Huden er, som Kellett bemærker, et morfologisk organ. Det har evnen til at forandre sig over tid. Det fornyr hele tiden sig selv – huden har en transformationscyklus (på omtrent 52-77 dage), i løbet af hvilken den destruerer og genopbygger sig selv på ny. Det interessante, som Kellett peger på, er, at vi har tendens til ikke at opdage hudens bevægelse og tredimensionalitet, fordi vi ikke har bevidst adgang til nogen af delene. Vi er ikke bevidste om, hvad der finder sted i vores hud. Hvad man *kan* sige, er, at vi er ubevidst klar over hudens mikrobevægelser – særligt i ansigtet, ikke mindst på dem, vi elsker.

Kellett betegner huden som dybt forbundet med *berøring* eller *følesansen*. Hun nævner kulturhistoriker Constance Classen, som er specialist i sansernes historie og har beskrevet følesansen som den *dybeste* sans (Kellett, 2017, p. 53). Det er på én gang den sans, der er allersværest tilgængelig for os, fordi den er så nært forbundet til det sanselige og sensuelle, det underbevidste og endda ubevidste, og den sans, der, i kraft af hvor dybt i os den resonerer, har det største potentiale for at skabe etiske møder og relationer – både mennesker imellem og mellem mennesker og deres omgivelser. Dét potentiale er fortsat til stede i det, som Marks kalder den haptiske visualitet, også selvom der her ikke er tale om et direkte tilstedevær, men om et virtuelt medieret tilstedevær. Men hvad sker der, når der ikke blot er tale om et virtuelt medieret tilstedevær, men om et virtuelt *genereret* tilstedevær, som der jo er med Deep Nostalgias animation?

I udgangspunktet gør den digitale mediering automatisk hud til overflade. Som filosof Sybille Krämer skriver, er overflade og fladhed (*flatness*) også digitaliseringens modus: (Krämer, 2023, p. 11). Det giver sig selv, at gengivelser af hud i 2D frem for 3D *vil* være flade sammenlignet med den fysiske huds dybde. Men det betyder ikke nødvendigvis, at hudens dybde eller vores dybe, haptiske måde at erfare den på, forsvinder. Digitale medieringer kan netop sagtens rumme en haptisk visualitet, trods deres fladhed. Den haptiske visualitet opstår ifølge Marks, når oplevelsen af en visuel overflade involverer de andre sanser. Den haptiske visualitet forbliver dog fraværende i Deep Nostalgia-animationen. Animationen afslører en overfladisk måde at forstå og gengive ansigtshuden på. Illusionen af 3D-dybden, som normalt stadig er til stede i 2D-medieringen som billeder og video, brydes i animationen. Betragter man animationen grundigt, bevæger huden sig ikke efter fysikkens love. Kinderne står på én gang kunstigt stift og utroværdigt dirrende. Rynkerne har ikonisk, mere end indeksikalsk karakter. De skærer sig igennem kinderne som linjer, snarere end fordybninger. Og de bevæger sig ikke. Laura U. Marks skriver at “det er svært at nærstudere sin elskedes hud med et optisk blik.” (Marks, 2002, 3) Men det føles som om, det er det man bliver tvunget til her.

### Hudens temporalitet

I Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (Det lyse kammer) bruger han i sine refleksioner vedrørende fotografiets relation til affekt og eksistens en beskrivelse af Alexander Gardners fotografiske portræt af den amerikanske soldat Lewis Payne fra 1865, hvor Payne sidder på dødsgangen og venter på at blive hængt. Barthes pointerer, hvordan vi simultant i billedet læser: “Han er død, og han vil dø”. *Dette vil ske, og dette skete.* (Barthes, 2007, p. 95).

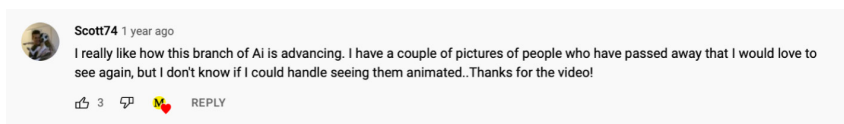
Bernard Stiegler har analyseret, hvordan filmens indeksikalitet adskiller sig fra fotografiets grundet den temporale dimension. I Frederico Fellinis film *Intervista* fra 1987 besøger instruktøren Anita Ekberg og ser sammen med hende den berømte scene i *La Dolce Vita*, hvor hun bader i Trevifontænen. Hun ser dermed sig selv, men også ikke-sig-selv, fordi hun er i rollen. Stiegler læser, hvordan dette ikke er Barthes' erfaring af, *han er død, og han vil dø*, men snarere Ekbergs eget *jeg*, der kommer til at dø, der

er *dødeligt*. Stiegler forklarer, hvordan filmen qua sin temporalitet giver potentiel mulighed for spøgelsesagtige fornemmelser. Som han beskriver det, kommer filmens øjeblikke til os som en række øjeblikke fra det virkelige liv. Skuespillerens fortid vil fremstå som en spøgelsesagtig nutid, fordi hun bevæger sig (Stiegler, 2009, p. 22).

Man kan sige, at film er anderledes forbundet med tiden, der går, fordi mediet selv er temporalt, og derfor virker levende billeder af os selv eller afdøde familiemedlemmer så stærkt. Fordi de har dette spøgelsesagtige nærvær. Det fysiske nærvær af virkeligt liv over tid gør indtryk på beskueren. Det er et temporalt spor af et levende væsen, der var til stede, der havde et liv som karakter og som skuespiller. En række øjeblikke, der var. Men dette fysiske nærvær eller tilstedevær virker også stærkt, netop når det kommer til ansigtet og dets hud. Hvorfor er ansigtets hud og dets evne til at udtrykke sig så stærkt forbundet med følelser? I sin bog fra 1924 om formalistisk filmteori, *Visible Man*, analyserer filminstruktør Béla Balázs det menneskelige ansigt som et medie. Denne analyse synes stadig relevant i en analyse af forholdet mellem følelser og temporalitet. Det menneskelige ansigt og dets følelsesudtryk lader sig ikke oversætte til sprog. Balázs beskriver, hvordan ansigtets følelsesudtryk er mere polyfont end sproget – et ansigt kan udtrykke forskellige følelser på samme tid eller snarere i en kontinuerlig modulation, og derfor oplever vi følelser over tid (Balázs, 2010, p. 34). Litteraturforsker Elisabeth Freeman (2019) beskriver, hvordan det er de tidsbaserede kunstarter og medier, der er i stand til at repræsentere den proces, hvor energier transporteres fra én krop til en anden. Her skal 'energi' forstås som affekt. Affekt og temporalitet har altså et særligt forhold til hinanden. Med levende billeder er vi i stand til at begribe den Andens følelser og indre bevægelse. Det levende billede evner bedre at formidle følelserne fra én krop til en anden, kunne man sige.

Det levende billede har altså en særskilt indeksikalsk status. Det er, i udgangspunktet, tæt og stærkt følelsesmæssigt sammenknyttet med det virkelige, som det repræsenterer. Der er et spøgelsesagtigt nærvær i det levende billedes temporalitet. Men hvordan er det "spøgelsesagtige" nærvær anderledes, når man oplever levende billeder genereret med kunstig intelligens? Når man oplever levende billeder, som i den forstand aldrig har været, men som alligevel vækker noget til live ved at mime en tempo-

ralitet, der ligner det levede livs? Vi fandt denne reaktion på udviklingen af Deep Nostalgia, hvor brugeren Scott reflekterer over, at han ikke ville kunne håndtere at se billeder af sine egne afdøde familiemedlemmer blive animeret.



#### ILL. 1

Screenshot. Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen.

Scott har fotografier liggende af de af hans nærmeste, som han har mistet, men han vægrer sig ved tanken om at animere dem og dermed give dem temporalitet. Levende billeder og følelser har en helt særlig forbindelse. Og det er måske netop dét stærkt emotionelle krydsfelt, der findes mellem ansigtshud, levende billeders temporalitet og eksistens, at der opstår en slags spøgelsesagtig fremmedgørelse. Det er, som om, at denne handling opløser den indeksikalske lim i billedet.

Hud, tid og eksistens er stærkt forbundne. Og måske fordi det er så ekstremt svært at genskabe ansigtshudens følelsesudtryk – og særligt de for den enkelte persons helt unikke følelsesudtryk – bliver animerede billeder af personer nemt uhyggelige at se på. Med billedet af den ene af forfatternes mormor sker i hvert fald nøjagtigt det, at der opstår et ubehag i oplevelsen af animationen af ansigtet. Ansigtet bliver mere en maske end et ansigt. Og som respons oplever barnebarnet en følelsesmæssig afkobling.

*I stedet for at se på det levende billede, lukker jeg øjnene og forsvinder ind i mig selv og et andet sanseregister. Ind i et minutiøst detaljeret virvar af fornemmelser, følelser, stemninger, lugte, erindringer, barndomsminder og lyde. Hendes stemme. Lyden af hendes knips. Det indforståede smil. Den dybe lykkefølelse i min barndoms mave af at være grebet, helt trygt, i min mormors nærvær. Duften af hende og hendes hus. Af ryttere, runde pind-is, skov. Cykelture til svanerne. Fornemmelsen af plasticbørnestolen foran hendes*

*fjernsyn. Lyden af alle vores grin. Hele hendes sygdomsforløb. Depressionerne. Hendes afvikling. Alt livet i hende. Dansen. Gymnastikken. Det hele på én gang. På ét kort øjeblik.*

Nærværet, der sættes i bevægelse med animationen, bliver på et splitsekund til fravær. Alt, der foregår i animationen, bliver irrelevant. En farce. Et komisk maskespil. Ren overflade. Hvis haptisk visualitet er en mulighed, en potentialitet, i levende billeder, har vi her argumenteret for, at potentialitet ikke indtræffer i Deep Nostalgia-animationen. For det første fordi den kunstigt genererede dybde ikke overbeviser os. Og for det andet fordi temporaliteten ikke virker overbevisende. Det, at det er en animation, altså et levende billede, gør nærmest det første værre, idet løftet om noget levende – løftet om nærvær – skuffes. Men det, at Deep Nostalgias deepfake-animation ikke virker autentisk eller overbevisende, betyder imidlertid ikke, at den ikke har en påvirkning og indvirkning.

### **Skuffelsen, tabet og hvad der er tilbage...**

Mediekunstner og -forsker Grayson Cooke skriver om ansigtshudens særlige relation til tid og dens status som arkiv i en kontekst af såkaldte cosmeceuticals – rynkecremer, botox og lignende, der behandler tiden som et problem; noget, der skal bekæmpes og udlignes teknologisk. Cosmeceuticals gør ansigtshuden til et arkiv over det levede liv, og dette problematiseres i én og samme vending: “[A]nsigtet konstitueres som en slags arkiv, som noget der registrerer – automatisk, mekanisk, ukontrollabelt – tid og erfaring i sig selv. Ansigtet registrerer tid blot ved at være tidsligt, det er en analogi til tid, en krop/en maskine/et ur, hvis sekunder og timer markeres af blink og rynkede panderynker.” (Cooke, 2009, p. 8). Der er i Cookes kritiske tilgang til tids-bekæmpende teknologier en præcis beskrivelse af, hvordan ansigtshud *er* tid, hvordan den er et ur, at det netop er bevægelsen, der er liv, og desto stærkere virker det, når man ser teknologisk animeret hud af en elsket afdød. Bevægelsen, der normalt ville være liv, ansigtshuden som ur, er i den animerede video nærmest demonstrativt ikke-liv. Samtidig med at ansigtshuden er et ur, er den et arkiv. Så samtidig med at vi gestikulerer, bevæger os, *lever* over tid, fungerer huden som en meget

langsom arkivering af disse bevægelser. Dermed er huden ur og arkiv på én gang – den er nu og da, men begge temporaliteter annulleres, når der er tale om kunstigt genereret hud – den er hverken nu eller da. I hvert fald ikke mormorens nu og da. Hvis den kunstigt genererede hud og dens animerede bevægelse har et nu og da, er det et “gennemsnits-nu-og-da”. En standardiseret nutid-fortid. Uret er ikke *mormorens* ur, *mit* eller *dit* ur. Det er majoritetens ur. Det kommercielle gennemsnitsur. Et nu og da for alle de bevægelseskemaer, der er en del af det arkiv, som AI-programmet er trænet på.

Cosmeceuticals (som f.eks. botox) lover, ifølge Cooke, at ansigtet kan blive restaureret (Cooke, 2009, p. 9). Han beskriver derfor botox som et paradigme, der indfanger en tendens til, at ansigtet som arkiv er under opløsning: Ved at fryse ansigtsmusklerne og reducere ansigtets evne til både at udtrykke sig og tage indtryk ind, bliver fortidens arkiv visket ud, samtidig med at fremtiden for arkivet også udtømmes, fordi der i fremtiden ikke vil være nogen optagelse mulig, og dermed vil ingen begivenhed nogensinde finde sted. (Cooke, 2009, p. 9).

Arkivets dybde, ansigtets indlejrede tidslighed, udvaskes, strækkes ud til en blank overflade. Det, vi mener, botox har tilfælles med det animerede, kunstige ansigt, er, at der også her hverken er tale om muligheden for indtryk eller udtryk. Hvis et ansigt er kunstigt, har det, som Cooke skriver, ikke indtryk eller udtryk. Der sker en kortslutning i den relation, der ellers er mellem to gestikulerende ansigter, mellem to typer ansigtshud, der bevæger sig og udveksler information.

Indenfor psykologisk spejlteori, beskrives følelser som noget, der opstår imellem to ansigter. Frem for at forstå følelser som noget, der opstår indeni, som man så herefter udtrykker gennem gestik, opstår følelser nærmere i *udvekslingen* mellem to menneskers ansigter. Psykoanalytiker Donald Winnicott er ophavsmand til denne spejlteori. Han beskrev i slutningen af 1960'erne, at barnet, når det kigger på moderen, ser sig selv, idet moderens udtryk, spejler hvad hun ser (Winnicott, 1967, p. 131). Når moderen spejler spædbarnets ansigtsudtryk, som afspejler dets følelser af for eksempel vrede eller glæde, oplever barnet derved sig selv. Hvis man for eksempel forestiller sig spædbarnet, der prøvende og øvende bevæger sit ansigt, vil det mærke sine følelser ved at se sin omsorgsperson mime disse

bevægelser. Det vil opleve og forstå sine egne følelser igennem moderens ansigt. Denne spejling går tabt, når det kommer til brugen af botox, men det samme kunne man sige om den type af standardiserede billeder, der med nutidens AI-teknologi breder sig i vores visuelle kultur. Det har betydning, at vi i stigende grad lever i og med en billedkultur med denne type visuelle tendenser. Den overfladiske, standardiserede, stereotypificerede visualitet *indvirker på* og *påvirker* os. I særdeleshed affektivt. Vi står tilbage med oplevelsen af *det samme*. Gennemsnittet. Standarden. En normativ overflade, som vi er kropsligt afkoblede fra, men som vi hele tiden møder og konfronteres med. Som vi hele tiden må tilpasse os i forhold til. Vi lever med denne standardiserede overflade, der vil inkludere og ekskludere. Denne bølge, der synliggør nogle og usynliggør andre. Der bringer nogle stemmer til overfladen og drukner resten. Midt i denne flod af billeder, står vi tilbage med en dybere, langt mere alvorlig nostalgi: længslen efter dybden, det komplekse liv, temporaliteten, *arkivet*, det etiske møde med faktiske levende mennesker, den kropsliggjorte, haptiske forbindelse.

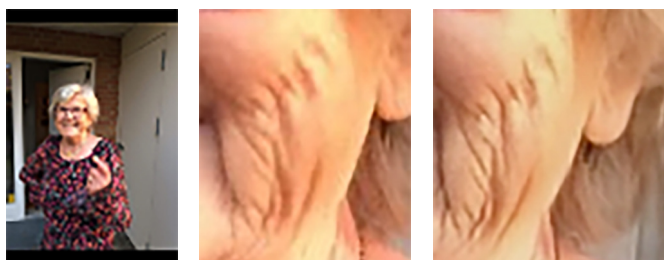
Mere end reduktionen til 2D-overflade/fladhed, inviterer Deleuze og Guattaris filosofi om ansigtet (eller ikke-ansigtet) til en multiplikation af dimensioner. En "mere-end-3D"-hed. Uendelige spatiotemporale forskydninger. De kalder denne umulige rumtidslighed for *lysstrålen* med et poetisk billede, som, når man først har set det for sit indre, har det med at blive siddende i hjernen:

Når jeg holder en kvinde i mine arme, kigger jeg ikke længere på hendes øjne, jeg svømmer igennem dem med både hoved, arme og ben, og jeg ser, at der bag øjenhulerne ligger en uudforsket verden, en verden fuld af fremtidige ting, og i denne verden er enhver logik fraværende. (...) Jeg har nedbrudt muren (...), mine øjne kan ikke længere bruges til noget, for de giver mig kun de velkendte billeder. Hele mit legeme må blive en konstant lysstråle og bevæge sig med en stadig større hastighed, uden at standse, uden at vende tilbage, uden svaghed. (...) Derfor lukker jeg mine ører, mine øjne, mine læber. (Deleuze og Guattari, 2005, p. 171).

At *svømme igennem øjnene* på dem, vi elsker. På de mennesker, vi møder. At *lukke øjnene* og dykke ind i de uudforskede dybder, hinsides den optiske visualitet. At møde den Anden *med hele sin krop*. Men ved at lukke ned for alle sanserne lokaliseret i og omkring ansigtet. Lysstrålen er måske *de un-*

*dertrykte sansers egentlige modus? Vores flugtvej ud af den AI-genererede visualitets kedsommelige ensartethed; den evige genkomst af det samme?*

*Da jeg åbner øjnene, får jeg igen øje på den maskelignende reduktion af min mormor foran mig. Datasættet, der aldrig har mødt hende. Der ikke kender hende. Ikke er blevet berørt af hende. Hvor er det synd, ærgerligt for det, tænker jeg, at det ikke forstår. At det aldrig kan rumme livet i n-D. Kærligheden i n-D.*



ILL. 2

Private billeder: Mormor og mormors kind (originalfoto og Deep Nostalgia video still).

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*Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen er lektor ved Aarhus Universitet og medlem af forskningscentret AIIM (Aesthetics of AI Images). Hendes forskning fokuserer på æstetik, multimodalitet og digital kultur, med særlig vægt på forholdet mellem kunst, teknologi og sansning. Hendes seneste publikationer inkluderer "Deepfake Face-swap Animations and Affect" i Human Perception and Digital Information Technologies: Animation, the Body and Affect (Bristol University Press) og "Disjunctive Pronouns: On Multimodal Analysis of Digital Poetry" i Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics.*

## Artificial Cheeks

The article delves into the intersection of artificial skin, visibility, and human perception through MyHeritage's Deep Nostalgia feature, which animates old family photographs. Using autoethnography as a method, the authors analyze the affective impact of animating the faces of deceased loved ones. Central to the analysis is the concept of "haptic visibility," as described by Laura U. Marks, where images are not only seen but also felt, engaging memory and touch. The authors compare Deep Nostalgia's animation of a facial image – one very familiar to one of the authors – with that author's embodied and personal experience of that face. The analysis considers two aspects of the skin: its depth and temporality – aspects that typically give rise to a personal and embodied haptic visibility in the encounter with facial images of loved ones. The authors argue that while the AI-generated animations of faces are visually engaging, they fail to capture sensory depth due to the standardization of the face and its movements. This results in what is termed a ruined haptic visibility.

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## NOTER

- 1 MyHeritage – Deep Nostalgia: <https://www.myheritage.dk/deep-nostalgia>.
- 2 De dele af vores tekst, der er markeret med kursiv, stammer fra den ene af forfatterens egne erfaringer med at benytte Deep Nostalgia. Inspireret af auto-etnografisk metode (Ellis et al., 2011) forsøger vi at lade beskrivelsen af en personlig erfaring være forudsætningen for kulturel analyse. Som Laura U. Marks skriver om at oversætte følelser og erfaringen af multisensoriske medier til skrift, handler det om at få de tørre ord til at bevare et spor af mødets “wetness”. Hun tror på sprogets evne til at kondensere en erfaring og få den til at geneksplodere i en anden form. “Opgaven er at få de tørre ord til at bevare et spor af mødets fugt.” (Marks, 2002, p. x).
- 3 Den største andel af deepfake-indhold (både billeder og video) har seksuel karakter (Ajder et al, 2019, p. 7). Den danske forening Digitalt Ansvar, der følger udviklingen af deepfake-indhold nøje, foretrækker termen MSM (Manipuleret Seksuelt Materiale) frem for termen deepfake. Dette skyldes, at begrebet deepfake er belastet af, at det stammer fra en Reddit bruger, der introducerede og populariserede seksuelt manipuleret materiale (Digitalt ansvar, 2024). Vi anvender stadig begrebet deepfake video i denne artikel, men vil gerne rette opmærksomheden mod denne problematik ved begrebets ophav.

# Critique through the Skin

## Wafaa Bilal's *and Counting...*

LOUIS-PHILIPPE SAVARD

*Skin, one of the crucial components of body art performances, is indispensable to Wafaa Bilal's durational performance and Counting... (2010). This article proposes to analyze the semiotics of the skin as a pivotal component of this truly unique artwork, in which the artist merges durational performance art with the act of tattooing. The essay clarifies how Bilal reveals unexpected avenues for thinking about racism and American imperialism, as well as the traumatic effects of global violence by resorting to vulnerability and pain as aesthetic devices. The skin of the artist acts as an interface between the public, the artist, and the deceased of the war in Iraq to produce a reflection on life and loss. Drawing on phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and performance studies, among other things, the analysis examines the potential for performance to generate forms of intersubjective exchange. Bridging the ever-expanding field of skin studies with performance studies and art history, this article theorizes how artistic interpretations of wars may deploy the personal as universal, connecting seemingly remote cultural contexts and relating the history of global violence to the Western public.*

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Not long after 8 pm on March 8, 2010, inside the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in downtown Manhattan, Wafaa Bilal (b. 1966) is sitting, his torso against the back of a chair. The characteristic buzz of the electric tattoo machines – its diffuse vibration will form a discreet soundscape for the entirety of the performance – directs the visitor's gaze to the tattoo artist, bent over the back of Bilal. The exhibition space is bathed in a bluish light, which blends with the room's fluorescents. In one corner, facing the artist, someone is solemnly reciting names into a microphone, imbuing the scene with the aura of a strange ceremony; this scene is that of Bilal's performance titled *and Counting...* (Ill. 1). This performance work was intended to ar-



ILL. 1

Wafaa Bilal, *and Counting...*, 2010, performance, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York.  
Source: <https://wafaabilal.com/and-counting/>. Courtesy of the artist.

ticulate and “[feel] the pain of both American and Iraqi families who have lost loved ones in the war” in Iraq. As the artist further insisted, the performance aimed to render visible what is usually described as “casualties,” whose deaths are often relegated to invisibility in the American context.<sup>1</sup> Devised as an endurance work, *and Counting...* spanned over 24 hours, during which a tattooist created a design composed of 100,000 tiny dots in transparent (blacklight) green ink and 5,000 in red ink on Bilal’s bare back. American deaths in the war were symbolized in red, while the blacklight ink evoked the Iraqi deaths.<sup>2</sup> These marks are placed over a minimalist, schematic map of Iraq displaying only the names of the country’s main cities, written in Arabic, the contour of his back defining the map’s limits. During the performance, the public was tasked with reciting all the names of the disappeared Iraqis and Americans at a microphone nearby.

This enumeration was doomed to failure, yet it effectively echoed the impossibility of the task undertaken by the artist to portray death and loss on such a scale. Even though the event ran almost through the entire 24 hours, Bilal could not make it to the end nor endure the completion of the 105,000 tattooed dots. The pain was overwhelming, and his back was so swollen and red that the process could not go on any further. Although only 25,000 dots, a fraction of the intended number, were tattooed, his back was already covered with them (Pellegrinelli, 2010). But this “failure” points to the irrepresentability of death and grief and the difficulty of truly accounting for the tremendous number of deaths. Bilal’s project, therefore, refers to the insufficiency of statistics and systematic representation of war to fully account for the lived experience of loss (Kapadia, 2019, pp. 93-94). His intervention proposes a sensuous mediation of harrowing events, which, in conjunction with the numbers and statistics, calls for a recognition of the universality of pain and the disruption of the apathy toward death often induced by the mass media. The different components of the performance sought to make audible, visible, and felt – often in metonymic ways – the actual existence of Iraqis whose lives were taken.<sup>3</sup> Through the tattooing of these indexical dots, Bilal aimed to render each one its own particular event.

As this article will demonstrate, the skin is a platform on which the performative action of *and Counting...* extends from the closely personal to the largely global. As a signifier of our shared humanness, skin is a deeply personal yet public attribute and functions as a metonym for the whole body. The biggest organ of the human body also *contains* it. Being the most fundamental sense organ, skin is that without which one cannot survive, nor can one survive if it is heavily damaged (LaFrance, 2018, p. 4). It is simultaneously envelope, surface, and vessel; interfacing the external world and the monadic self, it is also what is marked by stigmata: racist, social, and historical categorization, exclusion, violence, and afflictions. Understood as the outward manifestation of “internal” characteristics (such as “race”), skin color casts its bearer in a determined (and oft-unsurpassable) difference. Yet, what most strongly characterizes skin as a marker of difference is, paradoxically, that we all share it. Bilal’s work astutely points to this difference/semblance dichotomy and the recognition of an erro-

neous difference that founds forms of racism. For instance, in the context of the War in Iraq, the perception of the Iraqi as an inherently different being facilitates the acceptance of their death as a mere casualty. We are all equals for we all have a carnal envelope, but not all skins are valued equally.

In the public discourse of the United States (and in much of the so-called West), the skin of the Middle Easterner becomes the surface onto which stereotypical and hyperbolic fantasies about Arabs' sexual backwardness, violence, and religiousness coalesce to confirm what is already supposed. A set of random forms comes to perform a falsely coherent syntagm, which the person becomes a prisoner of. The attribute of being an Iraqi forges a marker as indelible as tattoo ink; Whereas nobody thinks of tattooing as a signifier of moral degeneracy, like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the skin's mere surface perversely comes to confirm already known prejudices rather than allowing the individuals to appear for what they are. The artwork does not elucidate the indifference of the American people and the apparent absence of regard from the Western public to their Iraqi counterparts. Quite the opposite, it troubles the possibility of a single adequate representation. *and Counting...* shows that what stands out as different is always, nonetheless, included. Like skin and tattoo, which are ambiguous signifiers at the crossroads between the universality of humanness and signifiers of difference, death and trauma are what shall be included in the accounts of the influence of the United States of America on other parts of the world, notably the Middle East, and in our case specifically, Iraq. Through the skin, the personal merge with the historical and political, and the public is invited to recognize that the lives of Americans are inextricably tied to the lives – and deaths – of Iraqis. While the performance fosters a possibility of recognizing this fact, it foregrounds the fundamental failure to recognize entailed in the repeated disavowal of humanness that undergirds racism.

### *And Counting...* The Psychoanalytics of Racism

The work originates in the death of Bilal's brother, Haji, who was killed by an American missile at a checkpoint in their hometown of Kufa in 2004. However untimely, the tragic event made him one of the many hundred thousand Iraqi deaths caused by the "war on terror", launched by the United

States in 2003, in the aftermath of the attacks on the country on September 11, 2001. Evoking a cathartic response to a traumatic personal experience, the performance confirms the artist's own path through the tangled global routes of displaced people and armed conflicts. Born in Iraq in 1966, Wafaa Bilal was forced to flee shortly after the first Gulf War (1990-91) because of his art and activism against Saddam Hussein's regime (van Sertima, 2011, p. 4). He fled to Kuwait and immigrated to the United States a few years later, where he undertook artistic studies.<sup>4</sup> His personal story also echoes a history of imperialist, military interventions that marked the recent history of Iraq. First through the British occupation (1980-88) and through the United States interventions in the Middle East and Asia that throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (also referred to as the Forever War) (Kapadia, 2019, pp. 76-77). In *Domestic Tension* (2007), created "to address this chasm between the comfort and conflict zones" (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 11), the artist established residence for a month inside a room of the FlatFile Gallery in Chicago, where he lived – quite literally – under the gun for a month. With the help of collaborators, he created a motorized paintball gun mounted on a rotating axis whose range could cover most of the space. Programmed to allow it to be controlled remotely through an online platform, a gamified user interface allowed online visitors to shoot at the artist in real time. As the experiment unfolded, a thick layer of gooey yellow paint built up to cover every inch of the room, Bilal's body and clothes, spreading like a second skin.

Throughout the month, the participants were also invited to exchange comments in a chatroom accessed through the online platform. Excerpts of these conversations, reproduced in Bilal's memoirs, show how cruel and unapologetic people can be when hidden behind their screens and keyboards. Some of the worst comments made by players or spectators logged in the chat seemed determined by an orientalist racism: "Anyone stupid enough to set this whole thing up deserves to be shot" (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 81), "72 virgins await him" (p. 82), "Baba ghanoush" (p. 79) and repeated calls to death. Those comments demonstrate that orientalist viewpoints and Western supremacy do not necessarily come from the accumulation of knowledge about the other, as Edward W. Said suggests in *Orientalism*, (Said, 1979, pp. 31-51) but rather from a vulgar articulation of

stereotyped ideas about the person they are aimed at. It also demonstrates the inherent anti-Arab sentiments of the post-2001 era. In the United States and beyond, 2001 represents a tipping point where perceptions of Middle Eastern people drastically shifted. The years following saw the figure of the dangerous terrorist take the leading role in racist fantasies about the Arab man, replacing that of an overtly hypersexual yet naïve figure with one of extreme violence and control (especially toward women – as manifested by Western media’s obsession with themes such as female sexuality, the veil, etc.) (McGowan, 2022, pp. 65-69). This evolution of perceptions morally justified as well as underlay the illegal military intervention (Hussain and Ahmad, 2020, p. 72), and motivated the desire for action despite tangible evidence.

Film scholar and philosopher Todd McGowan describes the unconscious roots of racism not as a problem of knowing (an epistemological problem), but as a problem of enjoyment (McGowan, 2022, pp. 7-9). Fueling the racist’s behavior, the racist structure emerges from the erroneous reasoning that a certain object of desire is rendered inaccessible because the racial other is standing in the way. Impeding on one’s enjoyment, the violence that is required to get rid of the inconvenient racialized subject acts as the process from which enjoyment is derived, while only reinforcing the appeal to racism (McGowan, 2022, pp. 27-28). The self-fulfilling nature of the system instills the mainstream discourse on the Forever War with the conception that the Arab could be conceived as the one who prevents American citizens from enjoying some form of past freedom that would have been withdrawn from them. Bilal’s artwork thus emerges from a visual regime where skin color not only often defines one’s social and economic status, but more pervasively, through racialization, determines one’s right to live or die, based on the preservation of others’ enjoyment. In this schema, external threats are substituted for internal issues, and the security imperative invoked by proponents of military interventionism abroad masks problems inherent in and internal to the United States.

Already in 1952, in an early theorization of the psychoanalytic implications of racism, Frantz Fanon described skin as the visual enabler of racism, or, as he put it, the “epidermalization of inferiority” (Fanon, 1952, p. 8). His seminal *Black Skin White Masks* explores how racialized individuals

are subjected to violence and racism because of the very color of their skin. Fanon discusses the near impossibility for the visually racialized individual to become the white's equal as a "corporeal curse" (Fanon, 1952, pp. 89-90). Immediately following the September attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian immigrant to the U.S., was murdered by someone who mistakenly mistook him for a Muslim man.<sup>5</sup> The 2005 case of Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian worker in London who was killed by the London police after agents mistakenly identified him as an Arab terrorist, is also exemplary of this curse.<sup>6</sup> These examples highlight how the ascription of an "identity" onto brown-skinned persons operates in dangerous ways in the wake of the 21st century, making them become the object of a heightened scrutiny over the last 25 years. Accounts of the issue of race prior to the new millennium made clear that the issue of "race" has evolved to include Middle Eastern people or Americans of Middle Eastern descent in the United States. If it was previously more of a political question, largely dependent on the Israel-Palestine question (Hatab Samhan, 1987, pp. 11-12), perceptions of Arab people have evolved to resemble more classical conceptions of "race". Skin has therefore become, literally, inescapable for those perceived as Arabs.

For centuries, skin was thought to hold no secret about its bearer's internal conditions: a marker of health, immorality, backwardness, or degeneracy, skin afflictions were used by artists to connote negative moral or social attributes (Reinarz, 2013, pp. 8-9). It was a screen that "broadcasted messages about the person wearing it" (Reinarz, 2013, p. 8). In this sense, if skin was assumed to be (and still is, to a great extent,) the external manifestation of a subject's inferiority, and problematically, the equivalent to their interiority (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 4), it confirms that race works as a self-confirmation process. As the historian Barbara J. Fields and sociologist Karen Fields demonstrated with their notion of "racecraft", the existence of race is based on a tautological reasoning in which the markers that are supposed to prove the existence of different races emerge from the idea that races exist in the first place; the process of racecraft therefore consists in confirming the existence of race using parameters that were themselves created by race (Fields and Fields, 2012), and involve a near-magical procedure (racecraft as a form of witchcraft), by which cultural and social

features both appear to be clarified by race and are deployed to produce and naturalize race.<sup>7</sup> Recourse to race thus serves to naturalize historically, socially and economically determined inequalities and inherently carries the idea of a biological hierarchy among human individuals.

Such confusion between the outside and the inside generates the schema of inescapability described by Frantz Fanon, where one's physical appearance restricts one's general claim to universality. Worse, to only oppose rational arguments to those racist attitudes remains useless, as they are founded in inconsistencies and contradictions, and the failure to recognize the other as an equal contributes to another form of aesthetic enjoyment. In some of his performances, such as *Domestic Tension*, Bilal surrenders himself to the racist impulses of an anonymous yet active audience. In *and Counting...*, Bilal's interpellation/identification as an Iraqi person, which once seemed absolute and inescapable, now seems almost uncanny, as it unarms the violence of the anonymous crowd and substitutes it with the intimacy of a common gesture. Focusing on the body of the artist without his voice or gesture, the space created by the performance allows not only for the recognition of the Iraqi as equal to all others, but conversely for the American as an equal to the Iraqi.

### Thinking through the Skin<sup>8</sup>

Skin is a border of surprisingly malleable nature; at once porous and permeable, it adapts, morphs, is marked by different contexts and marks in return. Skin is the most visible and expressive organ of the body, and this is why performance has seen it be used to represent the actualization of individual subjectivity (Roques and Vigarello, 2013, pp. 85-87). Sylvie Roques and Georges Vigarello demonstrate that hurting skin is an effective strategy to illustrate human suffering in general (Roques and Vigarello, 2013, pp. 93-94). Skin marks. It registers the shape of teeth when bitten; skin wrinkles, it bumps, folds when torn or bunched; it blushes and changes texture when harmed. Blood creates a color and texture contrast with skin, whose surface then becomes something like a canvas. Simultaneously, it acts both as a visual signifier of difference and as an interface enabling the transformative, intersubjective experience central to the discipline

of performance art. Skin is capable of “double sensation”: it touches and reciprocates touch – it is simultaneously the subject and object of touch (Lafrance, 2018). Skin creates the materiality of the signifier as much as the signifier defines its materiality (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 15). Despite not being fully containable, skin has a concrete materiality, and its corporeal existence, as skin scholar Marc Lafrance underscores, “is omnipresent and inescapable: there is no getting beyond it. On the other hand, however, the skin is always already in flux. It is a fluid boundary and a leaky interface” (Lafrance, 2018, p. 6). Unless hidden, skin is always available to sight. It interrupts gaze, and meaning is projected and diffracted on its surface. But it is only this: a mere surface that evades assumptions about the depth it conceals. In itself, precisely – as Fanon demonstrated – skin has no depth.<sup>9</sup> Just as film scholar Laura U. Marks has argued for the filmic medium’s hapticity, skin operates as a screen upon which images and symbolism merge through sensorial cognition, where they summon conscious and unconscious sensorial associations (Marks, 2002, p. 222). The sight/site of the skin in the performance entails a subconscious recognition of the spectator’s own derma; this phenomenon emphasizes the role of skin in the differentiation between self and other (Cavanagh, Failler and Hurst (eds.), 2012, pp. 3-4), but also as the connection between the self and this other.

Compared to the strategy used for *Domestic Tension*, which aimed at extending beyond the borders of the art world into the world (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 318), the event at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts occurs on a quasi-epidermal scale. The movements the artist executes are minimal, and the performance operates through an intimate (if still public) mode, reminiscent of the logic of familial gatherings or of certain mourning practices. Conducting the event, the artist is present but surrenders to the tattooist and the audience, adopting a posture of radical vulnerability. By being tattooed by another artist, Bilal submits to the artistic action of the other, seemingly surrendering the very creative gesture involved in realizing part of the artwork. At times, he asks that the lights be turned off in order to be able to see the blacklight ink. Nonetheless, his nominal role in the unfolding action has the effect of distributing his agency amongst the room, as if the audience had a tangible responsibility. This device radicalizes a vulnerable stance reminiscent of performers dating back to the seventies.

Cultural theorist Ronak K. Kapadia draws on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to highlight this element of the performance, claiming that "closer inspection reveals that [Bilal's] work resonates [...] with the radical passivity that Halberstam sees in female masochistic performances" in the sense that Bilal knowingly "participate[s] in the 'willing giving over of the self to the other, to power.'" (Kapadia, 2019, p. 89). Artists such as Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and the duo Abramović-Ulay all enacted self-masochistic actions that emphasized the importance of the body in a fragile equilibrium between human subjectivity and its relationality to others (O'Dell, 1998, pp. 26-27). Chris Burden in *Shoot*, 1971, was shot in the arm by a collaborator to evoke the consequences of wars and gun violence in the United States; between the early 1970s and the 1980s, Gina Pane made a series of feminist performances in which she subjected herself to pain, using the cutting of her skin with a razorblade as a recurring motif (*Lait chaud* (1972), *Azione sentimentale* (1973), *Le corps pressenti* (1975), etc.); *In Talking about Similarity* (1976); Mariana Abramović and Ulay staged a dialogue in which, after the latter had sown his lips shut with a needle and thread, Abramović had to answer the public's questions in his place. All three cases deploy pain as a social tool and a vehicle for critique. Moreover, it asserts the other as the necessary counterpart for subjectivity formation to occur and to safeguard the quality of gesture as an artwork.

Performance scholar Kathy O'Dell's book *Contract with the Skin* discusses such canonical performances and suggests that a contract-like bond is formed between the artist and audience members through the display of transgressive acts of self-harm (O'Dell, 1998, p. 2). For O'Dell, the metaphor of the contract refers to the prevalence of legal practices in modern life and works to clarify the unspoken understanding that occurs between audience and performers. This form of figurative contract is what brings the public, artists, and collaborators to accept otherwise unacceptable actions and to remain in their assigned roles (O'Dell, 1998, pp. 2-4). Contemporary societies, for instance, pathologize the decision to self-harm because this type of transgression of bodily integrity is deemed to threaten life itself and to compromise the skin's quality as a sacred boundary (Le Breton, 2006, p. 478). But as sociologist David Le Breton emphasizes, attacks against the skin are never targeted at life, but rather

always constitute attacks against some symbolic meaning attached to this skin (Le Breton, 2006, p. 476). This is why the laceration, the opening of the derma, and the spilling of blood are deemed adequate vehicles of meaning in artistic contexts (Le Breton, 2013, pp. 106-108). They operate precisely as sacrificial acts: they allow the subject to operate on themselves a transformation of the sacrificed substance, a radical revolution of the self (Le Breton, 2006, p. 478). Paradoxically, the public's presence secures the effective separation between a true self-destructive act and the destructive act as allegory (Cascarino, 2018, p.156). Still, it does so precisely through its non-intervention; denoting in passing that the perverse hapticity of such performative actions always prevails, O'Dell remarks that "no matter how much fantasy such theatrics employed, the audience's attention could never wander far from the reality of the artists' self-tortured bodies" (O'Dell, 1998, p. 5). This is because acts of self-mutilation are inherently social: they captivate the viewer's attention to produce a vital bond, and to suture the viewer to the action precisely through the very transgression of social norms (Cascarino, 2018, p. 154). In all these cases, the public must have observed a simple set of implicit rules: only witness and be an accomplice to the performance. This constraint against intervention, with the painful and seemingly endless process of harming one's body, is what ultimately opens a space to think this violence both on the fictional level and the concrete reality of war violence in *and Counting*... As the tacit agreement between the performer and the audience appears oddly close to reality, it replicates the apparent lack of concern toward human suffering induced by media such as television.

Bilal's piece endeavors to engender this disruption of the habituation to images of war and, perhaps, prompt action. Appearing as the performance unfolds, the map on the artist's back etches the interlocking histories of Americans and Iraqis like an ephemeral archive. Each dot puncturing the performer's derma is reflected by the litany of names recited at the microphone, punctuating the event with a solemn rhythm. Through the act of tattooing, the spectator is drawn closer to Bilal's experience. The surface of the skin becomes the rough terrain of the war zone; the needle pressed into the carnal landscape parallels the warfare drones or the planes piercing the faraway ground with explosives, mutilating and interrupting

the rhythm of nature and cities, and merely evokes the remoteness of those who control them. As the artist himself stated, his performance sought to engage members of the public in a political dialogue in which they would otherwise have been unable or unwilling to enter (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 316). This forced intimacy ruptures what Judith Butler describes as the “exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted”. The philosopher stresses that those are “fields that are implicitly invoked when [...] we mourn for some lives but respond with coldness to the loss of others” (Butler, 2009, p. 36). Butler suggests that any fundamental sense of humanity is already mediated between lives worthy of being grieved and lives that do not appear to exist in the first place (Butler, 2009, p. 50). Bilal’s memorial illustrates this otherwise abstract “shared humanity”. In his memoirs, the artist recounts an interview he saw in 2007 of a “young female American soldier whose job was to drop bombs remotely on Iraqi targets, directing them from a computer console in Colorado”; answering a question, the woman said she had given no second thoughts and was trusting her superiors (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 10). Distance prevents people from feeling accountable for their actions.<sup>10</sup> Politicians and the mass media in the United States both foster an understanding of American identity based upon the impermeability of the border. The control over foreign sovereign territories and the killing of those who live there are just logical extensions of this imperative.<sup>11</sup>

While the extensive and painful tattooing process is, in the artwork, meant to create a memorialization of war that (re-)activates a traumatic kernel despite the geographical, social, and, *primarily*, symbolic distance, *and Counting...* “challenge[s] the ‘disembodying’ accounts of subjectivity” produced by modes of world-making that focused on language at the expense of the lived, bodily experience (Marc Lafrance, 2012, p. 18).<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, highlighting the racist attitude involved in responding with indifference to the death of thousands of Middle Eastern people, it emphasizes that American subjectivity-formation post-2001 is co-constitutive of the country’s military involvement in Iraq. Bilal’s skin foreshortens the disruption caused by the war in Iraq. It not only “seek[s] to think about [skin]” – about the slipperiness of visual identification – but “to think *with or through*” it (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 1).

### ***Dermographia: Inscribing Meaning in the Skin***

At once a catalyzer of stigmata and a tool for emancipation, tattooing has a complex history which reflects the duality of *and Counting...* and participates in the critique the performance enacts. Within the realm of performance art, if marking the skin as such is not a recent phenomenon, as we have seen, the use of tattoos probably attests to the increase of this practice in society at large. In recent years, several contemporary artists have reclaimed tattooing as a practice for themselves and included it as part of myriad different artistic practices, to the extent that tattooing in contemporary art is hardly homogeneous at all. Let's note the provocative tattoo performances by Ron Athey as a precedent to Bilal's performance, or, perhaps more harmoniously, the practice of Mary Coble, who used inkless tattooing in durational performances. The conceptual *Blood Script* (2008) was the synthesis of three previous performances where the artist asked the audience to inscribe derogatory terms that had been directed at them onto her body using markers. In this final piece, the artist had these terms tattooed on her body using no ink in a refined typography. The process problematized the tension between harmful language and queer identity formation, and constituted an anti-performance where those words, rather than doing things, were believed to be undoing the harm caused by those insults and to be expelling their destructive spirit. Those latter artworks dealt with tattoos as a means to discuss marginality and recognition in the context of the fight for LGBTQ rights, and therefore closely followed the methods and reflections behind feminist performance artworks from the early 1960s to the late 70s. Bilal's artwork, although taking some of the same methods, directs its gaze at the racial and geopolitical issues emblematic of the early millennium in a novel way.

In this perspective, his approach might seem closer to that of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, who used tattoos in conjunction with performative strategies at different moments in his career.<sup>13</sup> For one of his performances, entitled *Tim* (2006), Delvoye tattooed a back piece on model Tim Steiner, and subsequently paid him to pose for long days in museums as a "living canvas" (King, 2019, pp. 6-22). With disarming literalness, Delvoye offers an illustration of a "cultural worker" involved in the articulation of the logics of modernism in a global capitalist setting (Dimitrakaki, 2011,

pp. 191-192). His polemical strategy supplements the modernist artistic gesture with a neoliberal twist: Steiner's body-canvas is *rented* by museums around the world. One can be doubtful about the extent of the actual critique the work enacts. Rather, *Tim* exemplifies how, as a commodity, art can easily circulate through borders. To further exemplify *Tim's* non-critical approach, the pictorial style chosen for the back piece corresponds to major tenets of tattoo-making: clear and defined lines, symmetry, contrasting colors, etc. For Bilal, it is almost the opposite. More akin to a skin disease than a map, the final design subverts most tattoo conventions (see Ill. 2); obscure and opaque, its meaning is not self-evident and is rather ambiguous. The "canvas" is, then, not the back of the artist but the *context itself*, and the "image" depicted is not the map but the *cartographic imaginary* of a globalized geo(bio)politics. The artwork proposes an aesthetic of the encounter staging the encounter as a central component of global capitalism as we know it today, to record this as a historical moment and produce ways to reflect upon this moment.<sup>14</sup> Most crucially perhaps, it uniquely places the United States as a total, if novel, imperial power at the center of those unequal relations and records the still-evolving place that this country occupies within the global equilibrium. The American involvement in the Middle East, generally, and in Iraq, specifically, long predated the invasion of the latter in 2003 and the 2001 attacks. For example, the Reagan administration provided support to Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the context of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, p. 2610). Following 1945, the United States gradually replaced the old, waning influence of imperial forces of Europe, weakened by the war.

But let us come back to the subject of tattooing. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the development of pseudo-scientific theories trying to associate the act of tattooing with criminality or overall degeneracy was on the rise (Etz, 2023, p. 6), largely contributing to the broader flourishing of racist scholarship. Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso's

ILL. 2 (OPPOSITE)

Wafaa Bilal, *and Counting...*, 2010, performance, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



*Crime, Its Causes and Remedies* was one of the infamous examples that mediated popular understandings of tattooing in Europe. According to him, “the custom of tattooing” had to be considered alongside a plethora of manners and physical characteristics pointing to “atavism.” Lombroso goes as far as to claim that “many of the characteristics presented by savage races are very often found among born criminals” (Lombroso, 1911, pp. 365-366). Ideas such as his contributed to linking the act of tattooing with crime and crime with race,<sup>15</sup> constituted in a greater conception of a human hierarchy. A few years earlier, Austrian architect Adolf Loos, in *Ornament and Crime* (1908), characterized the ornamental traditions of South African and Persian cultures as backward, and claimed that Europeans have evolved past ornamentation (Loos, 2002, p. 24). According to him, following the same logic, tattooing as body adornment is a thing of the past and is only a marker of degeneracy (Loos, 2002, p. 19-20). If this interpretation now reads erroneous and absurd, it still carried a long way into the twentieth century, and made the history of tattooing one of othering, a corollary of the colonial impetus of anthropological classification. However, the practice of tattooing was already well anchored in both Europe and the United States at that point. The encounter with Polynesian people in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which likely gave the practice its name by deriving the word from Polynesian *tatu* (to mark) or *tatau* (to strike), ought not be understood as the discovery of the practice at large, which dates back several centuries, even millennia (Caplan, 2000, xv). If the Pacific encounter is not the origin of the European practice of tattooing – it was believed that the expansion of European colonizing countries into the Pacific and their encounter with the Polynesians was a catalyst for a renewed perspective on tattooing during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Caplan, 2000, xv) – it nevertheless reinforced the already existing liminal status of the practice by ascribing it to the developing conception of the racial (ethnic) other (Caplan, 2000, xiv-xv). Throughout history, tattoo was from time to time present and/or absent from consciousness. Gaps in historical records, like that of the period between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, should not be read as a defect in the archive, as historian Jane Caplan has noted, but “its character of always being in transit from or to the multiple horizons of a self-centred world, of circulating most actively on the margins where it is

least visible” (Caplan, 2000, p. xv). This mythology echoes what anthropologist Alfred Gell theorized as the inherent ambiguity of tattoos; the tattoo sits simultaneously on the skin and in the skin, evoking circulation between the interior and the exterior (Caplan, 2000, pp. xiii-xiv), and is reminiscent of what Fanon identified as the confusion of form with essence, or as an individual’s interiority and physical appearance. In his “conversation” with Hegel, Fanon shows that although the skin (and, in our case, the combination of skin and tattoo) is the surface through which an individual is recognized as such, it is a mistake to understand this external surface as revealing inner truths about the person wearing it.

In 1936, anthropologist Winifred Smeaton described, in a conference paper, the richness and complexity of tattoo culture in Iraq (Smeaton 1937, pp. 53-61). In Iraq, the custom of tattooing tiny dots is present in rural areas to this day, where to *daqq* (to strike) or *dagg* (to knock) (in Arabic) serve therapeutic purposes. This type of tattooing, in contrast to the more ornamental forms that are meant to mark special moments of one’s life, is seen as magical and is believed to have healing capabilities (Etz, 2023, pp. 88-89). But connotations around the practice are also uneven in Iraq. In an interview, Bilal recounted that shortly before, while he was in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, he and his brother were close to being denied emigration to the United States because of the tattoo the latter sported on his arm (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 325). “The reason [...] was that the American delegation had apparently learned that tattoos are socially prohibited in Iraq” (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 326). His brother decided to burn the tattoo with the help of a cousin. In America, the practice of tattooing has been associated with sailors as well as the military since the Second World War (Govenar, 2000, pp. 212-214). If tattoos were present in the American collective imaginary from the 1930s onwards, it is only after 1970 that the practice really started to gain traction, following periods of prohibition that effectively banned it in places like New York City (Lodder, 2022, pp. 223-228). Over the last decades, tattoos have become a ubiquitous component of visual culture in the West, and their reputation have evolved from a marginal practice to a mainstream one (Barron, 2017, pp. vii-ix). Yet, despite their omnipresence, they can still be seen as a stigma. In Bilal’s account, not only was the discrimination against tattooed migrants by the Americans presumptive, but

it also rehearsed old prejudices that no longer had currency in the United States. Inadvertently, it aligned with the pseudo-scientific tradition that associated tattooing with crime and implicitly engaged a colonial aesthetic of identification, in which the Americans represented the Other through structures of fetishistic recognition (if probably largely unconscious).<sup>16</sup> In the story, Americans found in the practice of tattooing the meaning they already expected to find, in line with what the world, as seen through the lens of the Empire, should have been.

If Bilal's performance resonates with that of Ron Athey and Mary Coble, it is because they are less coded within a register of the aesthetically pleasurable than within one of the negative, of the haunting, of the trace. These tattoos symbolically observe traumas and attend to the un-representability of death and loss. Predicated upon this failure, the un-representable nature of their object heightens the power of these scars, a form of abysmal absence. As an extension of (self-)portraiture, performance – and more precisely body art – radicalized the critical legacy initiated by the avant-gardes of the mid-twentieth century. Amelia Jones stresses in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* that modern art history and criticism were largely constituted through the failure to properly grasp the subject. Aesthetic categories are, in other words, founded upon errors. For Jones, the body's power in art precisely exists to compel a re-evaluation of our interpretative categories (Jones, 1998, pp. 8-9). The emergence of body art catalyzed a modality of criticism that allowed to identify that modernist art discourses had afforded some individuals with creative transcendence while others were confined to their immanence (Jones, 1998, pp. 45-52). Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jones emphasizes that subjectivity always entails a fundamental (traumatic) split (Jones, 1998, pp. 182-183, p. 197). Therefore, in Bilal's work, though it may seem that tattooing dots representing Iraqi lives in invisible ink itself replicates the failure to conceive of Iraqi lives equally as lives and re-enacting their violent abstraction, it must be noted that the idea of an invisible life is also an abstraction. Further, the tattoo allows for the recognition of the split within Iraqi identity, and in parallel, the lack in the American one.

## Conclusion

The derma bears the traces of past events as much as it indicates the future. Tattooing without ink still produces a trace. At the moment of execution, “tattooing without ink produces a crisp bloody line, and the marks fade with time to leave subtle scarring” (Dominic Johnson, quoted in Atia, 2019, p. 1081). The life no one heard about still produced its trace. The real failure occurs when a lost life has not allowed for change to take place. Bilal’s back becomes a palimpsest for this history: through the strange relationship between the invisible and the visible, the subcutaneous and the apparent. The affliction-like trace over the artist’s back recalls a history that resists representation yet refuses to disappear. Bilal’s performance is a cartography of the myriad meanings of skin in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a sign that individuals are repositories of political history. *and Counting...* connects the social and cultural context of Iraq and the apparent remoteness of Western spectators. Through this interface, the personal experience of the Iraqi whose relative has been murdered is revealed as intrinsically connected to the American public and posits the United States as a neo-imperial power, which inadvertently opens lines of exchanges through the destruction and desolation it creates. The “failed” attempt to depict the ravages of the war, the uncanny final tattoo, the small-scale exchange initiated in this New York gallery on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, all articulate a complex, impossible yet necessary call for a more comprehensive, multilayered understanding and questioning of an ever-renewing world order that more often than not relegates a basic sense of humanity to the unknowing tomorrows of wars.

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## NOTES

- 1 Wafaa Bilal, "and Counting...," Works, <http://wafaabilal.com/and-counting/>.
- 2 The actual number is estimated to be much higher than this conservative estimation. Some sources place the number of Iraqi deaths that are directly imputable to the war since 2003 to around 300,000: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, "Iraqi Civilians," Costs of War, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/iraqi>. Other sources, considering deaths that are attributable to indirect consequences of the war, suggest that the number could even be 500,000 or higher (Nodell, 2013).
- 3 During an interview, the artist said that he meant to create "a physical platform that allow[ed] people to engage with [his] performance and acknowledge the dead" (see Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 329).
- 4 Wafaa Bilal, "Frequently Asked Questions: What Is Domestic Tension About?" Wafaa Bilal: Domestic Tension, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070620111358/http://www.wafaabilal.com/faq.html> (accessed November 5, 2023).
- 5 BBC, "US 9/11 revenge killer convicted," October 1, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3154170.stm>.
- 6 Amelia Jones brings this example to contextualize her book *Seeing Differently* (2012), in which she argues that we are not beyond the questions and problems raised by identity/recognition (or rather, sometimes, misrecognition) (Jones, 2012, pp. xx-xxi).
- 7 Race (the idea that there would be different human races), as a scientific concept, has been largely proven false. Yet, its currency to describe and understand ethnic and cultural differences is still prevalent in the American context. (On that specifically see Fields and Fields, 2012, pp. 118-121).
- 8 This phrase is the proposition made by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey in the opening of their collection of texts on skin. On the first page, they mention that they endeavour "to think about [...], but also with or through the skin" (emphasis in the original text) (see Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 1).
- 9 I am responding here to Lafrance's summary of Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks*, emphasizing that race has no depth. While this is true, I

wish to point out that while skin has incredible phenomenological and symbolic potential, it nonetheless has no depth as such (Lafrance, 2018, p. 8).

- 10 As Bilal reflected, commenting on the relationship between Domestic Tension and the reality of US warfare in the Middle East (Kapadia, 2019, p. 84).
- 11 This is particularly clear in the address to the nation on March 19th, 2003, when the President announces the start of the invasion of Iraq (Butler, 2009, p. 43, p. 47, p. 51).
- 12 Marc Lafrance is drawing from Sarah Ahmed and Jackey Stacey's *Thinking Through the Skin*.
- 13 Notably, and controversially, on live pigs. (Calchi-Novati, 2011, p. 41).
- 14 Bilal has said that the main intention behind his work is to create spaces of encounter, but that his primary audience is the people living in comfortable situations outside of war zones (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 329).
- 15 Etz mentions other examples such as Alexandre Lacassagne and Adolf Loos (Etz, 2023, p. 6).
- 16 In her book *Seeing Differently*, Amelia Jones discusses Heidegger's concept of representation, in which the subject understands the world as if it were rendered in a picture. To supplement her discussion of colonialism and aesthetics, she draws from Lacan to posit that the all-knowing subject of colonization always recognizes the other through unsurpassable fantasy structures (Jones, 2012, pp. 82-84).



# Ordet blev kød

## Stigmata, hysteri og hudskrift

LIS NORUP

*Artiklen handler om religiøse stigmatikere og hospitalsindlagte hysterikere i Frankrig de sidste tre årtier af det 19. århundrede. Fælles var de om at have en hud, hvorpå ord og mærker trådte frem. Artiklen undersøger, hvordan ordet blev kød, og mennesker til redskaber i kampen mellem tro og videnskab. Men også, hvordan stigmata og hudskrift for stigmatikere og hysterikere blev en livs- og anerkendelsesform.*

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I slutningen af det 19. århundredes Frankrig blev en række hysterikere og religiøse stigmatikere indlagt på hospitalet, fordi mystiske tegn begyndte at træde frem på deres hud. På hospitalet La Sâlpêtrière i Paris forstod lægerne hudskriften som et af mange symptomer i hysteriens neuropatologiske sygdomsbillede, mens biskopper, præster og læger samt lægfolk i tusindtal bevidnede, at Gud udøvede skriftlige mirakler – som i hærværende sammenhæng – på en analfabetisk kvinde fra Nordfrankrig.

At ordet blev kød, lader sig ikke afvise som et kuriosum. For tydnin-gen af skriften på hysterikernes og stigmatikernes hud overskred bundet-heden til konkrete kroppe i hospitalets sygesale eller privathjem og blev en del af tidens kamp mellem fysik og metafysik, neurologi og teologi, materialisme og mirakler. Udgrundningen af dermatografiens oprindelse og validitet indskrev sig i en politisk og ideologisk kamp i den turbulente Tredje Republiks første tiår mellem en sekulær republikanisme og en ul-trakatolsk modbevægelse, som ønskede monarkiet genindført.

Videre søger artiklen at vise, at de beskrevne stigmatikere og hyste-rikere, der alle kom fra den agrare og urbane underklasse, ikke kun var objekter for og redskaber i kampen mellem tro og videnskab. Deres kroppe bar ikke kun vidnesbyrd om det metafysiskes tilstedeværelse i det fysiske

eller var blotte levende plancher i den medicinske nosologi. Deres hud og symptomer gjorde dem synlige. Uden dem ville deres liv og historie have fortabt sig i mørket. Alle blev de qua deres ekstraordinære kroppe og hud skrevet ind i historien. Men på forskellig måde. For hysterikerne, hvoraf flere fik stjernestatus i kraft af deres rigt udspundne symptombillede, gik den proces, der gjorde dem til berømtheder i medicinens historie, gennem individualitetens afhændelse. Under lægevidenskabens tryk trådte de ind i den tilbudte skikkelse som patient. Mens tegnene på huden for en stigmatiser som Marie-Julie Jahenny fra det franske bondeland blev en livs- og anerkendelsesform og en måde at afværge det individuelle livs undergang i glemslen. Fra 1873 og frem til hendes død i 1941 – i samfulde 68 år – fylkedes skarer af troende i hendes stue eller ved hendes seng for at se, høre og blive berørt af 'la Sainte de Blain', helgeninden fra Blain.

Artiklen indskriver sig i den forskning i krop, normativitet og klasse, som siden årtusindskiftet har fundet sted i de humanistiske videnskaber. Herunder i huden, hvor dermatologiens specialiserede medicinske felt er udvidet med kulturhistoriske, psykologiske og visuelle studier. (Connor, 2003; Andrieu et al., 2008; Benthien, 2002; Didi-Huberman, 1982, 1990, 2004; Johannisson, 2001).

### **Guds skrift – Marie-Julie Jahenny**

I La Fraudais, en lille flække med omkring ti huse tre kilometer fra landsbyen Blain uden for Nantes, skete der forunderlige ting med en 23-årig ugift kvinde, Marie-Julie Jahenny. Fredag d. 21. marts 1873 viste der sig blødende sår på hendes fødder, hænder og i højre side. Et halvt år senere, 5. oktober, blev hendes pande og hoved omkranset af punktformige blødninger, der 25. november fulgtes af rifter på venstre skulder og ryg. Hertil føjede sig 12. januar 1874 røde, hævede bånd om ankler og håndled samt en række inskriptioner tæt ved hjertet: Bogstaverne JHS (Jesus, menneskeheds frelser) og MA samt udsagnene *Viens, ma victime* (Kom, mit offer) og *Triomphe de l'Eglise* (Kirkens triumf) hen over brystet. Efterfulgt 8. februar af et blødende lam på højre hånd. Endelig viste der sig 20. februar på højre hånds ringfinger en koralrød, ringformet hævnning. Den 7. december 1875 tonede endnu en inskription frem, denne gang på latin, *O Crux ave* (O kors,

vær hilset), sammen med billedet af et kors og en blomst (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, p. 21, pp. 27-28, p. 72, p. 477).

Fra første færd strømmede tusindvis af troende til fods eller i hestevogn til La Fraudais, overbeviste om, at Jahenny var en hellig stigmatiker: Sårene i fødder, hænder og side, hvorfra der udstrålede et herligt lys, var imitationer af Jesu naglehuller og lansestik; blodudtrækningerne i panden mimes stiksårene fra tornekrone om Frelserens pande; rifterne på skulder og ryg svarede til blodsporene efter den piskning og korsbæring, Gud søn blev udsat for på sin vej mod Golgata, mens blodbåndene om ankler og håndled lignede mærkerne efter de reb, der bandt den korsfæstede til korset inden naglingen. Hertil føjede sig Guds lam på håndfladen og ringen på fingeren som symbolske tegn på, at Jahenny lig Jesus var den syndige menneskeheds offerlam, men også formælet med ham i "le mariage mystique", i et mystisk-erotisk ægteskab. Alt forudsagt af Jomfru Maria i visioner et par dage inden fænomenernes fremkomst. Endelig vitterliggjorde skriften på hudens væg i form af monogrammerne og sentenserne for hvem, der måtte tvivle, at Jahenny var udvalgt til at åbenbare Kirkens triumf i en gudløs tid. Men hendes krop var også en kampplads mellem Gud og Satan. Djævelen rev flere gange hendes krop til blods med sine kløer, hev hende ud af sengen og kastede hende på gulvet, ligesom han forsøgte at kvæle hende ved at stoppe krusifikser og bønnebøger i hendes mund. Alt bevidnet af de tilstedeværende, heriblandt hendes skriftefader Pitre-Hervé David, der noterede alt, hvad der hændte Jahenny i en tretten hæfter lang *Journal de La Fraudais* (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, p. 10, p. 117, p. 177, p. 181; Chiron, 2023).

Biskoppen i Nantes, Félix Fournier, iværksatte straks efter tilsynkomsten af de første sår, en medicinsk undersøgelse for at afdække, om der var tale om et mimetisk mirakel eller et mimetisk bedrag. De hidkaldte professorer fra det medicinske fakultet i Nantes, d'herrer doctores Joüon og Vignard, undersøgte Jahenny 28. marts 1873 og konkluderede i deres rapport, at "sårene ikke er af overnaturlig karakter, og at blodudstrømningen står i et naturligt forhold til sårenes omfang". Jahennys sår var altså ikke udvirket af en guddommelig mærkning, men havde en gemen fysisk oprindelse. Sårene var ikke tilføjet i bevidst bedragersk hensigt, understregede Joüon og Vignard, men frembragt i en nervekrisens uklare bevidsthedstilstand (Chiron, 2023).

Den medicinske duos dom skulle ikke vinde hævd. Ind på scenen trådte endnu en medicinsk professor, denne gang fra det medicinske fakultet i Clermont-Ferrand, Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre. Teologisk tilhørte han den katolske kirkes konservative fløj, politisk var han monarkist, og medicinsk var han en erklæret tilhænger af homøopatisk behandling. Han undersøgte Marie-Julie Jahenny 24. september 1873 og kom til den stik modsatte konklusion af sine ærede kolleger: "Efter endt undersøgelse kan jeg meddele biskoppen, at han i sit sogn har en stigmatiker af udsøgt bonitet, og at der ikke er tale om bedrageri i La Fraudais". Eller med det uoversættelige franske ordspil, *pas de fraude à La Fraudais*. Monseigneur Fournier glædede sig over den lægelige verifikation af mærkernes metafysiske autenticitet og dermed af "Guds virke i en sjæl" (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, I, p. XVIII; De La Franquerie, 1965, p. 8). Hver eneste fredag de næste 68 år skulle hun bløde fra sine sårmærker. At de ubetrageligt var ægte, i betydningen mirakuløse, understøttedes af, at blodet fra stigmataerne på hænderne brød alle kendte lovmæssigheder for blodomløb (Anonym besøgende, 1881, citeret fra Graus, 2021, p. 119).

Imbert-Gourbeyre, der syntes at have som sit livs mission lægeligt at verificere stigmataernes guddommeligt frembragte realeksistens, besøgte Jahenny utallige gange frem til sin død i 1912. Altid forundredes han. Over sårmærkernes varighed og konsistens, men især over hudskriften. For i troens historie, hvor stigmata var set mange gange før, var billederne og skriften på huden fænomener, "der aldrig er set eller beskrevet før" (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, p. 79).

Til Jahennys stigmata og hudskrift føjede sig somatiske symptomer og smertefulde krampeanfald. Imbert-Gourbeyre overværede et sådant anfald 27. september 1880:

Hun krummede overkroppen sammen, samtidig med at hovedet sank dybt ned mellem skuldrene, og hagen rørte brystbenet (...). Armene strakte og bøjede sig flere gange i langsomme bevægelser, indtil de forblev i bøjet stilling. De udstrakte fingre presseses hårdt mod hinanden med tommelfingeren drejet indad mod håndfladen. Knæene løftede sig lidt efter lidt op mod hovedet, til cirka tyve centimeter fra det. Marie Julie var krøllet sammen som en kugle; alle hendes muskler var spændte i en tonisk krampetilstand, i en stivkrampelig tetanos (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, pp. 133-34).

Men Jahenny var ikke bange. For et par dage tidligere havde Vor Herre i en vision fortalt hende, hvad der var i vente. Hendes sekretær – en sådan havde hun, seks år inde i sit stigmataliv – nedskrev profetien. Herunder, at hun skulle rammes af en voldsom feber, alle hendes led hæve, og hendes tunge svulme op. Hvilket skete. Den opsvulmede tunge “gav hendes ansigt et frastødende udtryk”. (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, pp. 133-34; Graus, 2017, p. 59).

Fra tid til anden afløstes kramperne af halvsidige lammelser. Til legemets vekslende spænding og afspænding føjede sig sanseberøvelser i form af blindhed, døvhed og stumhed. Sansetabene var alle indforskrevet i den himmelske fryds tjeneste. Døv var Jahenny for det timeliges tale, hvorimod hun, den dialekttalende bondepige med seks måneders skolegang bag sig, kunne forstå røsterne fra de himmelske sfærer og høre “præstens stemme, når han talte latin”. Ligesom blindheden for verdens tant lod hende skue “himmelens åbenbaringer”. Tabet af taleevne, som var forårsaget af en bagudbøjet kontraktur af tungen, der tvang tungespidsen ned i svelget, blev genvundet, når hun i ekstaser gav mæle til sine af Gud, Jomfru Maria, ærkeengle og helgener indgivne visioner (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, II, p. 132). Talestrømmene, der var på den lokale patois, men isprængt brokker af middelalderlatin og teologisk lærdom, blev på stedet nedskrevet og oversat til fransk af de tilstedeværende.

Forunderlig og underfuld var også Marie-Julies afvisning af at tage jordisk næring til sig. Første gang fra april 1875 og tre måneder frem, næste gang fra 28. december samme år, hvor hun i en faste, der varede “i fem år, en måned og 22 dage”, hverken spiste eller drak. Eller rettere: Hvor hun ernærede sig af den hellige hostie og korsets blod. Undervejs var der ifølge Imbert-Gourbeyre “ingen afføring og urinudskillelse, ingen slimsekreter eller menstruation”. Som læge efterlod de naturstridige fænomener ham rådvild, men som troende fandt han Jahennys hellige sult garanteret af “hendes moralske og fromme karakter”, af “hendes omgivelsers moral” og af det faktum, at hun “fysisk var ude af stand til at bedrage”. Havde han haft den mindste mistanke om bedrag – eller om “hysteri som på La Salpêtrière” – ville han have ladet hende “overvåge dag og nat.” Men her var der tale om et underfuldt-forunderligt mirakel, der ikke fordrede mistanke, men ærefrygt, thi “*helgener ærer man*” (Imbert-Gourbeyres kursivering, 1894, II, p. 190).

Jahenny var med andre ord indlemmet i troens kamp mod den gudløse medicin. Det, der ifølge Imbert-Gourbeyre fandt sted i La Fraudais, var nemlig “den totale negation af fritænkernes teorier om, at stigmatikernes ekstraordinære lidelser er en form for hysteri”. (Imbert-Gourbeyre, 1894, I, p. XIX). Jahennys kropslige lidelser var i selve den form, de viste sig i, en bekæmpelse af den verdslige medicins opfattelse af, at lidelsesudtryk som hendes var fysiske og mentale symptomer i en neuropatologisk hysteri. Eller mere præcist fandt Imbert-Gourbeyre, at Jahennys forvredne krop underminerede hysteriparadigmet indefra og bekæmpede “La Salpêtrière på selve hysteriens område”. Blandt hendes lidelser var kontrakturen, et af de dominerende symptomer i diagnosticeringen af hysteri. Men omstændighederne omkring hendes krampespændte krop og tunge beviste,

at den ikke var af hysterisk karakter. Hvem har nogensinde, på La Salpêtrière eller andre steder, set en kontraktur regelmæssigt ophøre hver fredag i flere timer, for at give den kramperamte mulighed for at tale og gå i fuld ekstase? Observationen af den bretonske jomfru bringer alle kendte hysteriobservationer i miskredit. (Imbert-Gourbeyre 1894, II, p. 138).

I realiteten er Imbert-Gourbeyres bog *La stigmatisation* med undertitlen *Réponse aux Livres-Penseurs* en læges, dvs. en medicinsk autoritets, 1147 siders lange attack på den somatiske medicins opfattelse af, at de religiøse mystikers sårmerker, hudskrift og ekstaser havde deres grund i et læderet nervesystem, sådan som neuropatologen Jean-Martin Charcot og kredsen omkring ham på La Salpêtrière i Paris hævdede at føre empirisk belæg for. Ligeså imødegik Imbert-Gourbeyre i *L'Hypnotisme et la stigmatisation* (1899) Salpêtrièreskolens opfattelse af, at blodet fra stigmataernes hellige sår skulle være *sueur de sang*, ‘blodsved’ (med den diagnostiske betegnelse *hematohidrosis*), fremkaldt i lige dele af selvsuggestion og somatik.

Det var imidlertid ikke alene til kampen mellem tro og medicin, mellem guddommelige og hysteriske kontrakturer, at Jahennys rigdom af hudskrift, stigmata og fysiske symptomer leverede ammunition. Strømmen af visioner, hun i årevis fremsagde “med en stærk og mærkværdig røst” mindst en gang ugentligt, opnåede en umådelig gennemslagskraft. Det gjorde de, fordi Jahenny viste sig som en politisk seer, der udsendte bandbuller mod det onde “republikanske, sekulariserede og postrevoluti-



ILL. 1

I ekstase 1930. Marie-Julie Jahenny med sekretær.

Fra Andrea Graus: "A Visit to Remember: Stigmata and Celebrity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" in *Cultural and Social History*, nr. 1, 2016, p. 5.

onære Frankrig" og profeterede genkomsten af et katolsk kongedømme og – hvilende på dogmet om pavens ufejlbarlighed – kirkens overhøjhed over staten; holdninger, der var gangbare i vide kredse, især på landet. (Graus, 2021, p. 355, Kselman, 1983, p. 113 ff, Goldstein, 1982, p. 209 ff).

Her en vision fra 27. april 1877:

Fortvivlelsens og rædslens skrig vil stige mod Himlen. I Det Hellige Hjertes måned (juni) og Jesu Blods måned (juli) vil tegnet til straffen og borgerkrigen komme. (...) Den første opstand vil finde sted i byen Paris, og de onde kongers trone vil falde ligesom byen, og dens ofre vil omkomme inden for dens mure ... Mange gange har flammer og ild vist sig i denne kriminelle by, men denne gang vil det være hagl af svovlholdig ild, som vil kvæle de skyldige (Jahenny, 2011, pp. 53-54).

Og videre 11. maj: "Når den udvalgte konge og Frankrigs frelser har bevidnet Frankrigs triumf, vil han skrive: *In hoc signo vinces* (Ved dette tegn vil du sejre). Og Frankrig vil stå under Det hellige Hjertes banner og under

Jomfru Marias kors.” Og sådan fortsætter tiraderne om pest, borgerkrig, ildstorme og apokalypsen uge efter uge, år efter år. Som her 19. maj 1898: “Det store slag fra Guds hånd vil ikke vare længe, men det vil være så frygteligt, at mange vil dø af rædsel. Det er efter dette store slag, at Kirkens og Frankrigs triumf vil komme.” (Jahenny, 2011, p. 54 og p. 348).

Kendskabet til visionerne og kroppens særegne udtryk, der blev spredt fra titusindvis af munde og udbredt via bøger, aviser og pamfletter, gjorde Jahenny til en berømthed. Kendt langt uden for Frankrigs grænser blev hun med Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyres bøger fra 1873 og 1894. Den orale overlevering gjorde, sammen med menighedsagtige sammenslutninger som *Amis de la Croix* så tidligt som 1873, at et regionalt kultfænomen kunne udvikle sig til et nationalt og internationalt fænomen. Og en analfabetisk kvinde fra et afsidesliggende sted kunne blive en levende helgeninde, der blev lyttet til og værdsat for sin legemliggørelse af Guds magtfulde virken i sin krop. Og det til trods for, at kirken, efter biskop Felix Fourniers død i 1877, afviste at anerkende Jahenny som hellig stigmatiker og i perioder nægtede hende Det hellige Sakramente (Graus, 2021, p. 120 og pp. 113-114).

Tilbage står spørgsmålet om, hvorvidt der er tale om et enten-eller. Altså om Jahennys mærkede kvindekrop legemliggjorde troens hellige realitet, eller om hendes lidelser var hysteriske symptomer og hendes religiøse ekstaser selvsuggestion? Her skal plæderes for kompromisets tredje vej. Nemlig, at hendes krops udtryksregister var socialt konstrueret og kodificeret inden for en religiøs horisont. Forstået på den måde, at hendes kramper, anfald og blodudtrækninger samlede sig i matricer, der af andre og af hende selv genkendtes som stigmata og tungetale. Altså som fænomener, der var *hors norme*, hinsides kendte fysiologiske lovmæssigheder. Ligeså hendes evne til at forme syner og talestrømme inden for et kendt og anerkendt religiøst paradigme. Jahennys hele gestalt lader sig på denne måde forstå både som hendes egen og – med Janet Beizer – som en bugtalerkrop (Beizer, 1994, p. 26). Forstået således, at Jahenny – sandsynligvis i en tilstand af bevidsthedssocioiering og på en klangbund af faktiske, omend diffuse symptomer – omformede sin krop til det, hun selv og hendes omgivelserne begærede at se og inderligt troede på. I den bevægelse blev hun til helgeninden fra Blain, til en berømthed, som folk fra nær og fjern

valfartede til, fordi hun evnede at gøre sig til et lidelsens ikon. I sandhed, som det stod på hendes bryst, sørgede hun for *Triomphe de l'Eglise* (Kirkens triumf). Og for sin egen.

### Tro eller viden

Hvad der end måtte være tilfældet, så var fronterne mellem metafysik og fysik trukket op i tiårene op til forrige århundredskifte. På den ene side hævdede Imbert-Gourbeyre, at "ingen agtværdig læge af god katolsk, jødisk eller protestantisk tro" eller for den sags skyld intet "intelligent, verdsligt tænkende menneske" ville nå frem til den slutning, at stigmata og visioner kunne "forklares med hallucination, hysteri eller hypnotisme" (Imbert-Gourbeyre 1894, p. XIX). På den anden side gennemsatte Charcot og Salpêtrière-skolen med kolossal gennemslagskraft et hysterisk sygdomsbillede, hvor stigmata, kramper, sanseforstyrrelser, tungetale og hudskrift blev indrulleret i et neuropatologisk paradigme.

Men ikke nok med det. Den af hysteri ramte krop trådte ind i den politiske kamp mod det, der blev betragtet som ultrakatolske, obskurantistiske kræfter. Den positivistiske medicin omdefinerede stigmata til sygdomstegn og ekstatisk ægteskaber med Gud til delirier. Ligeledes blev de tilbedende skarers opløftelse udtydet som massesuggestion. Som også fortidens dæmonbesættelse lig den, der ramte et ursulinekløster i Loudun i 1634, hvor priorinden og samtlige nonner var underkastet Den Ondes magt. Resolut diagnosticerede Charcot kohorten af symptomer og sekreter som en kollektiv hysteri i dens mest udfoldede form. "På La Salpêtrière findes der syge," skrev Charcots kollega, Charles Richet, "som i forne tider ville være blevet brændt på bålet, og hvis sygdom ville være blevet betragtet som en dødssynd". (Charcot, 1886, p. iii; Richet, 1880, p. 346). De besattes spektakulære *figures*, der i århundreder var blevet tolket som guddommelige eller dæmoniske *præfigurationer*, afslørede således af en nådesløs, sekulær medicin som det, de var: *stigmata*. Ikke på en spirituel styrelse, men cerebral forstyrrelse, ikke udløst af *spiritus sanctus*, men af spiritus og andre uhellige provokatører. Det overnaturlige var naturligt, det metafysiske fysisk. Patologiseringen var imidlertid, som Ruth Harris viser, mere end en afmirakulisering af det overnaturlige; omdefineringen stemte overens med

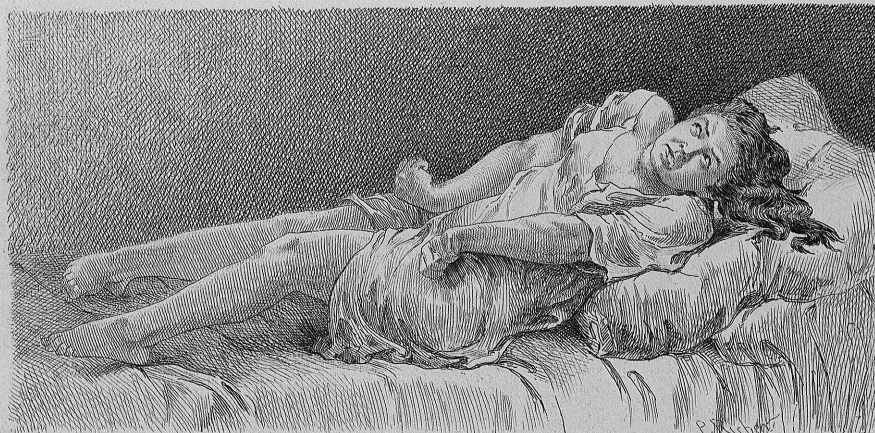
den kampagne for verdsliggørelse, der prægede den republikanske politik i årtierne op til århundredskiftet, og som i 1905 resulterede i udskillelsen af kirken fra alle offentlige institutioner (Harris, 1999, p. 327f.).

### La Salpêtrière – Det symptomatologiske scenarie

Problemet med hysterien som en agtværdig, somatisk lidelse var imidlertid, at den sygdomsudløsende læsion i centralnervesystemet ikke – eller med Charcot: endnu ikke – lod sig lokalisere. Derfor var det bydende nødvendigt at forlene hysterien med et objektivi iagttageligt og uniformt symptombillede. Til et sådant hørte synlige afvigelse fra den raske krop som astasia-abasia (problemer med at gå og stå), anæstesi (følelsesløshed), paralyser (lammelser), konvulsioner (kramper, rystelser), kontrakturer (fastlåste muskelspændinger), anfald, hysterogene zoner samt syns-, høre- og føleforstyrrelser.<sup>1</sup>

Blandt dem, der med deres symptomers rigdom skulle yde det ypperste til bekræftelse af Charcots neuropatologiske hysteriparadigme, var den analfabetiske, arrede og tandløse Justine Etchevery, som i årene 1869-1875 frembar en "veritabel Odyssé" af symptomer, der i lighed med Jahennys overskred alle kendte fysiologiske og nervemæssige lovmæssigheder. Heriblandt langvarige krampetilstande i alle fire lemmer samt i mund, anus, vagina og blære. Hertil kom anfald, der lignede kirke- og kunsthistoriens afbildninger af forne tiders besatte, og som skulle gøre hende til stjerne. Ikke blot på La Salpêtrière eller i Frankrig, men i den ganske verden (Charcot, 1890, I, p. 277).

Blandt de mange, der vandt berømmelse som Charcots eksemplariske patientmateriale var også hysterikere som Geneviève Basile Legrand, Céline Marcillet, Suzanne Muzieau og Blanche Wittmann samt den sødmefulde og fotogene Louise Augustine Gleizes. Alle fik de deres symptomer og anfald optegnet i deres journaler. Alle blev de foreviget i fotografier, litografier og tegninger. For i modsætning til den interesse, der omgav Jahennys ordstrømme, var alt på La Salpêtrière konciperet under synsaktens regimente.



Phase d'immobilité Tonique  
ou Tétanisme

**ILL. 2**

Krampetilstand. Tegning af Paul Richer efter fotografi, 1881.

In Paul Richer: *Études cliniques sur l'hystéro-épilepsie ou grande hystérie*, Paris, Delahaye et Lecrosnier, 1881, s. 42.

Hentet fra <https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histmed/image?med44055x0056>

## Louise Augustine Gleizes

Den 15-årig Louise Augustine Gleizes blev den 21. oktober 1875 indlagt på La Salpêtrière. Augustine, som hun blev kaldt, frembar alle de symptomer, Charcot definerede som hørende til den fuldt udviklede hysteri. Heriblandt svære krampeanfald. Som her i januar 1877:

Fra kl. 6 til 9 enogtyve anfald. Under de første anfald blev højre arm låst fast på tværs bag på ryggen. Tungen var kontrakteret; den var hård, bagudbøjet med tungespidsen presset mod den bagerste del af ganen. [...] Alle led var stive; underarmen i voldsom indadretning, fingrene med stor kraft tvunget mod håndfladen, tommelfingeren placeret mellem ringfinger og langfinger. (Norup 2013, p. 26)

Anfaldet afsluttedes “med armene udstrakt i korsform”. I journalen blev der stort set dagligt optegnet nye anfald af en styrke, der den 22. april 1877 om natten fik vågekongen til at tro, at hun var ved at dø.

Augustine Gleizes er imidlertid ikke gået over i hysteriens historie på grund af sine symptomer og voldsomme anfald – dem delte hun med alle andre hysterikere på La Salpêtrière (fra 1882 også mænd) – men på grund af sin fotogenitet.

### Fotografiet i medicinens tjeneste

Fotografiet var nemlig i sandhed trådt i medicinens tjeneste på La Salpêtrière som et medie til understøttelse og verifikation af den medicinske udforskning af hysterien. Således var Augustine Gleizes' sygehistorie, der blev offentliggjort over to omgange, i 1878 og 1880, i Désiré-Magloire Bourneville og Paul Regnards *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, ledsaget af 21 fotografier, der viste hendes symptomer og allehånde stillinger under det hysteriske anfald. Det var også hendes krop og træk, der trådte læseren i møde på hovedparten af de 103 tegninger og gravurer, som illustrerede Paul Richers lærebog fra 1881, *Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie*. Hertil legemsstore plancher af hende i Charcots konsultationsværelse, venteværelse og forelæsningsale, hvor der også hang reproduktioner af 1500- og 1600-tallet malerier af ekstatikere og besatte. Af alle dem, der tilforn havde været anset som udmærket af Gud, men som Charcot nu diagnosticerede som hysterikere, lidende af *la grande névrose religieuse*, af den fuldt udfoldede religiøse neurose. (Daudet, 1911, p. 285). Billederne af Augustine Gleizes hang der mange år efter, hun selv havde forladt hospitalet. Som var hendes hysteriske paroksysmer, med Charcots karakteristiske sammentrængning af medicinens og kunstens vokabular, et *chef-d'œuvre*.

På La Salpêtrière søgte ordet bestandigt mod billedet, både det grafiske og fotografiske.

### Fotografiet

Fotografiet havde siden dets opfindelse i lige så høj grad stået i medicinens og patologiens tjeneste som i kunstens. Blandt de første læger, som forevige de sygdomsramte, var Hugh Welch Diamond, der i 1850'erne fotograferede sine afsindige på Springfield Asylum i England (Lyhne, 1996, p. 100 ff.). I Frank-

Collection Iconographique  
P. B/2112



ILL. 3

Bagved Charcot: Det hysteriske anfalds figurer i Augustine Gleizes' eksemplariske udførelse.

Gravering af Paul Renouard, in *La Revue Illustrée*, August 1887.

<https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histmed/image?CIPB2112>

rig var pioneren inden for det medicinske fotografi Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne, der i 1862 havde ladet sine eksperimentelle undersøgelser af ansigtsudtryk frembragt ved elektrisk parring illustrere med 74 elektrofysiologiske fotografier. Ligesom Albert de Montméja og Jules Rengade, som fra 1869 udgav det medicinske tidsskrift *Revue photographique des Hôpitaux de Paris*, bragte talrige fotografier bl.a. nærbilleder af hudsygdomme.

Med Bournevilles og Regnards *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* fik fotografiet sin stjernestund. I fotografierne lykkedes det at indfange og fastfryse hysteriens symptomer og dermed gøre dem til genstand for sammenligning og typificering. Men endnu betingede fotografiets eksponeringstid, at det især var de fikserede kontrakturer, der blev foreviget. Lysforholdene på sygesalene nødvendiggjorde også fra tid til anden, at hysterikere måtte bæres ud i gården, før deres symptomer kunne dokumenteres fotografisk. Vanskeligere var det at fastholde hysterikere under anfald, hvorfor det fortrinsvist er anfaldets kontrakturer og såkaldt passionerede attituder, der blev fotograferet. I forhold til gengivelsen af anfaldets dynamiske og voldsomme former var blyanten og tegneblokken stadigvæk fotografiet overlegne.

Omvendt var det, som om nogle af hysteriens symptomer, f.eks. de karakteristiske synsforstyrrelser, spejlede virkemåden i det apparatur, der mekanisk forevige deres realkarakter. Således syntes *fotofobi* (lysskyhed) og *blepharospasme* (øjenlågskrampe) at mime optagelsens *nu*. Som gled øjen-



#### ILL. 4

Hysterisk øjenlågskrampe. Hortense J..., syerske, 16½ år gammel, indlagt på Charcots afdeling 22. september 1887 med hysterisk betingede knæsmertner, hoftebetændelse, afoni (stemmeløshed) og øjenlågskrampe.

Foto: Albert Londe. *Nouvelle iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, 1889, s. 111.

Hentet fra Norup, 2013, p. 30

lågets blænde ned over det lysfølsomme øje i en fordobling af kameraøjets lukker. Også farveblindhed og tunnelsyn reflekterede de talrige fotografiers sort-hvide gengivelse (Baer, 1994, p. 67; Didi-Huberman, 1982, p. 108).

Smukkeste trak læge og patient, videnskab og teknik på samme hammel i den af hypnose frembragte katalepsi, dvs. en tilstand af stivnet bevægelse, der, som Charcot udtrykte det, var "særdeles favorabel for den fotografiske reproduktion". Ubevægeligheden var ikke blot til nytte i den medicinske verden, men også i kunsten. For kataleptikeren, "[d]enne ekspressive statue, denne ubevægelige model" gjorde det nemt for kunststuderende at afmale kroppens "mest forskelligartede udtryk". Som var École des beaux-arts en afdeling under La Salpêtrière, fastslog Charcot, at "kunsten og videnskaben går i takt og rækker hinanden hånden" (Charcot, 1890, IX, p. 443 og Charcot, 2002, p. 2, p. 30).

## Hudfølelse og hudskrift

Blandt symptomerne i det hysteriske symptombillede var hudens følelseløshed. Den medicinsk-somatiske forklaring på anæstetisen var, at der var tale om endnu ikke klarlagte forstyrrelser i blodcirkulationen. De anvendte undersøgelsesmetoder til bestemmelse af følelseløshedens omfang i huden – nappen, prikken, stikken, kildren, skoldning, brænding og faradisering (elektrisk stød) – var de samme, stødene pånær, som inkquisitionen i forne tider havde brugt til at afsløre hekse og troldkarle. Graden af analgesi (fravær af smertefølelse) og anæstesi (tab af føleevne) blev hos Louise Augustine Gleizes påvist overalt, såvel på den ydre hudoverflade som de indre slimhinder:

Den kutane følsomhed i dens forskellige former er forsvundet i højre side af kroppen: der er ingen reaktion ved ryk i hår, berøring, strygning, gnidning, kildren, trykken, stikken, kulde og varme. Anæstesien påvirker ligeledes slimhinderne i højre side af kroppen (øregange, øjenlåg, øjne, næsebor, mund, tunge, gane, vulva). Den ophører ved en skarp og tydelig afgrænset linje, der deler kroppen i to halvdele. (Norup, 2013, p. 20).

Den penetrerende lægefingre afslørede hos en anden hysteriker, Rosalie Leroux, en følelseløs ganehvælvning, hvor tungen, der ligesom Jahennys

var kontraktueret i en S-form, ikke reagerede på berøring og prikken. Hos Suzanne Muzieau viste en nidkær undersøgelse, at hendes “øjenlåg og øjenæbler er følelseløse”, ligesom føle- og smagssansen var forsvundet i “ganen og det inderste af tungen” (Norup, 2013, p. 226 og p. 227).

## Hudskrift

Udforskningen af hudens føleevne på La Salpêtrière gik videre end til stik- og nåleprøver. Hos flere hysterikere var følelseløsheden legeret med *hyperæstesi*, hyperfølsomhed i form af ødemer, der opstod ved lette tryk eller gnidninger, og som fik huden til at rejse sig der, hvor den var blevet påvirket.

Med det mål at analysere sammenhængen mellem hudens samtidige følelseløshed og hyperfølsomhed tjente en del af hysterikerne på La Salpêtrière bogstaveligt talt som skrivetavler. Således blev der den 29. august 1879 på den rystende og forpinte Céline Marcillet “ridset bogstaver med en nål på den forreste del af brystet”. Herefter viste der sig “en stribeformet hudrødme, hvor der påfølgende rejste sig bogstaver i relief i op til halvanden millimeters højde”. Skriften stod prentet så klart og tydelig, at den dagen efter, 30. august, var som “skåret i voks”. Joséphine Delorme fik sit navnetræk prentet “på brystet og Salpêtrière på maven”, ligesom Blanche Wittmann, der fik skrevet sit “navn hen over den øverste del af brystet, måneden august ned ad begge ben og *Salpêtrière* på maven. En temmelig kraftig stribe hudrødme udvikler sig øjeblikkeligt; herpå hæver de tegnede bogstaver sig i relief” (Norup, 2013, p. 228, p. 229). Som var skriften på den nøgne hud en vitterliggørelse af, at ikke blot hysterien, men også hysterikeren var lægernes ejendom.

Den udefra påførte skrift på hudens overflade var ikke den eneste form for dermatografi. Hudskriften kunne også træde frem som *autografi*, der uden ydre påvirkning viste sig på hudoverfladen. Det var vel at mærke en selvskrift uden et selv. For autografien var frembragt af lægernes eksperimenter med hypnose og suggestion med det mål at vise, hvordan ukendte forstyrrelser i blodcirkulation og nervebaner fik bogstaver, tegninger og stigmata til at træde frem. Og dermed demonstrere, at det var sygdommen, der skrev på overfladen af det hypnotiserede legeme, hvori den havde taget bolig.

Således fortæller en af de utallige besøgende, som overværede patientfremvisningerne på La Salpêtrière, om et eksperiment med blodsved i 1889: "Efter at have bragt en mand i hypnotisk søvn" prentede lægen Bourrut de Rochefort "sit navn på mandens to underarme med en blød tegnestift og indsugerer ham følgende:

'I dag klokken fire vil du falde i søvn, og du vil bløde fra de linier, som jeg lige har skrevet på dine arme.' På det angivne tidspunkt faldt emnet i søvn. Snart efter perlede der fra de prentede og i reliefstående bogstaver små dråber blod, heftigt røde mod den blege hud. Senere, under et spontant hysterisk anfald, bød samme mand med høj røst sig selv at bløde fra armen, og nogen tid efter kom der en blødning. Dette mærkelige fænomen minder om og forklarer de blodige stigmata, som vi har observeret adskillige gange hos religiøse ekstatiske, når de gengiver korsfæstelsesscenen. (Norup, 2013, p. 229 og p. 316).

Hermed var demonstreret, at alt helligt hidrørte fra hysterien. Også Jesu Kristi stigmata og sårene fra hans tornekrone. Ligesom satan og alt hans værk.

## Satans hånd

Det særlige ved den hysteriske hud, og det, der gjorde, at den til stadighed bød sig til for eksperimenter, var, at de hyperfølsomme områder formede sig efter det påførte tryk, hvor let det end måtte være, f.eks. af en håndflade. Fænomenet var på ingen måde nyt; det var kendt og beskrevet i hekse- og troldkarleprocesserne i 1500- og 1600-tallet, hvor håndaftryk på huden blev tilskrevet Satans mærkning af sine adepter.

Således skrev Toussaint Barthélemy – der havde gennemgået og fotografisk dokumenteret 53 tilfælde af hudskrift, heriblandt en dermatograferet, hysterisk hest – SATAN på ryggen af både "en kvinde fra de lavere klasser, apatisk, overanstrengt, deprimeret, afstumpet og af ringe intelligens" og "en kvinde fra de højere klasser, aktiv, intelligent, forfinet, nervøs og sensibel i udpræget grad". Hos dem begge rejste den forbandedes navn sig. Formålet var at vise, at modtageligheden for dermatografi ikke var et klassetegn. Dermatografien var således, konkluderede Joseph Delbœuf "et rent fysiologisk fænomen, hvori psyken ikke spiller nogen rolle overhovedet" (Barthélemy, 1893, pl. 4 og 5, v. p. 38; Delbœuf, 1892, p. 258).



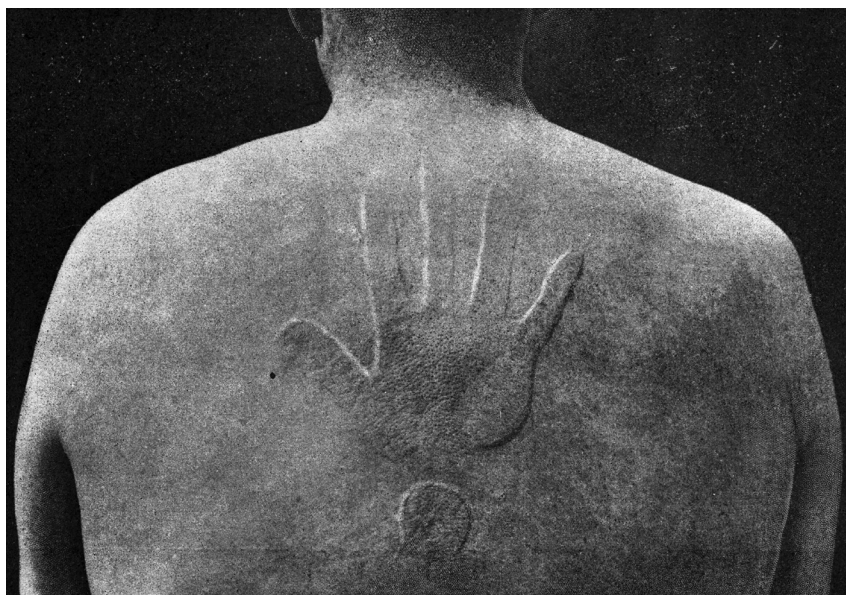
ILL. 5

Satans navnetræk og hånd.

In Barthélemy: *Etude sur le dermatographisme*, pl. VI & XIII, hentet fra <https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histmed/images.htm>

At alt helligt og uhelligt som kors og djævletegn randt lægerne i hu og hånd, generede Ernest Mesnet, der selv som læge eksperimenterede med hudskrift. For hvorfor benytte sig af et diabolsk vokabular og symbolik, når man vidste, hvilken uro og ængstelse det vakte hos dem, hvis ryg blev mærket med Satans navn og hånd, hans *sigillum diaboli*? Ovenikøbet når det viste sig nødvendigt at tilføje et svirp for at få hånden til at træde tydeligt frem. Det håndslag, Satan i forgangne tider brændemærkede sine kreaturer med. Som var anvendelsen af Satans segl ikke en tilfældighed, men endnu et udtryk for, at lægerne betragtede hysterikerne som deres medicinske materiale og videnskabelige ejendom. (Mesnet, 1889-90, p. 323; Didi-Huberman, 1990, p. 367; Connor, 2004, pp. 127ff.).

Eller som Pierre Janet skrev i 1907, da hysterien ikke længere var en del af den neuropatologiske spydspidsforskning, så var det som om, at lægerne, ham selv inklusive, havde behandlet "på samme måde, som den berømte inkvisitor Bodin gjorde over for kvinder, der var anklaget for at



være hekse. Vi blændede patienten, drejede hans hoved, gnubbede huden med vores negle, stak pludselig med en nål for at se, om der var smertefølelse. Intet havde ændret sig.” (Citeret fra Owen, 1971, p. 74).

Således viser forholdet mellem metafysik og fysik, teologi og neurologi, mirakler og materialisme i det 19. århundredes sidste tiår sig ikke kun at være modsætninger, men også forbundethed.

### **Anerkendelse**

Men samtidig spærrede diskussionen af hudtegnenes betydning for det, der var synligt og dog usynligt: at skindet bedrog, og at der bag hysterikernes og stigmatikernes beskrevne skind var mennesker med et liv og en historie. Samt egenvilje og handlekraft.

Fælles for fattige, uuddannede, men viljestærke kvinder som Marie-Julie Jahenny og stjernehysterikerne var, at de ikke blot blev gjort til

materiale for enten troens eller videnskabens sandhed. De gjorde også sig selv til materiale. For Marie-Julie Jahenny blev hendes stigmata og evne til at udholde særegne lidelser en livsvarig levevej og anerkendelsesform. Det samme gjaldt de parisiske hysterikere, der opnåede stjernestatus for deres kropes evne til at vitterliggøre Charcots sygdomsopfattelse. Men kun for en tid. For hysterikerens symptomer havde ikke samme varighed som levevej. Således undersøgte og beskrev Charcot i flere år dagligt Justine Etcheverys sære symptomer. Med hendes aktive bidrag hertil ved "på en sanddru måde at oplyse os om udviklingen i sin lidelse" (Charcot, 1890, I, p. 352). Som var hun – analfabeten fra *la France profonde* – den studerede mands lige. I 1875 havde hun ikke mere nyt at yde til Charcots forelæsninger og publikationer. Han var på vej til andre senge med andre hysterikere, der forstod at tænde hans forskningsmæssige ild med deres kroppe. Dog skulle Justine Etchevery en sidste gang træde ind i rampelyset. Hun rejste sig fra sin seng. Uden kramper og anfald. Og overgik til lønarbejde som gangkone på La Salpêtrière. Det katolske ugeblad *La Semaine religieuse* proklamerede, at der var tale om et mirakel, der åbenbarede Guds almagt midt i ugudelighedens højborg. Charcot fandt derimod, at der var tale om en på ingen måde usædvanlig spontan helbredelse i form af en retablering af hidtil blokerede nerveforbindelser mellem hjernen og de ramte legemsdele. For Justine Etchevery var der hverken tale om tro eller viden, men om en hysterisk *habitus*, som ikke længere gav mening.

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## SUMMARY

### The Word Became Flesh

#### *Stigmata, hysteria and skin writing*

This article examines skin sores and skin writing among religious stigmatists and hospitalized hysterics in France in the last three decades of the 19th century. In 1873, 23-year-old Marie-Julie Jahenny from rural France

began to bleed from wounds on her feet, hands and right side, just as the Savior's monogram and sentences such as *Viens, ma victime* (come my victim) appeared on her chest. At the same time in hospitals in Paris, hysterics displayed similar stigmata, including anesthesia. In clinical demonstrations, the doctors showed how it was possible with a light touch of a feather to make letters and drawings appear on the numb skin surface. The article deals with how the word became flesh, and people became tools and experimental material in the battle between faith and science. But also, how stigmata and skin writing for stigmatists and hysterics became a form of recognition and way of life.

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#### NOTER

- 1 Det følgende er et kondensat af min tematisering af hysterien og billedet i *Hysteriens tid* (Norup, 2013).