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Scars

If I were an architect, an architect in love, I would redesign my body. Mail you the blueprints. Redraw. I'd move my blood lines to make rivers in places you would like to swim. I'd use my muscle to shore up hills; I'd use my ribs to pile bridges from here to there (delicate little bridges that would sail above my heart). I'd paint the interior of my skin with birds and light; my breasts would be two small mountains you would sleep between; my feet the boats upon which you flow through time; my eyes the mirror you most deeply crave; my two mouths the music that wakes you to a city you've always wanted to call home. ¹

¹

These anonymous words were hand written onto the architectural blue print of a building that was never built, and found by Peggy Phelan when she visited an archive dedicated to these well planned out dreams. I found it on page 22 of her book, *Mourning Sex*, Routledge, London, 1997.

INTRODUCTION: GHOSTS IN THE PAINTWORK

Once upon a time, a young artist painted a watercolour of a naked woman on her knees, facing a naked standing man. The woman's arms hung loosely by her sides and her hands were marked with blood. The kitchen knife on the ground was streaked with red and the man's guts were sliced open from chest to groin. The woman looked, not up, but straight ahead at her work. It was *The Earnest Search for Love*, a painting of a young woman's bewilderment in the face of her cultural conditioning, and the moment when, in a confusion of knife and brush, she transformed a transgressive desire into an image. Disallowed rage was described in its sublimation into an art work — a fantasy of how the given power structure might be otherwise. The woman's stained hands were at rest as she took in the new image forming in the bloody mirror now in front of her.

Claiming the right to look, and to make pictures from what we see is a political act, as those with the most rights define what it is that we all see. *The Earnest Search for Love* was a painting of a woman on her knees, searching for a way to cope with this violent truth of the image. It was a small watercolour, it was mine, and I had made it because I could not understand. I see now that it depicted a desperate claim for the right to make my own picture, but I also know that, at the time, my earnest search was not really 'thought.' This was the first trace of knowledge that was difficult for me to think, that strained against my received world view of 'how things are.' I had forgotten about it, but it came floating back with the arrival of an old book of watercolours that also portrays intimate domestic scenes and half-formed images. These are not of blood and guts, but this leathery old book-body had surfaced towards me like an unnamed corpse, and *The Earnest Search for Love* had surfaced with it, a body from my inner archive. Together, they were pointing the way to what was not yet a concept.

I see now that the image I drew as forming out of blood and guts had been my recognition that, while an anatomical dissection will not reveal the mysteries of emotional life, a representation of the things we are able to see and touch could be a way to register those experiences that cut invisibly through all our bodies. A series of anonymous watercolours, jumping out at me from an undated manuscript, was bringing this back into renewed focus. I wasn't sure where the bodies were this time, but the quickening attention that tied this anonymous book to a painting that was now only a memory, heralded what would become *The Ghost Artist*, a story of invisibly present bodies. In *Ghostly Matters*, sociologist Avery Gordon (1958–) considers this quickening, and what it can mean when cultural objects seem to hold barely visible content, or when a form

seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.²

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

The archival records are slight, but in Part One, I consider what is already written, and go on to follow the material and cultural signposts that date the book. A preoccupation with time begins to lift out of each page, underlined by the choice to paint fifty-two images, perhaps one for each week of a year. This quality entwines with barely visible signs of a woman's looking, and this merger is perhaps the real quickening, that these might be the paintings of an older woman. Thirty years had passed since my *Earnest Search-er* had tried to draw what she could not see, and her ghostly psychological return also marked the passage of these years. The manuscript had floated towards me during research into the image confusions that ageing brings, and I had been stuck in the misogynistic world of witch and crone when its nameless worlds brought the realisation that it was not

2

Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008 (1997), p. 8

3

Witches and Wicked Bodies, curated by Deanna Petherbridge, in association with the National Galleries of Scotland and the British Museum, 2013, revealed a rich image history of monsters made from the natural cycles of women's bodies, and focussed on how male artists had depicted women who failed to conform to normative behaviours, 'othering' age, infirmity, knowledge of herbal remedies, and solitariness. At the same time, historian Mary Beard was attacked in UK Media for her appearance with grey hair and wrinkles while hosting BBC documentary *Meet the Romans*. These attacks included death threats, but this is a story perhaps best told by Beard's response to this: *Women and Power, A Manifesto*, London Review of Books and Profile Books Ltd, London, 2017

4

Lynne Segal, *Out of Time*, Verso, London, 2013

5

Glasgow University holds the largest collection of Emblem Books in the world, *The Stirling Maxwell Collection*. See Link 1, archived 20.06.2018

6

britannica.com, see link 2 for full address, archived 20.06.2018. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Emblem books were produced in their thousands. They were written in both Latin and vernacular European languages.

7

Mara R. Wade, *What is an Emblem?* Resources for Emblem Studies website of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu, see link 3 for full address, archived 28.02.2018

8

James Elkins, 'Two Ends of the Emblem' in *Emblematica*, Volume 16, Editors Michael Bath, Peter M Daly, and Daniel Russell, New York, 2008, pp.381–396

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

In 2013, Lynne Segal (1944–) published an affirmative contemplation of women's ageing that draws together the ideas of many recent thinkers,⁴ however *The Ghost Artist* focusses on the image, the way some older women artists have worked with ideas of the body in their mid and later years, and returned imagery to the world that both acknowledges the scab, and fills the gap site beneath with new forms of body. In three case studies, I reveal a spectral figure that I argue is the holder for this artistic movement, a figure taken up by women who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. The new forms of 'stand-in' bodies that I find within the work of the anonymous manuscript artist, Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), all circumvent this visible body, and offer fantasised forms of portrayal that allow the experience of life, which is occluded by objectification, to be shared. Together, these case studies suggest a genealogy, a way of working consistent from the late Enlightenment to the twenty-first century.

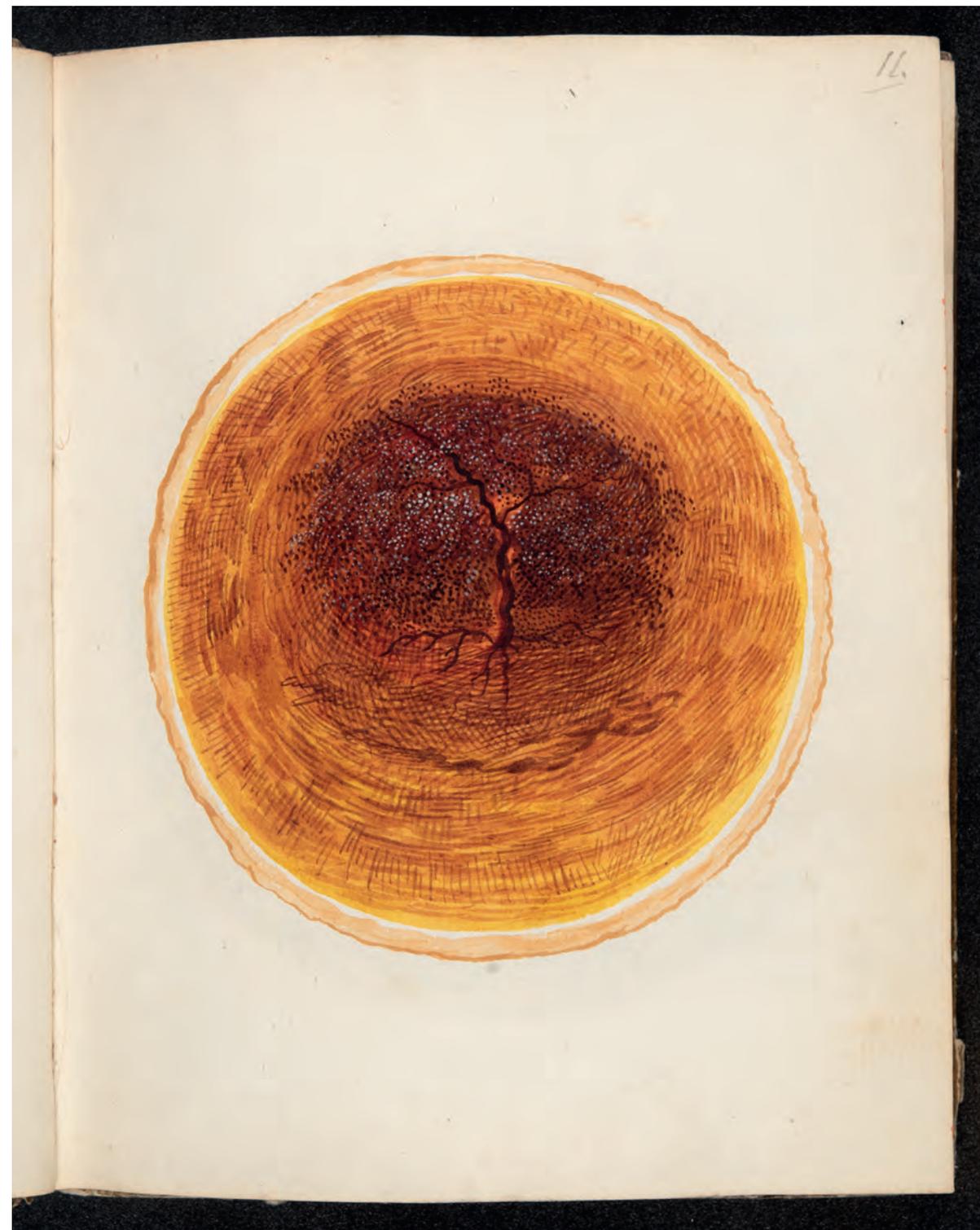
Many of our contemporary stereotypes of older women have their roots in old witch imagery, but looking through it did not lead me to an art history of commissioned oil paintings. It led to more populist images, the printing press, and the early years of mechanical reproduction. Etchings and woodcuts spread rapidly through seventeenth century Europe as the spread of print technology allowed more and more people to see, own, and share pictures. A popular format of this dispersal was the Emblem book,⁵ and looking at the ways older women were depicted in these, introduced me to the now outmoded but poetic form of an Emblem, an amalgamation of "symbolic pictures, usually accompanied by mottoes and [...] often also by a prose commentary."⁶ This approach to words in relation to images, which Emblem historian Mara Wade (1954–) defines as "a process of reciprocal reading of texts and images, whereby the back and forth between the words and the pictures creates meaning"⁷ resonated with my experience of painting, where thinking often happens more with congealing liquids than with words. A structure that encouraged a shuttling 'back and forth' relationship of intersecting meanings, gaps and overlaps, presented a way to write that might avoid the neutering capacities of the word.

The essay *Two Ends of the Emblem*,⁸ by art historian James Elkins (1955–) focusses on the point where these gaps widen.

Emblem book imagery was often simply drawn and easy to reproduce, and lent itself to being played around with. *Two Ends of the Emblem* explores this, and how initially related emblem parts were sometimes reworked until what may originally have been a concise locus of meanings becomes something quite opaque. The loss of image readability was perhaps at the core of my middle-aged-artist questions, as personal visual codes falling away, losing their context and the meanings they once had, were becoming my life. My social definition as a woman was changing, and I had been tracking this in pareidolic paintings of melting ice cream figurines and barely balanced household debris. It was, therefore, with curiosity that I turned the page to see what the deliquescing Emblem book would be. The answer was the untitled manuscript, full of watercolours, and known only by its archival designation: *MS Ferguson 115*. Elkins writes of this enigmatic and anonymous object as “one of the most amazing manuscripts the author has ever seen,”⁹ and reveals that its key is to notice that each painting uses the framing device of a cut cross-section of a tree trunk or branch. Within the age rings and bark of these painted log-ends, the artist conjures up imagined worlds. The brush strokes that define each of the circular log-ends entangle themselves with these interior scenes as they spiral inwards towards a transforming heart wood. Unsure if it even is an Emblem book, Elkins explores suggestions of alchemical and mystical symbolism.

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

⁹
Ibid., p.386



of other women artists living one, and two hundred years after this book was made. I was looking at a way of working, a way of seeing the world.

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

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

Emblematic mottoes have been replaced by a story, the tale of a middle-aged woman whose life is written into the margins. Jess's tale of desire juggles the problem that "If what 'I' want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of 'my own' desire turns out to be something of a misnomer. I am, in my desire, negotiating what has been wanted of me."¹⁰ Her involuntary engagement with this feeding, gutting loop of life, and her tense awareness of time passing, tell their own ghostly story.

The longer **emblematic text** has become this writing. As the artist of *The Earnest Search*, looking has been my primary method of research, but to bring these ideas into definition, I have been drawn to how women thinkers conceive of the world, and the key ideas I work with are weighted towards interpretations by female writers and theorists. Of the three case studies, the anonymous manuscript takes up by far the most space, as the book's place in history, where and when it was painted, had to be researched and defined before an idea of spectral embodiment could be explored. Presenting this analysis, as part of an emblematic structure balanced by fiction and images, is an experiment in artistic history writing. It attempts a crystalline structure that might catch the light of both analysis and imagination, as they each, from their differing angles, seek to define the shape of an absence.

This absence is the missing art historical body of women's lives. Women's forms are scattered throughout art history, but their daily lives are rarely told stories in an historical narrative that

Walking through the department store on the way to winter coats, she saw a podgy middle-aged woman gunning up the aisle towards her. She was that risky mix of run down and short fused, and Jess body swerved to avoid contact. To her horror the woman stepped with. Exactly with. The vision in the mirror rebounded like a kick in the head, and she felt repulsion spill and tumble through her. She hadn't recognised herself at all.

There must be a moment in every woman's life when she meets Mrs Hyde, and feels how the weave of being and appearing can separate as easily as a too small silk blouse. What becomes seen in this parting cannot be you, but she's with you to the end now. This is the hard-boiled uncanny, and you swallow a stone.

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Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Columbia University Press, 1993, p.8

There would be no new coat today. Hopes as yet un-named streamed from pockets and sleeves as Jess scuttled for the exit and air. She had only nipped into the shop for a break (a treat!) and would need to be fine again by her next appointment. She was not fine now. She walked to the further bus stop, and to the next. She bought a more expensive bottle of wine to take to dinner later, and distracted herself with thoughts of the meeting. The archivist was important. She needed access and it was far from automatic. Otherwise she had only the ghosts that slipped through the paintings themselves. She reviewed her questions and statements as she sat blindly on the top deck in December rain. She was still reeling from the realisation that in these last exhausting years spent fleeing from Mrs Dalloway, she had become sealed into Mrs Hyde instead—another object of fiction, and now mute with shock. She was brought back to herself by the ever-present sparkles of her damaged nerve endings, and as she sorted out her story, the anaesthetic of work began to mingle like milk with the acid of her encounter. Between these two, the thinking and the experience, lay her life. She wasn't ready.

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

In *The Apparitional Lesbian*, historian Terry Castle (1953–) also looks for an invisible woman, and records how, as someone unresponsive to the economy of male desire, the lesbian was widely considered not to exist before around 1900.¹¹ Castle's analysis reveals that she was nevertheless actively written into literary history, and there to be seen in early film; a figure that was present but somehow unrecognisable, a mere apparition in the eyes of a readership culturally conditioned not to recognise her form. By studying the literature from a different critical viewpoint, Castle is able to document her historic presence. The other woman rumoured to live in this no-man's land outside of the male desire economy is the ageing one, and *The Ghost Artist* seeks to define her outline within the cultural body of the manuscript, *The Paintings for the Temple*, by Hilma af Klint and the *Cells* of Louise Bourgeois. A woman's outline, and skin, are among her greatest vulnerabilities within the powerful social economy of the image however, and I argue that it is in re-thinking how a skin might be represented, that the stand-in figures within these artist's works portray this vulnerable embodiment.

The paintings of the manuscript begin as studies of wooden surfaces. Searching for images within the dents and stains of ageing logs, the artist treated these like black mirrors, seeing 'into' them, conjuring form out of the marks, cracks, and rotted holes of everyday firewood. Letting her imagination work slowly into such familiar materials was a different order of study to the recording of confirmable visual data. This artist saw herself in her imaginative projections, and recorded a wooden 'skin' that was both there, and not really there. By merging imaginative seeing-in with observation, she was creating another sort of body portrayal. Seeing herself in another form, that of a piece of wood, was a way to separate self-portrayal from body mimesis.

¹⁰

Judith Butler, *Frames of war. When is life Grievable?* Verso, London, 2009, p. xi



This is an idea I go on to explore with contemporary ideas of psychological embodiment. These were not part of the Enlightenment world-view the manuscript grew out of, but, while all artworks are residues of the cultures that made them, they also perform in relation to what we as contemporary viewers are able to see. This is what Castle laid bare, and it is a position art historian Mieke Bal (1946–), in *Quoting Caravaggio*, calls the constantly ‘re-visioning’ viewpoint of the present, where we all eternally live.¹² We are also produced by a constantly morphing present, and art works in effect morph with us, shape-shifting in the ways they can be seen. *The Ghost Artist* has been written from Bal’s eternal present, with Castle’s magnifying glass in hand, and an old Emblem book for a pattern.

12

Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio, Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999, pp.3–15

13

Theorist Martha Nussbaum has a handy check-list of objectification, lest anyone lose track:

1. instrumentality: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes;
2. denial of autonomy: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;
3. inertness: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;
4. fungibility: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;
5. violability: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;
6. ownership: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold);
7. denial of subjectivity: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

See Martha Nussbaum, ‘Objectification,’ in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 24, issue 4, October 1995, p.275. In *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, philosopher Rae Langton adds silencing, the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak. Oxford University Press, 2009, p.229

14

Fiona Jardine, *Trogloodytes*, Paisley Museum, 11.02.11 to 03.04.2011.

An apparitional figure rises out of this, one that rejects portraiture as an adequate form of portrayal. Women’s representation as images created for the pleasure of others has been their historic submersion beneath an objectifying cultural gaze, a social reality that much of art history has both reflected and reiterated.¹³ This powerful cultural force slides over the gaps left by women’s unrecorded lives; the ghosted subjectivities that lie silently beneath it. In Part Two I employ a Lacanian understanding of this force to think about the manuscript as a more fantastic form of portrayal, and I connect the liberating potential of such imagining to more contemporary artworks that at first, I only sensed inhabited these unmarked graves. *The Ghost Artist* is the path this haunting recognition took in becoming the ‘cold knowledge’ needed to define these relations.

Inscription in the art historical record is further explored in an analysis of a curatorial experiment by Scottish artist Fiona Jardine (1976–). The 2011 exhibition *Trogloodytes*¹⁴ also sought to tease apart the seemingly secure relationship between body description and subject description that portraiture historically represents. Jardine was given access to the collections of Paisley Museum, and from these, she selected a group of commissioned portrait paintings that she presented alongside a group of ceramic pots. In a set of visual relationships carefully choreographed around a written text and the museum’s title plates, the power of naming was re-distributed, and Jardine was able to reveal portraiture as primarily an emblematic, rather than a naturalistic, vessel of identity. I consider how the artist’s ‘re-visioning’ destabilized the dominance of traditional portraiture as an adequate portrayal of a subject, and moved the viewer towards an understanding of the imaginative, fantasising potential of other sorts of cultural mirrors. Setting this in relation to the destabilised self-portrayals of painter Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) and photographer Cindy Sherman (1954–), the specific function the manuscript artist asked of her blackly mirroring logs comes into renewed focus.

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

Endless looking for an interior beneath the surface of the bodies and images with which we are forever ensnared is the catastrophe of living (in)skin. Skinned alive, our bodies are sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.¹⁵

15

Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, Routledge, London, 1997, p.42

Phelan is interested in those who struggle to find their identities performatively returned to them within culture, and in how the temporality of performance, its constant renewal, might offer a form capable of touching on this. My proposal is that the manuscript both acknowledges and responds to this need for ‘endless looking for an interior beneath the surface’ in its serial re-imagining of what a meaningful reflection might look like, when the mirror that was this artist’s cultural world, returned only her absence back to her. Mourning the passage of time, of life, is deeply inscribed in the choice of the log as a stand-in for such an absent body, marked as it is by its annual age rings, and destined for the flames. Seeing the outline of an invisible Self within such images, is to both see, and suggest that the artist saw, a ghost. However, as María Pilar Blanco (d.o.b. unknown) and Esther Peeren (1976–), in *Conceptualizing Spectralities*, make clear, while a ghost may have

insight to offer, especially into those matters that are commonly considered not to matter [...] the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside it, excluded from perception and, consequently, from both the archive as the depository of the sanctioned, acknowledged past and politics as the (re)imagined present and future.¹⁶

16

María Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, ‘Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities,’ in *The Spectralities Reader, Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, p.9

The manuscript spends its days in a university archive, but as a ‘tangible ambiguity’ with virtually no contextualising identity. The speculative figure I conjure from its pages is also far from what the ‘sanctioned, acknowledged past’ has so far considered to be there. This figure is, additionally, one that has been ‘commonly considered not to matter,’ that of an older woman. The artist’s sketchy grasp of human anatomy reveals she was probably untrained, a lack of access suggested by every brush stroke made as she tries, nevertheless, to picture her world. Her outline within the shadows of her stand-in, wooden, multiple body reveals a form of self-portrayal inscribed with awareness of its cultural invisibility, but which takes the re-presentation of this absent presence, within aesthetic space, as precisely the figure capable of holding the ‘form of her love.’ By painting the surface of a log in terms of what is both there and not there, these paintings become a sort of log-book, or record of a life, and with this, I propose that the artist found a way to paint herself into a broader cultural record that thoughtlessly erased

this as a possibility. To look at the mirror on the wall, and paint what she saw there, would not have achieved this result, as the visible surface of her skin was also the location of her objectification, or loss of subjectivity. Asking an *actual* domestic object to stand in for this presented a vehicle of return with which she could insistently record her lived experience, while also acknowledging its obliteration within the given cultural forms of record-keeping in her time. Seeing life within the bounding surfaces of interchangeable, inert, and unfeeling bits of wood is to return a vision of a silent domestic object, through which subjectivity nevertheless relentlessly presses.



Hilma af Klint, *The Ten Largest, Adulthood. No. 6, Group IV, 1907*. Tempera on paper, glued to canvas. 315x234cm, collection of The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm

Such knowing, metaphorical, possession is also traceable in *The Paintings for the Temple*, by Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. This cycle of paintings was created in the early years of the twentieth century, but was virtually unknown until the early 2000's. Like the manuscript, Af Klint's work has been held within an archive, but barely exhibited by an art world that has only recently become interested. For fifty years they existed as art world ghosts, in an ironic material re-enactment of the invisible spirits that the artist wrote of as haunting her own interiority. From the age of 44, Af Klint strove to find a visual form for these inner experiences, and previous commentaries on the artist's work have mostly focussed on approaches to *The Paintings for the Temple* suggested by the ways the artist herself wrote about this process. By looking at the work itself however, and connecting it with previously un-researched aspects of the artist's life, I have found connections to the Af Klint family's map making history, and to the Swedish Life Reform movement, to which many of the artist's friends dedicated their lives. Aligning the material skins of the paintings, as objects, with maps of the sea, I find a metaphor for the body of the culturally invisible creative woman, tattooed and returned to visibility with patterns 'mapped' onto skins made of paint. By then tracing the artist's friendship with Swedish Life Reform activist Ottilia Adelborg (1855–1936), I find compelling evidence that these paintings are a political visualization of the beliefs and interests of the Reform movement. The patterns embedded there repeat embroidery patterns from Adelborg's collection of folk textiles, built up as part of a wider cultural impetus to preserve Swedish traditions. They are the patterns anonymously designed by countless peasant women seeking to decorate their lives in remote farming communities. Brought into the part-bodies of a cycle of paintings conceived as a single entity, like the fifty-two paintings of the anonymous manuscript, *The Paintings for the Temple* unite these personal and political image histories within a cyclical body that is infused with aesthetic life by the artist's understanding of the all-permeating force of light as a sexually freeing concept within Nordic Romanticism.

In Jess's mind a clear cryogenic vessel overflowed with liquid nitrogen, which boiled forever down and outwards with her need to burn.



Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*, 1989–1993. Steel, limestone, glass. 236.2x210.8x218.4 cm. Collection Tate Modern, London

The conceptual figure of return that these light-filled paintings define, and which connects them to the manuscript, comes back in a different form within the visually permeable skins of the late *Cell* cycle by French American artist Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois entered psychoanalysis when she was forty, and her later work is deeply informed by her understanding of this approach to ourselves in the world. Her first brush with Freudian ideas had been in the Paris of her youth however, when she had mingled with the Surrealists. She never joined this artistic movement, but her later work revisits Surrealist approaches to the submerged forces of the unconscious. The men of Surrealism had been motivated by the revolutionary potential of transgressive desire, but Bourgeois redirected their approach to make sense of their method in relation to her female experience. I will argue that the taboo she consistently touches on is not that of transgressive desire, but socially disallowed female rage. In my final chapter, *A Room of One's Own*, I explore how the transparent conceptual figure I trace in the shadows of the manuscript, and in the light filled bodies of the *Temple* cycle, can be traced in the *Cells* in its angry form. These are sculptural bodies that we literally see 'through.' With the invasive power of vision, we cut into dirty cages filled with an alchemy of mutilated body parts, often placed within a litter of used up domesticity. Catching sight of ourselves mirrored into this world, through skins of glass and wire walls, we become affectively entwined in the artist's screaming structures.

I have approached *The Paintings for the Temple* and the manuscript with the same psychoanalytic ideas that are commonly used to explore Bourgeois' work, and looking back in this way may only be possible from a present that includes the *Cells*. However, all these bodies-of-work resonate with a similar, insistent, thrum of internal life that these ideas merely give words to. Each visual realisation of the ghostly metaphorical carrier of this life has been found within the skin of a domestic object. These stand-ins, for the visible skins of the women who made them, are given aesthetic vitality through the meditative re-presentation of the sight and touch of the world at their hand's reach, the world experienced every day from inside those skins. In finding a conceptual metaphor for the visible object mingled with invisible subjectivity, these aesthetic bodies offer artistic resting places for the endless searcher 'sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.' To see these bodies-of-work, which are built up in serial form, we are obliged to dance in time, looking back, forward, sometimes around, building meaning from bits and pieces as our oscillations, through pages, round and through a sculpture, round a room, require both memory and imagination to patch readings together out of parts. From its continual present, the dance takes us back to a speculative reading of an old book as an

anonymous record of an ageing woman, negotiating picture-making in an attempt to make sense of her inner world. The dance finds her tracing her life within an aesthetic field that possibly offered her no other mirror, and that is only being recognised and valued now, centuries later.





CONCLUSION

*What had she failed to reproduce
that now required all this damned
scribbling? Who was it for?*

Who was the ghost artist? Who is she today? This study has presented a conceptual figurine whom I argue has danced her way, unnoticed, through art history. A figure taken up by women artists who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. A figure who has found fantasised forms of portrayal to step into, and whose aesthetic vitality thrums within the skins of these self-knowing stand-ins. A figure I have found within the logs, maps, embroideries, mirrors, and windows re-presented by artists working across three centuries.

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

with her as she painted a new sort of body, one that might hold her subjective experience, an *imago* she was unlikely to have found within the image world around her. This art historical lack has left that painted body unrecognised until now, but once seen, it is as blurrily insistent, beneath its religious and alchemical masks, as the one beneath Cindy Sherman's masquerades.

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

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

She poured a glass of wine from the bottle in the kitchen and went back to the window. The low clouds had become pale grey against the now inky darkness of the cumulus, and the sailing ship had become a lunatic head tossed upwards, and cackling at the end of the light.



At around the same time as the notebook was being painted, and the gentlemen scholars of Europe were collecting and classifying their Enlightenment world, the Emperor of China was also busy cataloguing. In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, historian Neil McGregor (1946–) recounts what happened when this Emperor came across an object he could not define. He was struggling to locate the history of an ancient jade ring, or *bi*, and in attempting to classify it, he compared it to other, similar, objects, collected what historical traces he could find, and admired its aesthetic achievements. However, he remained baffled as to the ring's actual use, and so he wrote a poem about his speculations, and had it carved into the back of the *bi*. This final intervention draws breath, but McGregor writes that he also admired the emperor's method because

thinking about the past [...] through things is always about poetic re-creation. We acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty, and must then find a different kind of knowing, aware that objects have been made by people essentially like us.³⁷⁴

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Neil McGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Penguin Books, London 2012, p. xviii

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

To do this, I have written a lot about tiny flicks of a brush, the spreading of mute blotches of colour, surfaces worked and scrubbed. These processes are not much like the process of writing about them however, and when I came to make my own paintings, my material thinking, such marks went up my arms and all over the floor. The results are the visual lacunae that have offered resting places within this narrative, taken from the serial bodies of *The Ice Cream Paintings* (2008–2016) and *D. I. Y.* (2014 to present). These paintings were made as life coagulated on me along with my paint, and built up as wrinkles, memories, and the twitchy scabs that irritate well-planned intellectual intentions. Slippery paint is a constant reminder of the unknowable qualities that are also held within completed artworks. This mute quality of the visual, the part beyond analysis, was known by those who made Emblem books, and has pressed through every aspect of *The Ghost Artist*, as it takes on marginalised lives and unrecorded histories. My initial glimpse of the historical body of a woman artist, a presence marked only by its absence, led me into

She took in the dark peach sky as tannin seeped through her tongue and her pupils dilated to cope with the fast waning light. The mouth on the cackling head was now wide open, and a bird was lifting out of it, spectral wings pointed down on each side as it ascended.

a spectral world of women's stories, and to summon its invisible bodies, I have had to look in black mirrors as well as books. Irrational joys and anxieties have undoubtedly seeped into the process, but believing that *these* historical figures might be 'essentially like' me, I have mingled written history with my own experience and imagination, and sought to cast new light on these bodies without organs, as a salute to the many bodies with, who sit in the shadows of this tale.

Art works are not lives, but sometimes their wordless presence can help to connect us to our own unspeakable selves. When we are 'touched' by a work, we are changed in some incremental way, and it was such a touch that sparked this writing. During a visit to a Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Freud Museum in London,³⁷⁵ I became stopped while looking into the industrial cage of a Portrait Cell in a small upstairs room of the analyst's live-work family home. Mesmerised by a blasted lump of sewn serge, I had to strangle the impossible need to put my hand into its dark recess—a hole that spoke to some unknowable part of me. When I finally walked away, it was into a room full of cases displaying the artist's notes. Rage and fear spilled directly out of every scribbled detail, but not the vital experience of my own life being grabbed and held, and so I returned to woollen cavities, stitched up eyes, and claustrophobic rooms. Downstairs, a marble baboon³⁷⁶ stared at me, and I left struggling to control both legs and tears. Spiralling out of the encounter came this writing on the snakes and clouds and invisible worlds of the notebook; spirals that have bent and curled through *The Ten Largest*. They are roads into the vanishing point, or out of it, and they are the routing of our vision into the *Cells*. They spiral back to a bloody knife on the ground.

The capacity of an art work to hold and share intensity can never be expressed as 'cold knowledge' as it is a constantly morphing power that exists between a material object and the evanescent ghosts of all our unknowable interiorities. Recognising this however, brings up the question of whose interiorities are deemed to matter to societies, and where the art might be found that each of us can recognise as our own, and revisit ourselves with. Searching for the seemingly invisible record of older women's life experiences led me to the life painted into the notebook, and studying how it performed its work, allowed me to connect it to that of other older women, and find a commonality in their practices. Negotiating this into visibility has meant looking at these better-known works from a different point of view to that already written down. The ghost story that this has created is one that records cultural negotiations between visibility and invisibility, who or what can be seen, has been seen, and who or what is in the shadows. In presenting these works of women artists as forms of portrayal, held within things, the woman portrayed 'as' thing is also present. I have

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Louise Bourgeois, *The Return of the Repressed*, curated by Philip Larratt-Smith, The Freud Museum, London, 2012

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This was *The Baboon of Thoth*, 30 BC – 395 AD. Thoth was the Egyptian god of wisdom and learning. Freud is known to have liked stroking the marble surface of this object, and it sat in a prominent position on his working desk (see the historical photographs in *Freud's Sculpture*, published by The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006.) I do not know which *Cell* disturbed me so much. When I searched the catalogue raisonné, the work I remember is nowhere to be found.

focussed on art that resists and returns this dehumanisation, and I have found it in older women's art practices. It may be that it takes half a lifetime to find a way to work out, and work with, the rage that all these works, in their different ways, insist on revealing. It may be that this is the raging embrace of the freedom that the invisibility of ageing skin, as the visible erasure of reproductive capacity, also brings.

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

As the human becomes thing and the mutual becomes one-sided and the given becomes stolen and sold, objectification comes to define femininity, and one-sidedness comes to define mutuality, and force comes to define consent as pictures and words become the forms of possession and use through which women are actually possessed and used. ³⁷⁷

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Catherine McKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp.25-26

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

