

Neither fused nor rejected

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'I had a woman come into the gallery and say 'Oh, you're the model'. And I said 'Yes, I'm the model - and I'm also the artist. This is my show. She didn't expect that'
(Hannah Wilke 1978)¹

'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' is the title of an essay by Luce Irigaray that explores the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in patriarchal societies, but it could also be seen to address the necessity to conceive of the desire of the feminine 'Other'. For Irigaray it is critical for women to address their relationship to genealogy and desire simultaneously, since women must have both a history of genealogy from which they 'become' and a horizon of desire towards which their becoming is projected. For her:

To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being. Obviously, this road never ends...The becoming of women is never over and done with, is always in gestation.²

Irigaray uses the word 'morphology' to indicate the form or forms of an embodied subject, and the relationships between these forms, which amounts to a combination of consciousness and sentience and cannot be divided into the restrictive binaries of mind / body, thought / matter or interiority / exteriority. These forms would not be static, but would be in a perpetual state of becoming that would be appropriate to the subject's sexual specificity. If woman does not explore her own morphology, she is in danger of "using or reusing that to which man has already given form(s), particularly of herself/selves, working what has already been worked and losing herself".³ The above statement by Hannah Wilke demonstrates how woman has historically been viewed as the beautiful object of contemplation in art practices, a position in which her becoming is often motivated by the desires of others rather than by her own desires.

¹ Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke 1940-1993* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende, 2000) 141.

² Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 61-63.

³ Luce Irigaray, 'A Natal Lacuna', in *Women's Art Magazine* 58 (May / June 1994) 11-13.

Irigaray suggests “we might suspect the *phallus* (Phallus) of being the *contemporary figure of a god jealous of his prerogatives*”.⁴ She sees Freudian psychoanalysis as presenting a 'dream of symmetry' between the sexes that negates and represses the representation of sexual difference. Through her writing, she attempts to create the possibility for multiple economies of desire, so that at least two - one feminine and one masculine - may co-exist in the positive expression of their differences. For Irigaray it is vital that woman should speak as woman, but this concept of 'woman' is not a monolithic essence that has a fixed historical definition, but is instead the site of multiple and complex experiences of real women from differing cultural, economic and social backgrounds.

For Irigaray, to pursue a feminine becoming is not only desirable, it is absolutely necessary, unless women are to remain the trajectory for men's becomings. While woman remains the negative shadow of a male subjectivity, the product of the reduction of difference to sameness, she points towards death: “My death is inside your own. We shall die together if you do not let me go outside your sameness”.⁵ In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray employs various strategic positions in order to expose the weaknesses in the 'voice of the father' and to reveal why it is that the feminine cannot be articulated within Western culture except as a reflective mirror to a stable masculine identity. One strategy available to women is to 'assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it'⁶. She proposes that women could adopt a mimetic strategy which means:

to resubmit herself - in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in / by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*.⁷

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 67.

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1992) 14.

⁶ Irigaray (1985): 76

⁷ Irigaray (1985): 76.

Irigaray sees Plato as the first in a line of philosophers to place greater emphasis on the principles of identity, oneness and visibility. The legacy of Greek culture and language was to provoke a shift in focus from proximity, touch and fluidity, characteristic of pre-Greek matrilineal cultures, towards a distant gaze that in turn creates greater subject/object differentiation. Woman is thus prevented from entering into her own sexually specific subjectivity, since “woman will...constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her”.⁸ For Irigaray, the masculine gaze is disembodied and linked to an abstract coldness creating an ever widening gap between spectator and the spectacle. Under the patriarchal economy: “*Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth*”.⁹ When sight is privileged, her sexual identity “which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*”.¹⁰ The patriarchal privileging of (sun)light, reason and the intelligible, under the metaphor of 'sight' is for Irigaray foreign to the feminine for woman ‘takes pleasure more from touching than from looking’. If she allows herself to enter into the dominant patriarchal economy, she signals “her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation”.¹¹

Her desire to expose Western ocularcentrism has caused Irigaray to be perceived by some critics as an anti-visual theorist, who privileges touch over sight in a simple reversal of hierarchies. If ocularcentrism is dominant in Western culture and language, and women are the target of an objectifying gaze, how can women artists develop a visual practice that unravels the patriarchal obsession with sight but does not exclude the specificity of body and sex? The artists in this exhibition presented us with a number of strategies to confound the male gaze and ways to represent their morphology or 'becoming' without being reduced to an object or fetish.

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) 13.

⁹ Irigaray (1978): 48.

¹⁰ Irigaray (1978): 26.

On entering the Ormeau Baths Gallery, the first image that the visitor saw was *Rosebud* (1976), Hannah Wilke's flesh coloured latex sculpture, which spanned the back wall of the lower gallery. Wilke's work generated a lot of controversy during the late 60's and 70's in relation to her sculptural forms, which resemble female genitalia, and the use of her naked body for stills, films and performances. She was critical of woman's position in traditional artworks as "the anonymous figurine, the object for the men to construct or deconstruct" and wished instead to 'create an iconography about a woman by a woman'.¹² While her artworks have been labelled by some critics as narcissistic, her playfulness and wit revealed in both the works and their titles suggests more that she used narcissism and voyeurism strategically in order to reclaim woman's body and image for herself. In *I Object, Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (1977-78), Wilke's naked body is photographed on rocks. Like Irigaray, Wilke re-uses the language of the father to playfully announce that woman objects to her position as the object of a masculine gaze. Wilke's latex sculptures, such as *Rosebud*, as well as the *One-Fold Gestural* ceramic sculptures depict forms that challenge the supremacy of the phallus. At the same time, they are not simply a representation of female genitalia, as Wilke says, "Why did the critics have to see it as only cunt? They wanted to bring it down to its lowest level. Look at these things as form".¹³ They could be seen as Wilke's expression of her morphology, her desire to become. The articulation of a specifically feminine desire is both essential and problematic. It is important to ask, where do women become woman from? From what speaking position? How do women know that their becoming is prompted by their own desire rather than that of another? The complexity of these questions surrounding desire are at the heart of Wilke's practice and she was very aware that "(a)sking people to take pleasure in their own bodies puts them in fear more than anything else".¹⁴ Irigaray sees feminine desire within the current

¹¹ Irigaray (1985): 26.

¹² Hannah Wilke: 140.

¹³ Hannah Wilke: 150.

¹⁴ Hannah Wilke quoted in Mary Horlock, 'Between a Rock and a Soft Place', in Mark Sladen, Ed., *Helen Chadwick* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Barbican Art Gallery and Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004) 33-45; 36

phallogocentric economy as “shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality”.¹⁵
Not only is this the case, but it is in the interest of the patriarchy that it remain so:

Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.¹⁶

The use of the female body by women artists since the 1960's has been persistently received with derision or suspicion by many critics, including some feminists, who have read the practices of Wilke, Carolee Schneeman and Helen Chadwick as the creation of titillating images of the female body for the voyeuristic male. As part of the project *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other*, OBG screened Wilke's controversial work *Through the Large Glass* (1976) in which she performed a deadpan parody of a striptease behind Duchamp's famous work exploring erotic relationships, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (c.1912). Wilke sought in this work and in others to expose and problematise the objectification of the female body in Western culture. Wilke said in 1978, “I found it really interesting that people would say, ‘Oh, she takes her clothes off at the drop of a hat’, but I do it only politically”.¹⁷ Over twenty years later, Helen Chadwick was also heavily criticised for the use of her naked body as the medium of her work. Chadwick's use of body images is based on the principle that the body “is the most direct means an artist has to explore notions of identity”.¹⁸ The self portrait *Vanity* (1986), in which the artist looks at her own semi-naked body through a circular mirror, generated extreme hostility, but for Chadwick the attempt to act as subject, object and author of this work and others was a strategy to circumnavigate the voyeurism of the viewer, who “was completely expelled from the sovereign space...the only way to enter was through a kind of mirror identification”.¹⁹

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray (1985): 30.

¹⁶ Luce Irigaray (1985): 77.

¹⁷ Hannah Wilke: 143.

¹⁸ Helen Chadwick quoted in Charles Hall ‘Sense and sensuality’, in *Art Review* (July-August 1994) (London, England) 50-52; 52.

¹⁹ Helen Chadwick quoted in Mark Sladen, ‘A Red Mirror’, in Mark Sladen, Ed.: 13-32; 18

In other works, rather than presenting a sanitised and pleasing image of the feminine body, Chadwick confronted the viewer with an uncomfortably close experience of matter, for example in the exhibition *Of Mutability* at the Serpentine Gallery in 1986, where the work *Carcass* consisted of decaying organic matter encased in a glass tower. *Carcass* and other works such as *Loop My Loop* (1991) insert themselves into the seventeenth century *vanitas* tradition, in which beautiful women's bodies or decaying matter were often used to remind viewers that death is only around the corner. However, Chadwick's images operate less as a moral device than as a celebration of life's inevitable and immanent decay, which can in fact be a source of pleasure rather than of fear. In *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other, Cocoa* (1994) was surrounded by the *Wreaths to Pleasure* (1992-93) series of circular photographs depicting flamboyant blooms in the process of sinking into seas of household products such as Germoline and Swarfiga. Excessiveness, indulgence and sensuous experience reach their climax in *Cocoa*, which wickedly both complies with and subverts the patriarchal prohibition of feminine pleasure. The circular structure containing one tonne of bubbling molten chocolate, with its central 'phallic' fountain dominated the upper floor of the gallery at OBG, and the sickeningly seductive smell of chocolate pervaded the entire exhibition. An eerie and high pitched whinnying coming from the installation of Lucy Gunning's video *The Horse Impressionists* (1994) floated through the thick air generated by *Cocoa*. This strange intermingling of senses, which characterised much of the exhibition, worked to undermine the patriarchal privileging of sight, pointing instead to an Irigarayan interplay of all the senses, which may equate more closely to woman's pleasure.

In *The Republic*, Plato denies most artists access to the Ideal State because he / she “wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements of the mind to the detriment of reason”.²⁰ The best artists will always keep impulses to imitate subordinated to Logos, but immature people, in a childlike way, will carry the mimetic tendency to extremes, imitating the crowing of cocks, the yapping of

²⁰ Plato, *The Republic* Book 10 Ch.2 (London: Penguin Books, 1987) 373 ab.

dogs, the neighing of horses, women railing, in love, in labour. When subjected to Platonic analysis, *The Horse Impressionists* could be regarded as a classic example of dangerous, hysterical mimetic artwork. Gunning advertised in a newspaper for women with an unusual talent: the ability to mimic a horse neighing. She interviewed and selected five women from the handful of responses that came back over the next six months. She wanted to work particularly with women who had developed this ability in a serious way as a child and then retained it as adults. Gunning filmed them in this activity with a Super 8 camera in different public locations, such as a park or a street. The women in the video display embarrassment and shyness, covered up by laughter. One woman repeatedly walks in and out of the camera frame, revealing her discomfort about being filmed in this act. In between these expressions of self-consciousness a strange phenomenon occurs whereby imitation gives way to a genuine sense that, for brief moments, these women are actually becoming horses and in the process sharing a non-sequential language through which they experience pleasure.

Historically, women have been seen as closer to 'nature' and therefore to animals, providing justification for assuming that women are more irrational and less capable of logical reasoning and that therefore their civil duties should be limited. Her supposed closeness to the animal kingdom is threatening to the Oedipal family unit. According to Hélène Cixous:

No matter how submissive and docile she may be in relation to the masculine order, she still remains the threatening possibility of savagery, the unknown quantity in the household whole.²¹

While Freud saw it as essential to reintegrate the hysteric into society through his 'talking cure', theorists such as Irigaray, Cixous, Phelan and Chisholm have all perceived hysteria as a strategic rebellion against the patriarchal order and its expectations of femininity, which position Woman as lacking. In order to enter

²¹ Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 91.

into the 'talking cure', woman must renounce her sexual specificity and adapt to a system of representations that does not serve her sex. Phelan argues that psychoanalysis attempts to reorder the jumbled narrative that hysteria presents thereby submitting the body to a chronological order. However, the body does not necessarily experience things in the same way as consciousness. It has its own rhythms and memories, which are expressed independently of narrative. A symptom is generally perceived as pathological, but not all symptoms are dangerous or destructive, they simply refer to 'bodily expressions not yet interpreted'. Phelan questions the need to *always* translate symptoms into a narrative, for this assumes that "talking is better than dancing, that language is more expressive than somatic utterances".²²

The Horse Impressionists could also be read as a form of strategic hysteria that challenges the Oedipal model of subjective development. In this sense it is closer to the concepts of becoming proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, who are highly critical of the Oedipal family structure and the way that it is perceived as a microcosm of a hierarchical social structure. They see this model as limited from the outset, enforcing specific and conservative roles onto members of the family by shutting down other possible models for being and becoming. Their rejection of psychoanalysis in favour of 'schizoanalysis' enables them to propose radical, post-familial concepts of subjectivity. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Freud ignored the becoming horse of Little Hans in his famous case study, focusing only on how the horse represented his father. Just because the child has not 'really' transformed into an animal, this does not mean that the relationship between child and animal is simply metaphoric. When children and adults enter into a becoming-animal they "bear witness to an inhuman connivance with the animal, rather than an Oedipal symbolic community".²³ Becomings are liminal in

²² Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 50.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1988) 274.

that they are neither this nor that, nor the relationship between the two, but the in-between, the threshold, the border.

Irigaray considers it of primary importance to repossess and reinvent images of the desiring female subject from the fragments of herself which can be found scattered in the phallogentric imaginary. The inability to locate woman's pleasure within patriarchal culture and particularly Freudian psychoanalysis is aptly illustrated in Donald Kuspit's reading of Ana Mendieta's practice. According to Kuspit, she deals with her 'conflicts' with men:

by returning to a "prelapsarian", that is paradisiac virginal state, in which she has no adult sexual needs and no awareness of man. But then the father's powerful penis unexpectedly appears in her consciousness, for Mendieta has a lingering resentment, even hatred, of her mother - no doubt irrational - because of the separation, for which she blames her mother. It inflicted a narcissistic wound, which, ultimately, only the father can heal, however much Mendieta tries to heal it by returning to Mother Earth.²⁴

This emphasis on the damaged mother-daughter relationship reduces Mendieta's practice to that of the typified Freudian castrated female who hates her mother and is consumed by penis envy. Kuspit links Mendieta's body and the earth with the romanticised pastoral myth of virgin territory. That Mendieta's sexuality might be active, not passive, that both her body and the earth might be conceived of as sexually desirous, touching, not just being touched, that she might be attempting to articulate an altogether different *feminine* economy of desire is not addressed. Another comment reveals just how threatening such a feminine desire might be: "Mendieta preferred to have narcissistic intercourse with Mother Earth than sexual intercourse with man".²⁵ In other words, if Mendieta's sexuality and desire cannot be slotted into dominant phallogentric discourses, she must somehow be asexual or frigid.

Much of the work produced in the Earth Art movement, with which Mendieta's work has been associated, did nothing to address the traditional association

²⁴ Donald Kuspit, 'Ana Mendieta, Autonomous Body', in Gloria Moure, *Ana Mendieta* (Ediciones Poligrafa, S.A. and Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1996) 35-83; 62.

²⁵ Donald Kuspit: 50.

between the feminine and nature. Many of the artists treated the land as a sculptural material which could be moulded and shaped at will, in an appropriation that Robert Smithson has called “the ecological Oedipal Complex”.²⁶ Mendieta stated in 1977 that “men artists working with nature have imposed themselves on it”.²⁷ In contrast, her approach to land and earth reveals a deep understanding of the ties which exist between earth and body, for *both* sexes and the need to reconnect with earth continually and not simply as a temporary means to escape the pressures of urban living.

The works that constitute Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series, including the *Salina Cruz* series which formed part of the exhibition *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other*, were executed in Iowa and Mexico between 1973 and 1980. While in much of her earlier performance work she used the physical presence of her body as a medium and transmitter of her art, the *Siluetas* series marks a time when Mendieta removed her actual body from the work, but left a trace of its presence-in-absence. This was a curious strategy in relation to much of the contemporary American feminist projects, where many women artists were demanding a visibility that they had previously been denied (for example, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, and Mary Beth Edelson). While Mendieta was sympathetic towards the American feminist movement, she saw it as 'basically a white middle class movement' and she saw her own position as an ethnic minority as being radically different and requiring different strategies.

In an unpublished statement about her practice, Mendieta had this to say in 1981:

I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth / body sculptures I become one with the earth.²⁸

²⁶ Robert Smithson quoted in Anna Raine, 'Embodied Geographies: Subjectivity and Materiality in the work of Ana Mendieta', in Griselda Pollock, Ed., *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 228-249; 235.

²⁷ Ana Mendieta quoted in Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) 18.

²⁸ Ana Mendieta quoted in Raine: 242.

This statement opens up a series of possible criticisms of her practice. Because of her Cuban origins and gender, she is in danger of being romanticised as 'primitive' and exotic. Her work and her statement could be read as reinforcing the essentialist association between the female body and the earth that some feminists have been anxious to deconstruct. As 'woman' under patriarchy has typically been essentialised as passive, natural, receptive, emotional and irrational, it is not surprising that many women are resistant to any form of categorisation that might limit their horizon of becoming. Irigaray's writings have been criticised by many feminists as being unashamedly essentialist. She is perceived as attempting to define Woman in her sexual difference from Man by making recourse to anatomy and biology, however, as Diana Fuss has pointed out, it is necessary to distinguish between practices that *deploy* essentialism and those that *lapse* into essentialism.²⁹

In this context, Mendieta's statement could be seen as a form of strategic essentialism, operating as tactically as Irigaray's texts. Beginning with a refusal to deny maternal origins, Mendieta also refuses to fix origins: "(t)here is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning...There is above all the search for origin".³⁰ Two sentences in this statement initially seem to be contradictory - 'there is no original past to redeem...There is above all the search for origins' - but in fact, Mendieta is making a distinction between historical origins, posited by a patriarchal linearity and origins in terms of subjectivity. The works mark a constant return to origins, a ceaseless exchange between body and earth that is cyclical and which challenges notions of the linear development of the subject along already pre-ordained paths organised by dominant patriarchal discourses. As the repetition in the *Siluetas* series suggests, Mendieta does not advocate a once and for all return to earth / mother as a solution to identity or gender problems. Her objective is

²⁹ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 20.

³⁰ Ana Mendieta quoted in Blocker: 34.

never stasis, but rather to keep the figure mobile so that identity and subjectivity are a fluid part of the process of becoming. This approach is an effective challenge to the dominant desire for stable identity that is always founded on the rejection and exclusion of what is perceived as not Self: the Other. The series points instead to intersubjective relationships between subjects as well as reciprocal relationships between subjects and the earth. Mendieta therefore plays between essentialism and construction, naming and un-naming.

While Irigaray and Mendieta play with essences and constructions, neither remains in one position long enough to be fixed. The following example of Irigaray's theorisation of female specificity could aptly apply to Mendieta's approach to identity and gender categorisation:

Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her*. She is not infinite but neither is she a unit(y), such as letter, number, figure in a series, proper noun, unique object (in a) world of the senses, simply ideality in an intelligible whole, entity of a foundation, etc. This incompleteness in her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say that she is ever univocally nothing. No metaphor completes her. Never is she this, then that, this and that.³¹

Mendieta insists on an embodied subjectivity, but suggests that both the female body and the maternal body exceed the discourses that currently define them.

Irigaray makes it her project to try to create conceptual spaces where women can live as women and symbols of feminine creative power can be revitalised and reassessed, starting with the womb, which needs to be recognised as the 'primal space in which we become body'. She believes that there is an absence of a symbolic understanding of the bonds that tie the infant to the mother in the womb in the patriarchal economy and that psychoanalysis is particularly reticent on this subject. She asks:

And where are we to find the imaginary and symbolic of life in the womb and the first *corps-à-corps* with the mother? In what darkness, what madness, do they lie abandoned?³²

³¹ Luce Irigaray (1978): 229.

³² Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993): 16.

There is no genuine attempt in Freud or Lacan to articulate the mother's subjective position, although, as E. Ann Kaplan has pointed out, "one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her - but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration".³³ Irigaray suggests that Freud articulates in modern terms not a new theory of subjectivity, but an old one that reaffirms the patriarchal economy and limits identity to sameness. There is really only one kind of subjectivity articulated in Freud's account and that is a masculine one, the feminine principle merely serves this subjectivity.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory conceives of the child's relationship with its mother as one of fusional bliss and undifferentiated symbiosis, which Freud sees as both a paradise and a state of annihilation. Mendieta's *Siluetas* series have often been assumed to represent a desire to be reunited with Mother Earth in a fusional union that is nostalgic for inter-uterine oceanic bliss. However, the works comprising the *Siluetas* series do not depict such a union, they depict ambiguous borders between the figure and the earth, tentative boundaries which are at times more firm and at other times extremely hazy.

In her essay 'On the Maternal Order',³⁴ Irigaray records an interview with biologist H el ene Rouch that explores a different type of *in utero* relation between mother and child than that described by patriarchy, relations which are "respectful of the life of both".³⁵ Although the placenta mediates between the body of mother and foetus, there is never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. In addition it also regulates exchanges between the two organisms, modifying the maternal metabolism and redistributing maternal substances for the benefit of both the mother and foetus. The functions of the placenta therefore indicate that the mother-child relationship cannot be reduced either to a fusional one or to an aggressive parasitical one, where the child is seen as a vampire in the mother's

³³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 3.

³⁴ Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 37-44.

³⁵ Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (1993): 38.

body, draining her of resources. These readings, suggests Rouch, are culturally determined descriptions, unsubstantiated by biology. Instead, the biological facts suggest that there is always a recognition of the Other, of the non-Self, by the mother, which is continuously negotiated. On this basis, Irigaray suggests that “differentiation already exists during pregnancy”.³⁶ Instead of a mutual recognition of subjects, the framework that is frequently used to explore differentiation stresses the establishment of boundaries and separateness, leading to a radical dichotomy between subject and object, ocularcentrism and specularisation of the Other which is central to Western rationality. For Jessica Benjamin, the product of this attitude is a 'rational violence' in which aggressive tendencies towards the mother's body and women in general is perceived as inevitable rather than culturally determined, having serious consequences for adult relations.³⁷

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich claims that feminists of the 1960s and 1970s tended to distance themselves from their mothers, choosing instead to see themselves as part of a sisterhood that extended beyond their genetic families into wider communities. In their desire to unite together against patriarchal oppression, they did not know what place to attribute the mother, who was ambiguously both an accomplice in that oppression and a victim of it. While supporting the feminist cause of the sixties and seventies, Rich suggests that there is also the need to recover the lost relationship between mother and daughter: “Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge - transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial - of 'mother-and-daughterhood’”. For her “The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy”. At the time of writing *Of Woman*

³⁶ Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (1993): 42.

³⁷ Jessica Benjamin, 'The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination', in *The Future of Difference*, Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, Eds. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 41-70; 46.

Born, in 1977, she regretted that there was “no...enduring recognition of the mother-daughter passion and rapture”.³⁸

Within this context, Hannah Wilke's series of works that used photographic images of herself and her mother stood almost alone during the 1970s and 80s. While Wilke and many of her contemporaries, including Betsy Damon, Ana Mendieta and Mary Beth Edelson were identifying with female mother goddess imagery in their practices, few artists addressed their specific relationship with their own real mother. *Portrait of the Artist with her Mother, Selma Butter* (1978-81), *My Mother, (Such a Smart Woman)* (1978-83) and other works such as *In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy) 1979-1983*, work towards intersubjective relationships between mother and child in which both closeness and differentiation can co-exist. In *Portrait of the Artist*, Wilke presents us with a homage to a woman's courage when faced with terminal cancer. Hannah's healthy body covered in souvenirs and trinkets contrasts sharply with Selma's disfigured body following a mastectomy, pointing perhaps to an acknowledgement of the sacrifices mothers have made, particularly within patriarchal cultures, in order to give life to the 'other'.

Western philosophy and religion has reduced the metaphorical figure of the mother to a void, a chasm of non-being who fulfils the becoming of others but is denied being or becoming herself. As E. Ann Kaplan has said:

The mother...was generally spoken, not speaking; she was usually discussed as an integral part of a discourse (because she really is everywhere) that was spoken by an Other. She was a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint.³⁹

This understanding of the mother has had a significant impact on the mother-daughter relationship. For Freud, a 'normal' woman accepts her 'castration' and replaces the longed for penis with a baby. Ideally, this baby will be a boy, since

³⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977) 225-227.

³⁹ Kaplan: 3.

only a male child can doubly replace the lost penis and for Freud, this relationship is “the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships”.⁴⁰

Irigaray describes the astonishment and jubilation that she felt when visiting Torcello Island when she came across a statue of the Madonna and noticed that the baby depicted was a girl. She says that she “felt freed from the tensions of that cultural-truth imperative which is also practiced in art: a virgin-mother woman and her son depicted as the models of redemption we should believe in”.⁴¹ Helen Chadwick’s image *One Flesh* (1985) attempts to redress this balance in that it depicts a Madonna pointing to the exposed genitals of her female child. In *Lofos Nymphon* (1987) Chadwick employs a series of images of her own naked body and that of her mother in various poses set against the background of Athens (her mother’s home city). Its Greek location gives this work a particularly strong resonance in the sense that it challenges the emphasis placed on the tragi-erotic relationship between mother and son in Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex*.

While she insists that there must be cultural images and contexts to explore and celebrate the mother daughter relationship, Irigaray also stresses the problems with the merging of mother and daughter in her essay 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', in which the speaking subject, the daughter, addresses a lament and an appeal to the mother, who, not having been attributed any subjectivity of her own, may attempt to live through her daughter. According to Irigaray, in doing so, she effectively smothers the girl child, who feels compelled to turn towards the father, not because she feels that the mother is 'lacking' a penis, but to avoid suffocation and death when the mother feeds her too much. Irigaray makes this appeal to the mother: 'Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you', pointing towards the possibility of a mutual gaze:

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud quoted in Jane Flax, 'Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy', in Eisenstein and Jardine, Eds.: 20-40; 25.

⁴¹ Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (1993): 25.

I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other - together.⁴²

In this kind of relationship, the daughter ceases to be “the bail to keep you from disappearing ...the stand-in for your absence”,⁴³ but an autonomous, active, desiring subject in relation with another subject - her mother.

Intersubjective relations are played out in the video installation *A Loving Man* (1996) by Jananne Al-Ani in which she takes part with her mother and three sisters. A circular structure provides an intimate space in which the visitor stands to view five monitors built into the wall. The artist, her mother and sisters occupy a monitor each, filmed from the chest upwards. *A Loving Man* tells the story of the family's relationship with the husband / father who remained in Iraq when the rest of the family came to England during the Gulf war in the 1980s. Each woman speaks in turn, beginning with the mother. The story unravels, not as a linear narrative, but as a word game. The mother begins with the words: 'A loving man who broke my heart'. The first daughter says: 'A loving man who broke my heart. He looked so young and optimistic once. He was my hero, he was loving and he made me laugh', the second daughter repeats these lines and then adds: 'He was in love and he made promises he couldn't keep', and so on, with each speaker adding a line. Sometimes the women struggle to remember the words, inducing laughter, sometimes they get the order wrong, or replace one word with a similar word, for example 'disbelief' for 'despair'. Each time the words are spoken they are slightly different, calling into question the possibility of a single correct and authorised text. The work is poignant, funny and revealing. Although ostensibly the 'subject' of the work is the absent man, what emerges is a deep bond between the five women in the contradictory emotions that his absence has evoked. The work is not an attack on the man, who is portrayed as a caring and loving father and husband, who was forced to make difficult choices: 'When politics, religion, war and cultures clash, it's the ordinary family who pays the

⁴² Luce Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', in *Signs* 7 (1982) 60-67; 61.

⁴³ Irigaray (1982) 64.

price'. The women both regret his absence and recall his love, and perhaps recognise what his absence has given them: 'I can live my life more fully with him not near me'.

She Said (2000) has a similar structure to *A Loving Man*, with five monitors and a circular space and employs another word game, Chinese whispers. Both *She Said* and *A Loving Man* stress the subversive quality of women's stories arising from the absence of a single authorised version of the text, emphasising instead oral traditions of storytelling passed from one generation to another. Although oral histories were probably not originally feminine, but bisexual, logocentrism, with its emphasis on rational, logical, printed discourses, has marginalised and trivialised women's stories, which have often been lost, and so the bond from one generation to the next broken. Oral stories that have survived often exist in several versions and are therefore resistant to the ever rational, patriarchal Logos.

Repairing the relationship with the other is central to Sandra Johnston's live works in which she uses her body as a tool for both reconfiguring memory and communicating with others in ways that question the distant and disembodied rationalism of the conceptual language frameworks that dominate Western philosophy. Sally Potter discusses how women might deal with the historical weight of associations with masculine fantasies that accompany the female performer. Stereotypical female performers include the stripper, the dying ballerina in her lover's arms and the singer who mourns the loss of her love. Women who use their bodies in a performative way as the instrument of their work "constantly hover on the knife edge of the possibility of joining this spectacle of woman".⁴⁴ The female body, whether it is naked or clothed, is "arguably so over-determined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused".⁴⁵ When women seek self-representation in Western culture in order to achieve a

⁴⁴ Sally Potter, 'On Shows', in Hilary Robinson, Ed., *Feminism Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 446-453; 448.

⁴⁵ Sally Potter in Hilary Robinson, Ed.: 446-453; 448.

visibility and therefore a power that they have previously been denied, they run the risk of fetishising themselves. For Potter, this does not mean that women should not perform at all. It is crucial that women address their relationship to performance, for it can be argued that many women's experience of everyday life is a permanent performance in which they 'perform' the masculine fantasy of femininity in a patriarchal society. In a live work in Skowhegan USA in 2001 titled *The Red Farm*, Johnston developed ways to subvert the objectification of the female performer by blurring the line between artist and audience. For twenty-four hours she occupied a room at Red Farm, during which time sixteen people from the Skowhegan art community entered the room alone for one hour. Participants were invited to communicate with the artist in any way other than verbally. Each visitor encountered the artist positioned in the room physically and affected emotionally by the previous exchange, thereby ensuring a continuity of the dialogue that materialised in the artist's body. Initially, visitors assumed a passive position as audience, but over the course of the hour became increasingly active in the process of negotiating the space between the Self and the Other in extremely physical ways that were appropriate to the specifics of the situation and the individuals involved.

In contrast to this very direct one to one communication through the presence of the body, in works such as *Broad Daylight* (2000) and *Expectationor* (2001), Johnston attempts to reconfigure past traumatic events by repeating an action or series of actions which recall a memory transcribed by the body. In these cases, Johnston exceeds her own representation in that she is both here and always already elsewhere; absent in her presence. For the Body Limits International Performance Residency at Les Subsistances, Lyon 2002, Johnston made a work in two parts called *Circum Stances* in which she placed a chair in a room with a stone floor and, from a sitting position on the chair, traced with charcoal the limits of her body's reach without losing contact with the chair. *The Space of a Chair* was a new work commissioned by the Ormeau Baths Gallery for *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other* that developed this earlier work in the specific

context of Northern Ireland. Johnston interviewed a number of women living in Northern Ireland and asked them to speak from a chair that they often used, either at work or at home. Initially, the women talked about what they could see from the chair and then this led them to talk more particularly about their relationship with the city and its inhabitants. Johnston suggests that the women discovered the potency of the chair as they spoke. For the exhibition, a basic room was constructed in the gallery, with a window and doorway, and the sound interviews were played in this space. Johnston made a live performance that lasted for twelve hours in which she again traced the limitations of her body's reach from a chair. She began each cycle by sitting quietly on the chair for a few minutes, before beginning her circular journey from the chair to the floor, always making sure that at least one foot remained in contact with the chair. This action was repeated over and over again, its duration marked by the increased density of the charcoal's residue on the floor. For the last hour of the work, at twilight between 9pm and 10pm, visitors were invited into the gallery. Johnston was by this stage mentally very focused and physically exhausted. For the witnesses, the tension between the circle as a protective boundary and the obvious vulnerability of the performer, together with her physical presence holding us in the here and now, and her simultaneous absence while she relived an event from the past was mesmerising.

Claude Cahun (born Lucy Schwob) employed an endless number of masks and postures as a means to explore identity through playing with absence. In a similar way to Wilke, Cahun becomes both the object and the subject of her practice by directing and staging the shots that include her. Working collaboratively with her partner and stepsister Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) between 1915 and the 1950's, she created thousands of photographs of herself in various masks, guises and poses that destabilise any notion of a stable identity or self, pointing instead to fluctuating states of being and becoming. Before she removed herself from the praxis of literary and artistic circles in France, Cahun was involved with the surrealist movement in Paris and also wrote for a number of contemporary

journals. Her statement “It's enough to say that I write, that I wish to write above all *against myself*”⁴⁶ could also be applied to her photographic practice, in which negation is the key to the radical rupture of the Self. The fragmentation of identity in Cahun's work is strategic and challenges the polarity of subject / object relations that form the basis of the patriarchal economy. Peggy Phelan sees the patriarchal gaze that desires to possess the other and consume it as the product of a failed inward gaze. Unable to see ourselves, we look to the Other to reflect ourselves back to us. In this sense “All seeing is hooded with loss - the loss of self-seeing”.⁴⁷ This desire to see oneself in the Other fails because the Self and the Other are not symmetrical. Phelan believes that it is first necessary to recognise the impotency and broken symmetry in the gaze. While it is possible to see the anxiety and fear that failed gazes produce, she sees the acceptance of the breaks, the blanks and the blindness in vision to offer the means to work towards a different social order that starts with an acceptance of the impossibility of self-seeing. For Irigaray, this amounts to perceiving the Other as irreducible in their otherness and the negation of preconceived identity categories is central to her elaboration of sexual difference. Woman's desire is represented by “neither a *this* nor a *that*, nor a *here*, any more than a *there*. No being, no places are designated”.⁴⁸ Cahun repeatedly employs negation and blanks in order to challenge and resist the normative heterosexual female destiny, which Freud proposes is every woman's lot. “Under this mask, another mask,” she wrote. “I will never be finished removing all these faces”.⁴⁹

Adorno identifies autonomy as being at the heart of the problem of bourgeois subjectivity, which encounters the other with fear and responds with the will to dominate. Art is crucial for Adorno as a possibility for another type of

⁴⁶ Claude Cahun, ‘Pour qui écrivez-vous?’, *Commune 4* (December 1933): 342, in Steven Harris, ‘Coup d’oeil’, *Oxford Art Journal* (January 2001) (Oxford University Press) 89-112.

⁴⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 16.

⁴⁸ Irigaray (1978): 193.

⁴⁹ Claude Cahun quoted in Lucy Lippard ‘Scattering Selves’, in Shelley Rice, Ed., *Inverted Odysseys, Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

subject/object relationship in which one assimilates the other in a two-way passage rather than the subject subordinating and appropriating the object. Aesthetic comportment is for Adorno “the form of knowledge that - having preceded the polarity of subject and object - does not acknowledge this polarity as definitive”.⁵⁰ In her notebook, Helen Chadwick wrote of “the erotic – the threshold where individuation breaks down, YIOU – the I in you”,⁵¹ pointing towards the need for the development of a symbolic and imaginary space that enables becoming for both sexes. Central to this process must be a re-examination of ways of seeing, prompted by the deflection of the distant and objectifying patriarchal gaze in favour of a way of viewing artworks which that allows for intersubjective relationships that focus on proximity. Within this way of looking, the Other is always recognised as irreducible in its otherness. Within this concept, The Self and the Other do not merge into undifferentiated oneness, nor do they remain completely independent. The encounter with the Other always alters the Self in unprecedented ways, but this relationship should be approached with fascination and awe, rather than the will to dominate, as has often been the case in patriarchal cultures. The artworks in this exhibition do not attempt to dominate or possess the Other, but recognise instead that all activity takes place in relation to a constantly shifting horizon in which the Self and the Other must negotiate their becoming at the same time.

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, 1999) 27-41; 36.

⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno quoted in Barbara Engh, ‘Of Music and Mimesis’ in Maggie O’Neill, Ed., *Adorno – Culture and Feminism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 162-173; 168.

⁵¹ Helen Chadwick quoted in Eva Martischinig, ‘Getting Inside the Artist’s Head’ in Mark Sladen, Ed.: 47-54; 54.