

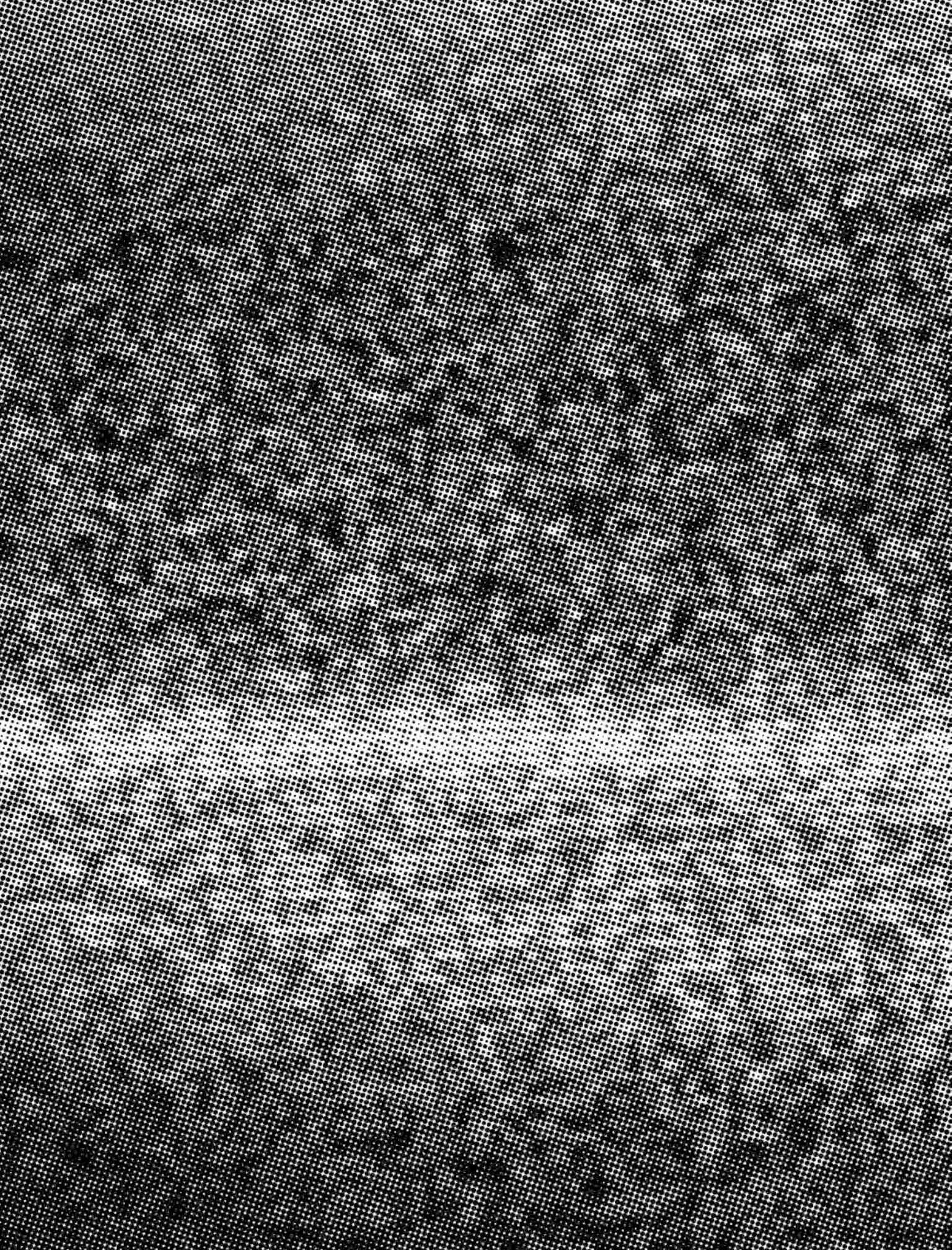
Was...

That...

A...

Prick????????????

I am thirteen years old and *alone* in the basement of my **parent's** house. I am watching channel 99, the *Spice Channel*, which broadcasts pornography, but scrambles the signal for non-subscribers. The screen is filled



[1] While watching The *Spice Channel* with my "straight" male friends I notice, in retrospect, that their viewing provides an almost comically assertive performance of heterosexual masculinity via the vocalization of subjective visual analysis. Their cocks in hand, with absolute posturing assuredness, my awkward adolescent companions divine and differentiate the shapes of female body parts, pointing out and arguing over breasts and arms, vaginas and mouths, legs and asses. I enthusiastically participate, eager to be one of the guys. Male performers are not discussed. *There are enough pricks in the room already.*

[2] It's worth noting that the height of the *Spice Channel* coincided with Bill Clinton signing the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which officially denied federal marriage rights to same-sex couples. In the same year he also signed the Section 505 of the US Telecommunications Act, which, among other things, attempted to get rid of "scramble porn." The Act required cable operators "primarily dedicated to sexually-oriented programs" scramble their signal to the point of intelligibility or block these channels altogether. They also had the option to curtail their broadcast to times when children were least likely to see them, between 10pm and 6am. Strange and telling to have childhood delineated by these hours. One year later, the US Supreme Court, in a 5-4 ruling in *The United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group* declared that section 505 of the Amendment violated free speech, placing an undue burden on the porn companies.

nails, teeth, hair, pubic

with vertical rainbow striations that flicker in and out, obfuscating and abstracting the orgy unfolding on screen. It's the days before fast internet service gave everyone access to a menagerie of pornographic proclivities, and the *Spice Channel* is the closest thing I have to actually watching adults fucking. I'm not physically aroused or intent on self-satisfaction (a rare occasion for any thirteen-year-old boy). My time in front of the TV is more of a learning experience; I'm just searching, scanning, looking carefully and waiting for hidden images. I'm engaging in an intimate exploration of visual fantasy. Watching carefully, I can discern bodies: faces, mouths, chests, limbs, butts, hair, fingers, and feet, all bending, dancing together against interference arcs in a staccato field of color. Genitals are hard to come by, but vaginas make more appearances than penises. As a closeted young gay man, I am always hoping to *see penises*.

My dad comes downstairs to get something from the boiler room. I don't jump up like *Bud Bundy* from *Married With Children*, caught in a compromising act. Instead, I lower my gaze and pretend to study a textbook in my lap. I don't worry he'll know what I'm actually doing. The TV is on mute.

If the volume were on, the scene before me would register as undeniably pornographic, punctuated with the profanities and unintelligible, animalistic exclamations that accompany spectacular sex, not to mention the obvious bass-line heavy beat of a skin flick. Also, the auditory phrase **"Fuck me!"** tends to pin a scene down in one's imagination.

The adolescent me likes to watch the *Spice Channel* with the sound off. This serves a dual purpose. Firstly, the silence is practical; it ensures no one within earshot can easily know why I am watching this experimental television show. The silence masks my intentions. For all they know I may as well be watching a screen of **black and white snow**, like the kid from . Secondly, the silence is *erotically* productive, effectively denuding the video of its heteronormative text, making the bodies on screen less beholden to strictly gendered performances, and allowing me to project my own sexuality onto the partially veiled action on screen[1]. Without prescriptive voices, I am more likely to formulate these sexual acts as queer, filled with co mingling bodies, organs that penetrate while being penetrated. In silence, the scrambled porn before me holds the possibility, perhaps reality, of same-sex, even poly-sex encounters, something overtly denied and denigrated in the mid-90s world I inhabit[2].

It's telling that my fascination with the *Spice Channel* involves engaging an act of disruption, visual confusion bordering on censorship. But strangely, this is not prohibitive, but liberating, and perhaps filled with revolutionary potential. Perhaps the purposeful denial of a resolute sexual body, the positioning of a body or bodies in states of flux, fascinates me because such a rejection of simple cohesiveness produces an *erotic charge* that extends beyond the confines of traditional porn and sexual simulation where bodies are arranged for me in a semi-rational field. I am interested in my reactions to this abstraction of bodies, and consequentially, the way other viewers, when presented with similar situations, are compelled into similar self-reflexive states, where they are aware of their own looking and the way they produce meaning. I think this, in turn, has radical potential to overturn **established norms**

In her essay *Transgression and The Avant-Garde*, in her book *Subversive Intent*, literary critic **Susan Rubin Suleiman** discusses, amongst many things, the role of pornographic literature in feminist practices, locating her analysis in a discussion of **Georges Bataille's** pornographic fictions and their consequential impact on literary theory. After framing many theories of Bataille within a long line of structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy, Suleiman articulates his impact on reading as opposed to writing[3]. She writes, "The characteristic feeling accompanying transgression is one of intense pleasure (at the exceeding of boundaries) and of intense anguish (at the full realization of the force of those boundaries). And nowhere is this contradictory, heterogeneous combination of pleasure and anguish more acutely present than in the inner experience of *eroticism*, insofar as this experience involves the practice of sexual "perversions" as opposed to "normal, reproductive sexual activity"[4]. While Suleiman speaks of literary texts, we can consider her analysis while looking at visual imagery, which inevitably enters a shared discourse through language. Few things we seek to understand exist outside of language.

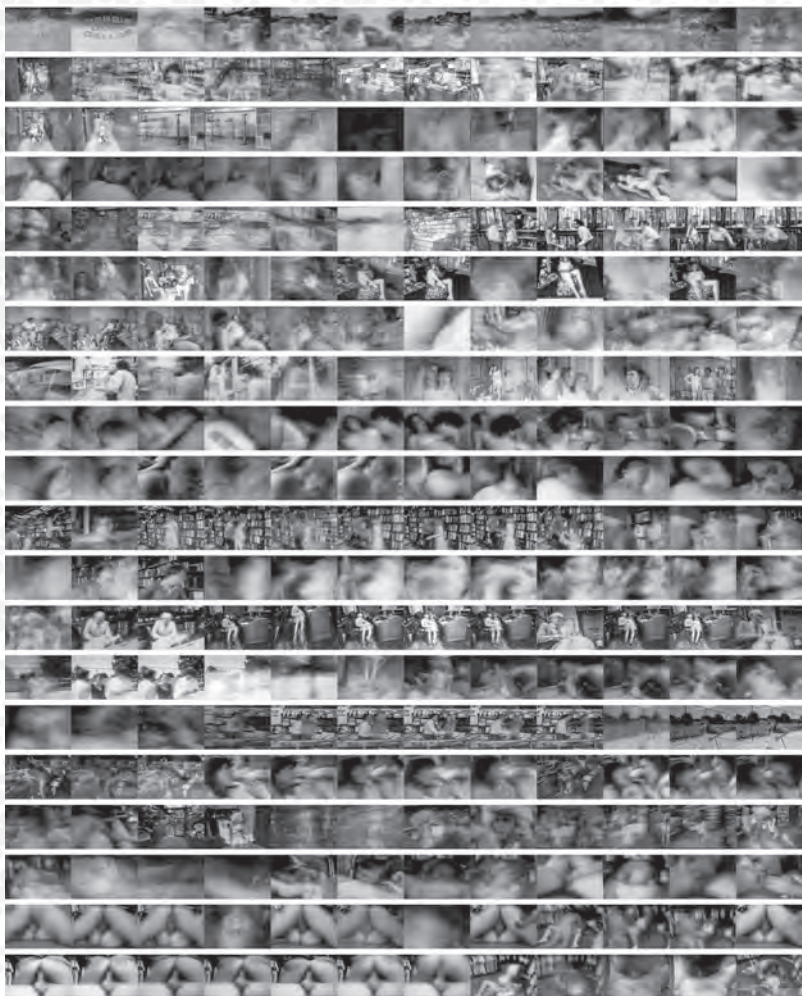
I reflect on Suleiman's observation as directly relating to the way the *Spice Channel*, in its scrambled state, propels a new sort of perversion into the viewer. Suleiman continues, "In eroticism, as in any transgressive experience, the limits of the self become unstable, "sliding." Rationalized exchange and productivity - or, in this case, reproductivity - become subordinated to unlimited, nonreproductive expenditure; purposeful action, or work, becomes subordinated to free play...."[5]. My interest in this "sliding," a term referring to Bataille's own use of the word as a disruption of sexual signification, frames *May Contain Explicit Imagery*, and sparks a desire to explore the limits of this elusive *erotic state* which seems so inextricably tied to our body, to our bodies, and the muddling of the two (and many *more*).

One of the few instances where one finds "perversion" delineated quite simply is in signs, texts, and utterances made from positions of *power*. These indicators are designed to warn potential viewers of impending "explicit imagery," before they encounter the offending work. A familiar example of this is in *museums, galleries*, and places where the public goes to experience *culture*. A warning sign placed before an exhibition stands as a bulwark against accusations of obscenity, of viewers crying foul for having been stained by looking at something that offends their sense of *purity*, which is always a pathologically flawed insistence on the *body/soul hierarchical divide*[6]. While warning labels protect, they also *entice*, promising something that holds disruptive potential, something that does not necessarily belong (otherwise there would be no use for the sign).

The double *entendre* of the word "explicit" in this exhibition's title, "*May Contain Explicit Imagery*," is purposeful. Its use comes from a fascination with how meaning slides from one instance, one *glance*, one point of recognition to another very different position of interpretation. *Explicit* is, after all, two things: "**Explicit**: very clear and complete: leaving no doubt about the meaning"[7]. This can be understood as the *rational, ordered space* of clear communication and interpretation. To be truly *explicit* is to communicate with no *slippage* between *signifier* and *signified*. To believe in such a clear form of communication is to ignore the unavoidable reality of *semiotic disturbances*, a willful denial of what **Roland Barthes** calls the "tissue of

[3] She takes special care to include Roland Barthes' prioritization of reading over writing, explaining that the reader participates in the creation of the text. This, of course, is exactly what I am compelled to reflect upon in front of scrambled pom.

[4] Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Subversive intent: gender, politics, and the avant-garde*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. 75.



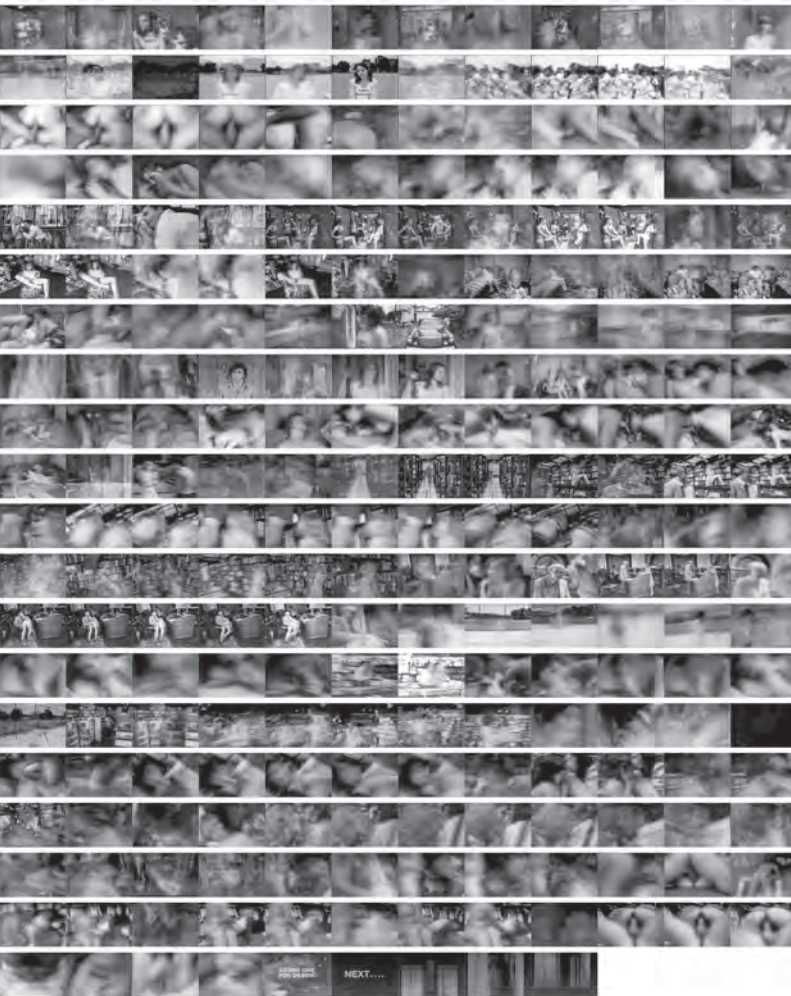
[5] Ibid. 75

[7] Webster is, perhaps, the embodiment of the explicit, which endlessly defines, links signified word to its signification in text. All explicit definitions come from Meriam Webster Online. Accessed July 20, 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/explicit> Meriam Webster 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/explicit>

[6] A recent example of this happened at the Torrance Art Museum in 2014. After one guest complained about the word "fuck" on Steve Bankhead's painting, "*Fuck Forever*" in the museum's show, "Reverb: Music as Both Inspiration & Content in Contemporary Art," the museum erected a sign warning, "**Viewer discretion advised. Some material may not be suitable for all audiences.**" Defense, it seems, is often best employed in these situations when confronted with a minor offense. <http://www.dailybreeze.com/lifestyle/20140222/obscenity-or-artwork-at-torrance-art-museum>

[8] Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Death of The Author in Image, music, text.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

[9] Webster. Ibid.



Kiki Seror, *Vertigo Draws The Spirit Which It Grips: To Become One Flesh With The Crowd. (Debbie Does Dallas, 1978), 2014.*  
477 C-Prints, each 4" x 6,"  
installation, variable dimensions

quotations," the fact of multivalent readings, where text encounters permeable interpretive fields, where one sign has multiple resonances[8]. Is it even possible to truly be explicit?

The explicit is also, "showing or referring very openly to nudity, violence, or sexual activity"[9]. This explicit is confounding. How "open" is "very open?" A chasm of subjective interpretation separates something that "shows," and something that "refers." The former can range dramatically from simple documentation (a medical slide) to the split-second appearance of the explicit (a breast exposed during a Superbowl half-time show). Even more problematic are interpretations of the trappings of the explicit. The definitions of "nudity, violence, or sexual activity" shift dramatically when one is faced with a *Playboy pinup* and the *Venus di Milo*; *Grand Theft Auto* and the bombing of Bagdad; *The Spice Network* and *Three And A Half Men*. If the explicit is clear and direct, full of the power to name and define, its phonetic partner is unsure of itself, subject to the whims of interpretation, full of things we are supposed to avoid or engage with in moderation. It's strange that this alternative meaning carries with it a wholly different appearance than its phonetic partner.

This exhibition plays with the reverse tautology between these two definitions, asking if something can be explicit with regards to the second definition but not the first. Where and when do we, as subjects and "viewers," of imagery both representational and abstract, locate explicit content? What physical, psychological, and social constructions color interpretation? And what, if anything, does art have to say about this perceptual / linguistic bind? When placed in proximity to one another, the work by artists in this exhibition, John Weston, Kiki Seror, and Nancy Baker Cahill, present an excellent opportunity to consider these questions.

Pornography as subject and eroticism as effect are both omnipresent in this exhibition. They are front and center in Kiki Seror's work, which unwinds the pornographic film, re-positioning its scopophilic gaze as a point of entry, providing an experience that lets one see the possible transgressive, and reflective nature of the erotic. To make her work for this exhibition, Seror selected pornographic films from the late 70s and 80s, played them on her laptop, and took long, open shutter shots of each film's scenes. Because Seror's images are created using an open shutter, the bodies performing in these films appear as blurred phantoms. Any movement is rendered obscure and indeterminate. Since the bodies in question are often nude and of similar skin tone, they seem to morph into and out of one another, muddling the sex act itself. The result is a confusion of orifices & penetrating organs. In effect, Seror takes the pornographic act in all its spectacle and, through a process of extended shutter release (itself a form of voracious looking) renders porn spectral.

Having captured each film in its entirety, distilling it down to moments of extended viewing, Seror displays each film's stills in a grid, turning the story into an installation with mathematical and didactic undertones. Such a system begs for examination, asking viewers to trace the film through a collapsed narrative with bodies wafting in and out of scenes. Seror's choice of movies is also particular to questions of technology and sight. The movies in this exhibition were made from 1978-1983, when the pornographic film industry was undergoing a seismic shift. Porno theaters were giv-

ing way to home entertainment centers where porn could be experienced in privacy instead of in a public venue. In fact *Debbie Does Dallas*, a film Seror highlights in this exhibition, was one of the first films distributed on *VHS*. One can read Seror's careful selection of movies as a comment about the viewing body's movement from the **public** to the *private* domain. This observation is perhaps amplified in the space of the gallery where these movies, presented in photographic form, return to a space of collective public viewing[10].

While all of Seror's installations allow viewers to follow each respective movie's plot structure to a certain extent, in that one can see scenes and sets change, bodies in ascending and descending states of **undress**, with semi-visible **sexual encounters** punctuating the overall arrangement, numerous singular images appear indecipherable, completely blurred. It is in these images one sees the true motivation of Seror's work, the complete disruption of meaning and narrative.

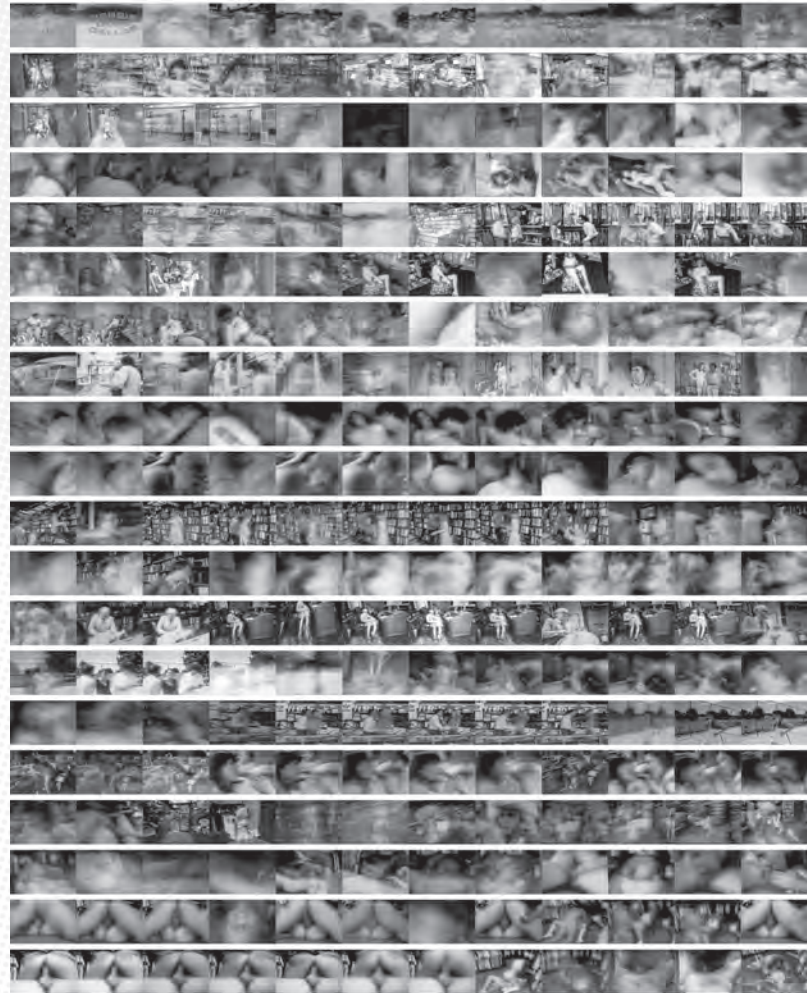
Let us focus for a moment on Seror's *Vertigo Draws The Spirit Which It Grips; To Become One Flesh With The Crowd*, (*Debbie Does Dallas*, 1978) from 2014. First we contend with the title, which adamantly overtakes the prominence of the movie from which it was birthed, now relegated to a parenthetical nod. This long title commingles lines from two texts. The first is from **Baudelaire's** *The Flask*, a poem about the remnants of memory as both poison and cure. The second is from Baudelaire's essay on the *flaneur* from *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. The two quotations fix Seror's art as emphatically about looking from afar at the everyday in search of a lost meaning that wants so very eagerly to bubble up from the past, in order to see what is right in front of you. But let us now explore the image grid before us.

The top left, second cell draws my attention because it contains the title of the film, which acts as a naming device and speaks to the time a title card lingers on the screen. This effect is repeated and bookended by three stills in the bottom right reading "**TOUCHDOWN FOR MR. GREENFELD**" then, "**SCORE ONE FOR DEBBIE**" and finally, "**NEXT...**" followed by what appears to be credits. The beginning and end of the film are sufficiently delineated, allowing the spaces in between to produce our narrative.

As I scan over the grid, *fixing my gaze* here and there, I am struck by the images that draw my attention. In one image it looks as if a mustachioed woman's head is emerging from a man's scalp as his hand holds a *thick black, vertical, long pole*. In frame after frame bodies stretch and contract as if in a funhouse mirror, reminding me immediately of Andres Kertez's photographs from nearly eighty years ago[11]. In another image on the bottom row it looks as if the **genitals** of two bodies get switched; the woman's *vagina sprouts a fleshy phallus*. It becomes difficult to discern *who is fucking whom*. Now, of course, we know that the very heteronormative, cisgendered *Debbie Does Dallas* does not actually display the trans body. But Seror's work offers a moment of **rupture**, isolated instances of **transgression** against **biological convention**, a slippage that truly elides bodies into other bodies. Seror presents us with the opportunity for **permissive, alternative viewings**.

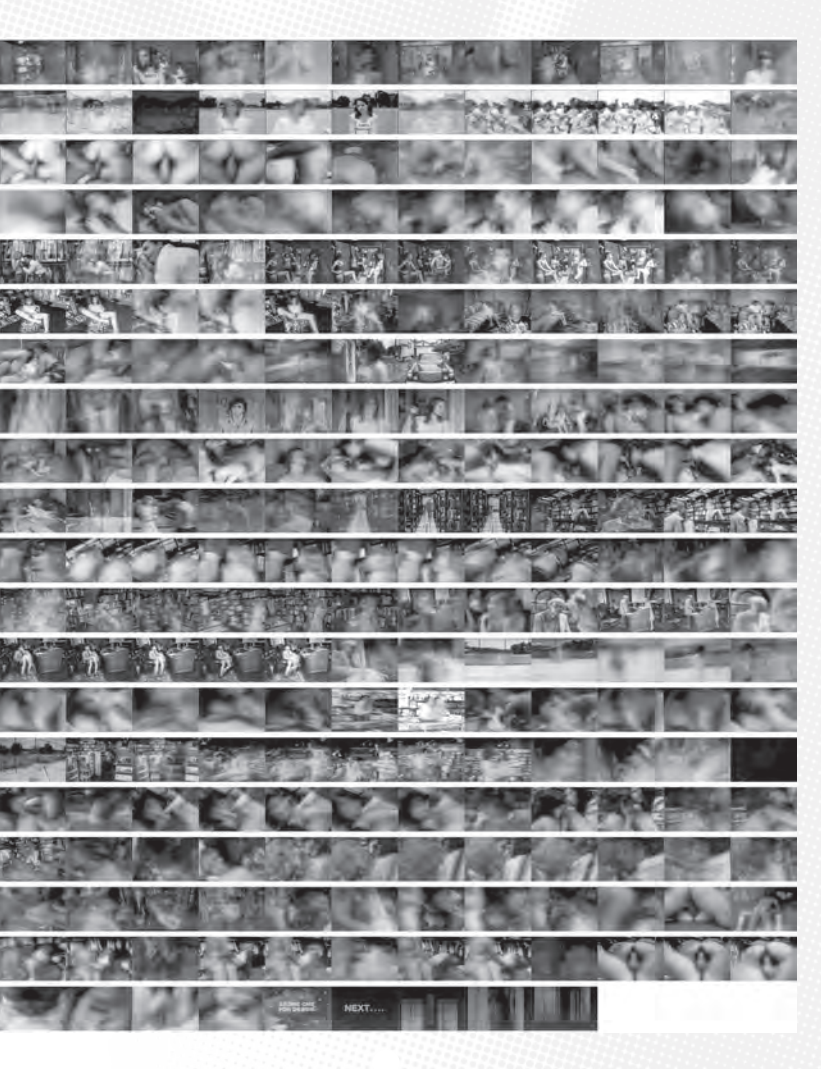
Seror also further complicates strictly heteronormative readings of the ghostly bodies in her installation by including two movies starring **John C. Holmes**: *Taxi Girls* and *The*

[10] This interpretation is further solidified when one considers that each of Seror's final "**purchasable**" works comes in two archival boxes, mimicking the two reels of film used to screen celluloid movies in older porn theaters.



[11] It strikes me immediately that Kertez's signature works of female nudes taken in wobbly fun house mirrors were originally published in the French magazine, *Le Sourire*, a soft-core porno mag that advertised porn theater show times and bondage gear. The feminist photo historian Amy Lyford in her essay *The Advertising of Emasculation: Andres Kertez in Surrealist Paris* from her book *Surrealist Masculinities* uses the Kertez archive to reposition the artists work not as a primary objectification of the disfigured female nude (though she acknowledges how the magazine distribution of his work contributed to this read), but as an extension of prevailing masculine anxiety in Paris after World War One. She notes that Kertez's photos, "work so well not just because they are grotesquely seductive but also because this seduction is born of, and taps into, men's unconscious fears of mutilation and loss" Lyford, Amy. *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction* in France. Berkeley: U of California, 2007.112.

I cannot help but apply this critique to Seror's manipulation of pornography. The sentiment is secured by her titles, reinforced by the historical distance of her subject, and finally solidified via the bodily distortions in her work. All this seeks to inscribe the diagrammed porn film as something "grotesquely seductive," but also steeped in "fears of mutilation and loss."



Kiki Seror, *A Phial Where Memory Survives and a Soul Flashes Into Future Lives; Finding Time Again*, 2014. (*The Private Pleasures of John C. Holmes*, 1983), 2014.  
 520 C-Prints, each 4" x 6,"  
 installation, variable dimensions

*Private Pleasures of John Holmes*. A story about a gang of independent prostitutes turned taxi drivers, *Taxi Girls* from 1979 involves mostly heterosexual sex with some lesbian same-sex scenes included (though they are perhaps made more for the hetero male viewer than for any lesbian audience – but I should stop myself. To claim the boundaries of pleasure is ignorant and self-serving). *The Private Pleasures of John Holmes* is a very low budget, exclusively gay film from 1987, which has Holmes play a Sultan who directs his subjects to fuck each other and him for his royal pleasure. The fact that Holmes' body, arguably one of the most famous male bodies (or bodies connected to a penis) in porn history, is featured prominently in both films, and in Seror's installation, assists in further blurring the lines of normative pornographic performance. In front of her grids, where the same body encounters both male and female partners, one can extrapolate a queer way of seeing all the characters captured in the installation. In this way, the Holmes body contaminates heteronormative reads through proximity.

This happens for me in one particular strip of images five rows from the bottom of the grid. The scene that unfolds involves three figures in a store. In the climactic action we see two squatting figures performing fellatio on a standing, apparently male, performer. We assume that these two figures are female, though little visual facts support this in the preceding or future frames as most of the figures seem to have most of their clothes on. There is a hint at a nipple in the stills beforehand, but it is amorphous and solitary, unattached to any specific performer. As the figure to the left's mouth engulfs the penis, the lines are again blurred and the organ becomes a powerfully long tongue. The figure on the right looks on, its mouth agape. Then, just as the figure on the right seems to take the phallus in hand, its head crystallizes and we see the clear profile of a very gender ambiguous face. Amidst a litany of previously blurry faces, this one jumps out at me and demands my attention. It is a face I've seen before. The lips suggest a certain sort of femininity, but the strong jawline, protruding chin, high brow, and almost 17th century aristocratic hair suggest a merger of genders. Then, from the depths of my visual memory, I merge this visage with an image of Andrew Shue's character from the 1990s-television show *Melrose Place*. The resemblance immobilizes me. Rationally, I am aware that I am projecting my adolescent crush forward, into the present, and yet the rush I feel is unavoidable, resistant to language. The face's resemblance to this teenage heartthrob becomes more and more concrete until I can't see anything else. The image arrests me and the entire grid of photos that surround it falls away.

My projection of a distant erotic fantasy onto this spectral sounding board may seem adolescent, even indulgent. The only thing worse than re-energizing one's teenage crushes is having to listen to someone else reminisce in such a nostalgic manner. In the context of this work, in this exhibition, I feel such resurrections have a relevance and a place in understanding how we make sense of images that don't settle down. I believe that the way this strange resemblance captures me has a direct relationship to Roland Barthes' concept of the punctum as the locus for the unfolding of subjective meaning.

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes deploys a wealth of knowledge on semiotics, visual culture, and literary criticism to unpack his own subjective connections to personal photographs in an effort to examine just how

the photograph as media, artifact, and document works on, within and through the viewer to create meaning. He proposes that the photograph consists of two elements, the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is culturally predisposed, containing the things a viewer can identify with as **social subjects**, general ideas in the photograph. This is tied to the photographer's interests, a kind of **categorical delineation** one might define as **genres of taste and interest**. Barthes proposes, "The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like // I don't like. The *studium* is the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a **half desire, a demi-volition**; it is the same sort of vague, **slippery**, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds "all right"[12]. I've always understood the *studium* as inherently objective - at least in appearances; it is a cool, methodical, laying down of observations and facts as they pertain a given topic. Barthes' *studium* is, "a kind of education (knowledge and civility, "politeness")..." [13]. This *studium* is programmatically self-contained, almost **didactic**, and partial to **peer-review**. So much of my discussion of Seror's images, as is the case with most **critical analysis**, fixates on the *studium*. What **excites** me is when these images break free of their molds and deliver a catalyst, an explosion of... *punctums*.

Barthes' concept of the *punctum* animates all his theories of photographic resonance. He begins by saying, "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also **bruises me, is poignant to me**)"[14]. He states that the *punctum* is, "...an addition; it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there"[15]. Barthes admits that "to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to give myself up"[16]. This, perhaps is why I **feel so naked in my admission** that I see **Andrew Shue** in a frozen image in Seror's grid. The *punctum* disrupts the safe confines of the *studium*; it takes you elsewhere. It is that moment in the photograph that disrupts the boundary separating you as passive viewer from the photograph's **authoritative picture frame**. For our purposes here, in deciphering Seror's work and my reaction to it, Barthes' thoughts on the *punctum* and *pornography* seem quite important.

In her essay *Carnal Knowledge*, from her book Thinking Through the Body, literary critic **Jane Gallop** discusses Barthes' theories of *punctum* and *studium* in relation to questions of where one finds pleasure in texts. Gallop notes that, "If you think of the *studium* as a kind of enclosure, breaking it up (with the *punctum*) suggests breaking something open, allowing seepage" [17]. This seepage creates what Barthes' calls a "**blind field**," a space beyond the photograph where action, possibility, and the subjective narratives of the viewer are spontaneously activated. Gallop observes that, "For Barthes, *pornography* is pure *studium* whereas the **erotic** occurs when there is a *punctum*" [18]. Barthes then separates the erotic from the pornographic, stating, "The **erotic** photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the **sexual organs** into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me" [19]. This is exactly what Seror's work does. In forcing the camera's eye to linger on the cinematic *pornographic*, Seror is able to fissure the porn movie's smooth operation, making room for many *punctums* to percolate and call the viewer to attention.

[12] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. 27.

[13] *Ibid.* 28.

[14] *Ibid.* 27.

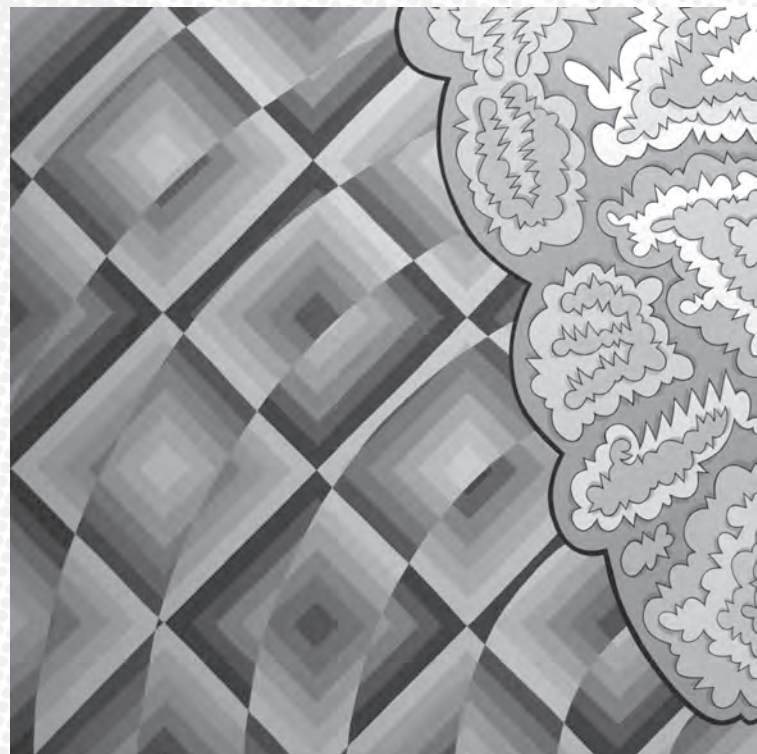
[15] *Ibid.* 55.

[16] *Ibid.* 43.

[17] Gallop, Jane. *Thinking through the body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. 154.

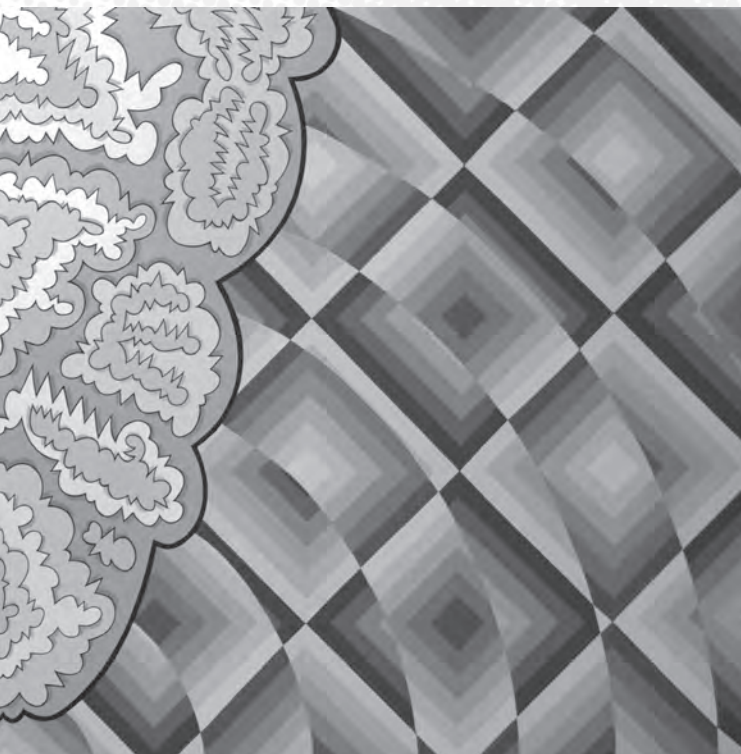
[18] *Ibid.* 154.

[19] *Ibid.* 59.





[20] Vincent, James. "Pareidolia: Scientists Say 'don't Worry, It's Normal to See Jesus on a Slice of Toast'" The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, 9 May 2014. Web. 20 July 2014.



John Weston, *Spare The Rod*, 2013  
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48"

Perhaps the *explicit*, for our purposes, is connected to Barthes' notion of the *studium*, an expression that seeks to speak from a position of solidity and knowledge. On the flip side, we can also consider the *debased explicit* as another manifestation of Barthes' *studium*, this time enmeshed in the dogmatically *pornographic*. Perhaps the frustration between our two *homonyms* is a *fertile* place, a situation where the viewer is animated by a sort of *punctum*, a piercing through the settled image towards the viewer.

Barthes contributions to the mystery at hand in this exhibition, how and why we see the *explicit* within works of art, remains primarily *philosophical* (though, I would posit, quite persuasive). But is there a biological reason for our tendency to find the *explicit* in the *non-explicit*, to recognize and act on the many *punctums* that might find us every day? What compels a viewer spontaneously to select one bit of information over another amongst a sea of similar bits of information? In Seror's work, we lock into the appearance of a body because of contextual information; there were semi-visible bodies before, and there are semi-visible bodies after in this large grid before us. With this rationale, the *flesh-like blobs* in individual stills must be a body - or bodies - in motion. Such a conclusion is based on *rational thought*. But what of scenarios where the narrative connection, gifted to us by a cinematic referent, is cut off? What about those times when we are convinced that an image exists when we have no *rational* reason to believe it to be so?

The neurological term *apophenia* refers to the subject's tendency to perceive meaningful connections in unrelated, *random phenomena*. While in the not too distant past this medical term distinguished the onset of delusional thinking and *psychosis*, it's now understood as a natural, perhaps evolutionary, reaction to *daily stimuli* [20]. Many *neurologists* and *psychologists* believe that degrees of apophenic states explain why some people claim to hear *secret messages* in music played backwards, insist on patterns in license plates in traffic jams, and see human forms in *everyday objects*. In fact, seeing human faces specifically when there are none is the state of *pareidolia*, a subset of apophenia. This may explain why some people claim to see images of the *Virgin Mary* in their unbuttered morning toast.

Apophenia is not necessarily a bad or rare thing. Most of us experience it from time to time. We access our apophenic inclinations when we see *concrete forms* in *cloud formations*. Apophenia is the basis for the *Rorschach test*, which provides a linguistic platform on which an *analyst* can suss out meanings from interpretation and in some situations kick-start the *psychoanalytic session*.

The Swiss neuroscientist *Peter Brugger* believes that apophenia may be connected to underlying questions of creativity. In his book *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Brugger sets out to examine the tendency for people who believe in ghosts to see these forms in their lives. In charting his research Brugger proposes, "The propensity to see connections between seemingly unrelated objects or ideas most closely links to *creativity*. Indeed, with respect to the detection of *subjectively meaningful patterns*, apophenia and creativity may even be conceived as two sides of the same coin. One must

keep in mind, however, that the term detection as used here does not refer to a process of mere identification, to finding the solution to a perceptual puzzle. Rather, the assumption of meaningfulness in randomness always involves a subjective interpretation of spatial or temporal configurations. The creative arts acknowledge and take advantage of this purely subjective aspect of perceiving"[21]. Brugger may be onto something.

**Leonardo DaVinci** also seems to refer to an innate understanding of apophenia when he writes in his journal about a tool he has "discovered" to spur creative thinking: "A Way of Developing and Arousing The Mind to Various **Inventions**: I cannot forbear to mention among these precepts a new device for study which, although it may seem but *trivial and almost ludicrous*, is nevertheless extremely useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. And this is, when you look at a wall *spotted with stains*, or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and *well drawn* forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose *jangle* you may find any name or word you choose to imagine"[22]. Just like a **Rorschach test** for artists, DaVinci proposes finding randomly dispersed **stimuli** and free-associating on the imagery that the eye brings forth. It seems well established that the natural world provides many opportunities for our *subjective conscious* to extract meaning in meaningless things. This play is creatively beneficial.

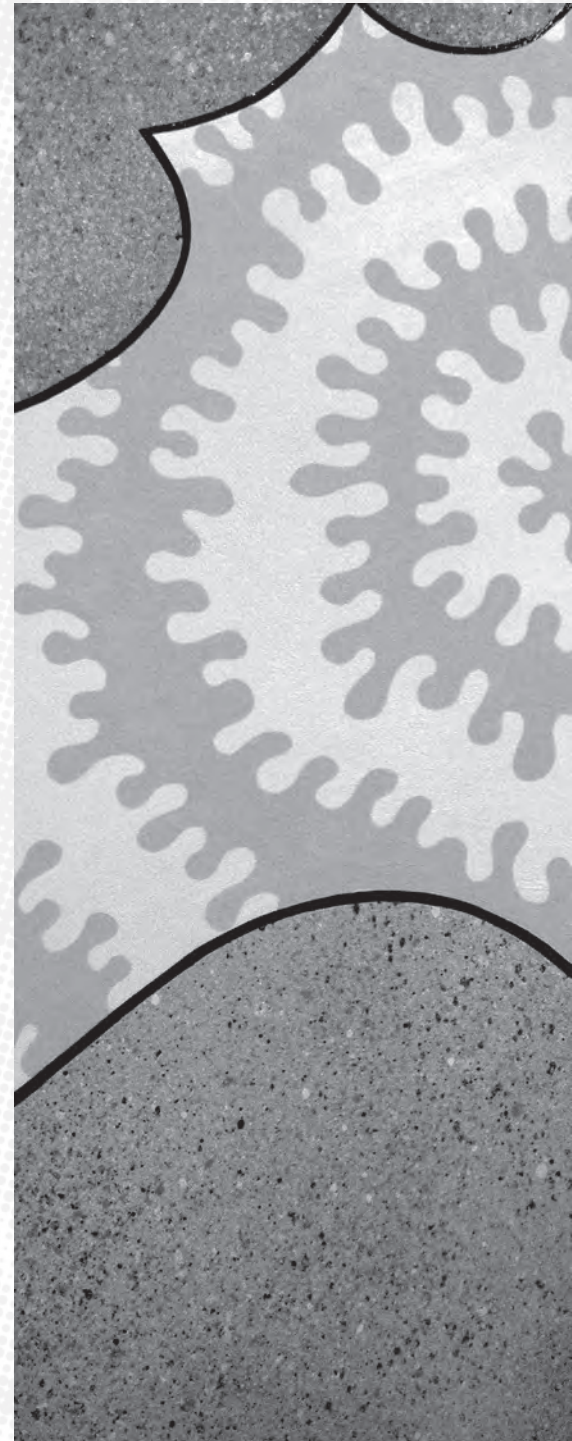
**John Weston's** visually arresting paintings activate our tendency towards apophenia, playing on our natural **predilection to make sense of nonsense**, see relationships in and amongst patterns in the world. Weston is a master of patterns, employing them to great effect in most of his work. He borrows liberally from a variety of patterns used as decoration and communicative devices, sampling from **Native American rugs**, **Islamic tessellations**, modernist wallpapers, and psychedelic ephemera. Weston's intricately hand-painted patterns are often assembled without the aid of an underlying grid and applied in high-key contrasting colors that border on the **chromophilic**. The result is a painting that intends to attract your eye through basic instinctual reactions; you cannot help but physically pay attention and react to his work. There is a reason for this.

When presented with images that are chromatically brilliant, packed with sharp contrasts in light and dark hues, and filled with repeating patterns and colors, the human eye and brain must contend with a sort of **information overload**, a cognitive alarm demanding attention. The brain has the eye scan the scene to locate where the intruding pattern is interrupted and where it continues. This ties back to questions of why we engage in episodes of apophenia, often with no intention to do so.

Science historian **Michael Shermer** posits that apophenia and pareidolia evolved from our **survival instinct**. Shermer proposes his theory as, "patternicity, or the tendency to find meaningful patterns in meaningless noise." He posits that our tendency to see new patterns amidst genuine chaos evolved from necessity to discern danger in

[21] Brugger, Peter. From Haunted Brain to Haunted Science: A Cognitive History of Pseudoscientific Thought in Hauntings and poltergeists: multidisciplinary perspectives. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001. 205

[22] The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci. Volume 1. Translated by Jean Paul Richter





John Weston, *Opening Up*, 2013  
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48"

[23] Michael Shermer. "Patternicity: Finding Meaningful Patterns in Meaningless Noise." *Scientific American Global* RSS. Nov. 17, 2008. Accessed July 20, 2014. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns/?page=1>

[24] Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. *Écrits: the first complete edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006. 155.

everyday life. In an article for *Scientific American* outlining his theories, Shermer states, "For example, believing that the rustle in the grass is a **dangerous predator** when it is only the wind does not cost much, but believing that a dangerous predator is the wind may cost an animal its life." He goes on to cite the studies of **Harvard University** biologist **Kevin R. Foster** and **University of Helsinki** biologist **Hanna Kokko**, who tested his theories, "the authors (Foster and Kokko) conclude that, "the inability of individuals—human or otherwise—to assign causal probabilities to all sets of events that occur around them will often force them to lump causal associations with non-causal ones. From here, the **evolutionary rationale** for superstition is clear: natural selection will favour strategies that make many incorrect causal associations in order to establish those that are essential for survival and reproduction"[23]. I would argue that Weston's use of patterns and purposefully elusive imagery touches directly on Shermer's notion of the evolutionary resilience of **patternicity**. Perhaps this explains why Weston's work demands immediate physical, as well as cognitive attention.

Once we are captured by Weston's images, his work unfolds to explore even deeper questions of how we construct meaning on a psychological level. He does this by pairing his imagery with carefully selected titles, allowing for meaning to slip from **signifier to signifier**. This has ramifications beyond the singular image.

In *The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious*, the influential philosopher and psychoanalyst **Jacques Lacan** attempts to chart his assertion that the unconscious, as a discovery developed by **Freud**, is bound up in language. While discussing the "meaning" behind the words "**LADIES**" and "**GENTLEMEN**" for two young children whose lives and place in the symbolic order are shaped by their relation to the very language that defines the bathrooms they use, Lacan notes, "What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify something quite other than what it says"[24]. Weston's art takes this possibility as a point for creative departure, purposefully crafting images that, when paired with carefully chosen titles, disrupt the socially constructed ties that bind signifiers together.

When studying his paintings, I am struck by Weston's depiction of the **phallus**, his flat, brilliantly decorated **protrusions** that often emanate from outside the canvas into the painted picture. Take, for example, the neon bulbous form in his painting *Spare The Rod* from 2013. Here a gargantuan plug-like shape inhabits the center of the frame. Its **pink** form is punctuated by symmetrical explosions of erratic **neon**, amorphous shapes resembling thought bubbles gone **electrically haywire**. The central form is phallic in presence, no doubt, partially because it occupies the foreground, protruding to a point, and also because it divides the radiating circular blue and purple geometric pattern in the painting's background. And yet it is in no way a representation of a **penis** in any conventional sense. It is **too ribbed, too lumpy, too out of sorts**, to convincingly signal to any human **organ**. The rouged, almost infected, phallus looks more like a **butt plug** than a **dildo**, more like **magical ecrement** than a **dangling penis**. This is perhaps, the start of the **punctum**, compelled out of me by Weston's work. The scnd **punctum** comes from the frenetic geometrics inside this phallus. The

secpmd piercing elements come from the forms lingering near the periphery, signaling to organs inside organs, a perplexing confusion of connotations. In fact, if Weston's image were doubled on its top horizontal axis, it would register as undeniably vaginal, the strange jittery forms equally symbolic of the vagina, labia, hymen, and clitoris. And yet for me, as I assume with many viewers, the implication of the phallus is still undeniable. How strange that such an image could retain this striking resonance while still conjuring up other, non-penile forms? Perhaps this is the apophenia settling in? This painting is emblematic of Weston's use of evocative yet resistant forms that always seem to displace resolution and sidestep meaning.

Considering this maneuvering against interpretation, Weston's work can be seen as signaling towards Lacanian notions of the Phallus and less towards the anatomical penis, as something located within an alienated body. In her essay *Beyond The Phallus*, also from *Thinking Through the Body*, Gallop discusses the use of the Lacanian theory of the phallus and its relationship to contemporary feminist politics, both within and around psychoanalysis. She sums up Lacan's notion of the phallus: "The Lacanian phallus is not simply linked to infantile genitality. It is a signifier, which is to say it belongs to what Lacan calls the symbolic order, which is the order of language. It is neither a real nor a fantasized organ, but an attribute: a power to generate meaning. Language implies the ability to make meaning"[25]. Weston's paintings embrace their ability to activate signification, both pointing towards, while at the same time standing against, any concretized message or symbolic narrative. In this way his work conforms with Lacan's notions of the phallic neither positing the phallic as carnal organ nor purely mental state.

Gallop continues, "But no speaking subject can, in reality, perform this generative act. And thus we grant this power to an ideal other: Phallic Mother, Primal Father, God. He says what he means and means what he says. This phallic Other is thus presumed to "know," that is, to speak and hear an unaltered language, which is the adequate expression of an integral self. Yet only the Other has the phallus; the subject, whatever organ he or she may have, is symbolically castrated. Which is to say that the subject can obtain no full satisfaction because the subject can never know what he wants because his "wants" are alienated in language"[26]. This psychic frustration is mirrored in Weston's work, which often features figurative allusions to base Freudian body parts and their corresponding effluvia (phalluses, penises, vaginas, clits, urethras, assholes, piss, shit, and cum). Weston pairs these images with titles that purposefully play with the slippage of meaning in everyday "clean" language.

So let us return to *Spare The Rod*. The title itself has immediate resonance, referencing the old saying, "Spare the rod, spoil the child"[27]. Using this title, Weston takes the double entendre of the word "rod" and unfurls its libidinal and paternal undertones, unearthing the connotative meaning behind the instrument of punishment, the relationship of child to parent, dominant to submissive. Faced with the title and image, one is stuck in a bind. Is the rod the phallus at hand, the pulsating organ that is not a penis, yet evokes one? Is this the present, yet invisible measure of order, discipline - the ultimate Other? Is Weston's painting a depiction of the body spared the rod? Is this the embodiment of unbridled reckless youth, that "spoiled" state that must be kept in check? Is the title more of a declaration - a call against corporal

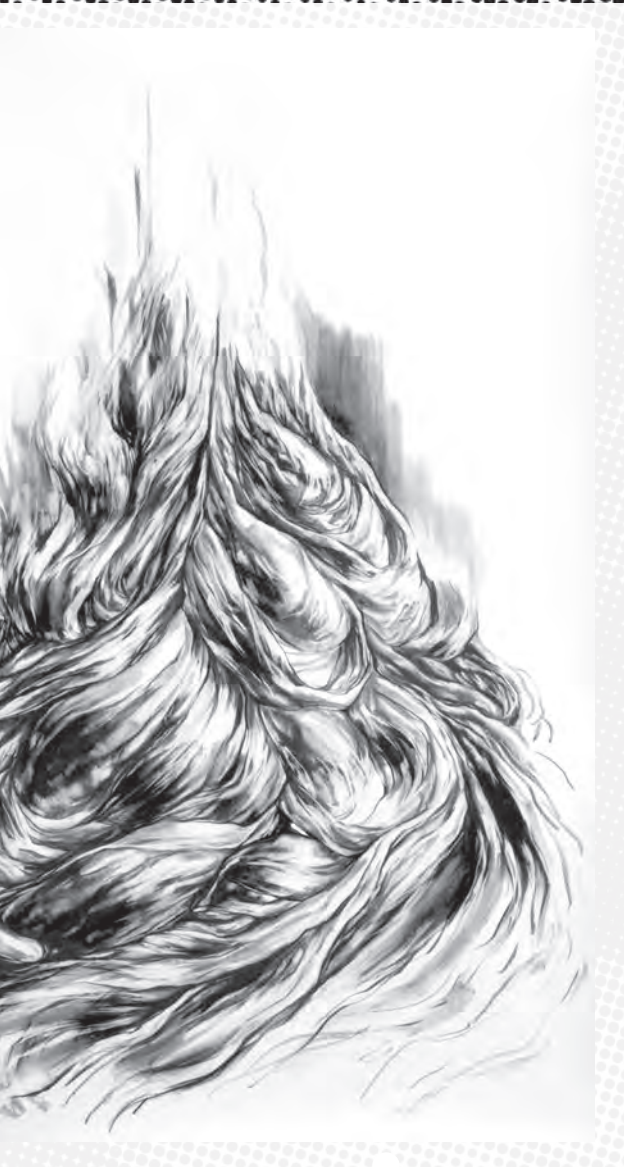
[25] Gallop, Jane. *Thinking through the body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 126.

[26] *Ibid.* 126.

[27] While many attribute this quote to Proverbs 13:24 from the King James Bible, the actual quote is derived from *Hudibras*, a poem from 1662 by Samuel Butler: Love is a Boy, by Poets styl'd, Then Spare the Rod, and spill the Child.

penises, vaginas, clits, urethras, assholes, piss, shit, and cum).





2014  
Graphite on paper, 55" x 55"

[28] Foster, Hal. *The return of the real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996. 140

**punishment**? Paired with its title, the painting's vacillating, wriggly underlying symbolic register cannot be ignored. In this way, Weston plunges viewers into a state of unresolved meaning, where definitions and symbols elide, clash, and overlap against and into one another.

Just as Weston's work deploys allusions to body parts to create meaning and bring forth communicative play in the viewer, **Nancy Baker Cahill's** drawings also situate the body as an **ambiguous, unknowable entity**, something both part of the embodied subject and at the same time alien to it. However, Cahill's drawings articulate their otherworldly forms using vastly different means with different effects.

To understand *Virgil*, Cahill's current body of work, one must first explore the strange circumstances that gave rise to its development. In 2013, Cahill spontaneously began creating daily graphite drawings. These daily meditations were intended to help her **loosen up** and discover new imagery to incorporate into her work. While Cahill's previous collage pieces, known as *Entropics*, evoked nebulous, bulbous forms sprouting small tentacles of hair or flesh-like armatures, these new images were much darker, more frenetic and gestural, referencing large **accumulations of hair**, mounds of **flesh**, and uncontrolled human emissions. After completing more than a month of these daily drawings, Cahill noticed pains in her **abdomen**. Visits to the doctor revealed she had a **football-sized benign tumor** growing in her stomach. After surgery and months of recovery, Cahill decided to take her experience and her oddly prescient drawings as the motivational force to launch her new body of work.

With their overwhelming scale, marks of erasure and presence that create forms packed with writhing conglomerations of polyps, sparse accumulations of hair, and bulbous, **sa** Cahill's drawings strike a purposefully unnerving chord in the viewer. They are abject in that they shock us with allusions to the body that lies outside signification, **the corpse, the tumor, the discarded other**. In colloquial terms, the **abject** refers to the lowest state, that which is cast out or off (from the Latin *abjectus*, to cast off). However, Cahill's work is so deeply tied to the body, her body and the body of the viewer, that the abject takes on a more specific dimension, once again tracing its roots back to **Lacanian psychoanalysis** and the place of the signifying subject within the symbolic order.

In his essay *The Return of The Real*, art historian and critic **Hal Foster** discusses the role the abject plays in conceptions of art's relationship to notions of "the real," a place that resists definition but primarily stands as a gut-checking locus for the reconstitution of a subject who has been wretched from the signifying chain by **trauma**. He first outlines a Lacanian relationship between subject and object, diagramming the "image screen" that exists between **two cones of vision**. The first cone has the viewing subject as the focal point, with the gaze extended out into the world, similar to the **diagrammatic position** of the painting subject in **Renaissance art**, the painter who sees the world through the rationalized and controlling power of perspective. The second cone is overlaid with the Lacanian conception of the gaze, wherein, "... the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze..."[28]. When the two cones are overlapped, the vertical line of their intersection is delineated by the "image screen," which, in Foster's words, is "the cultural reserve of which each is image is one instance.

reminiscent of pregnant bellies,

Call it the conventions of art, the **schemata of representation**, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the **object-gaze** for the subject but also **protects** the subject from this object-gaze"[29]. The image screen, in a sense, **protects** us from the reality of what we see, protects us against the "real." This **mediating screen** situates us in a zone where symbolic chains of reasoning shield us from fully ever being able to "**understand**" that which we perceive.

In discussing the way extremely accurate representations of reality in the form of **hyperrealist painting** work to bring us closer to the supposed real image, Foster notes that, "... the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object (the little bit of the subject lost to the subject, the object *a*)"[30]. This last line resonates with me in regards to Cahill's work. What is more a lost object that is part of one, but separate, the subject lost within the subject, than a

Such an alienated form physically problematizes the cohesive subject, the totalized body, the body "known" to the living subject.

Foster continues his analysis of the object's place in art by integrating the ideas of the psychoanalytic literary critic **Julia Kristeva**. Foster notes, "According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the object is what I must get rid of in order to be an I (but what is this primordial I that expels in the first place?). It is a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it - too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject"[31]. One can see manifestations of this fantasmatic subject writ large in Cahill's work.

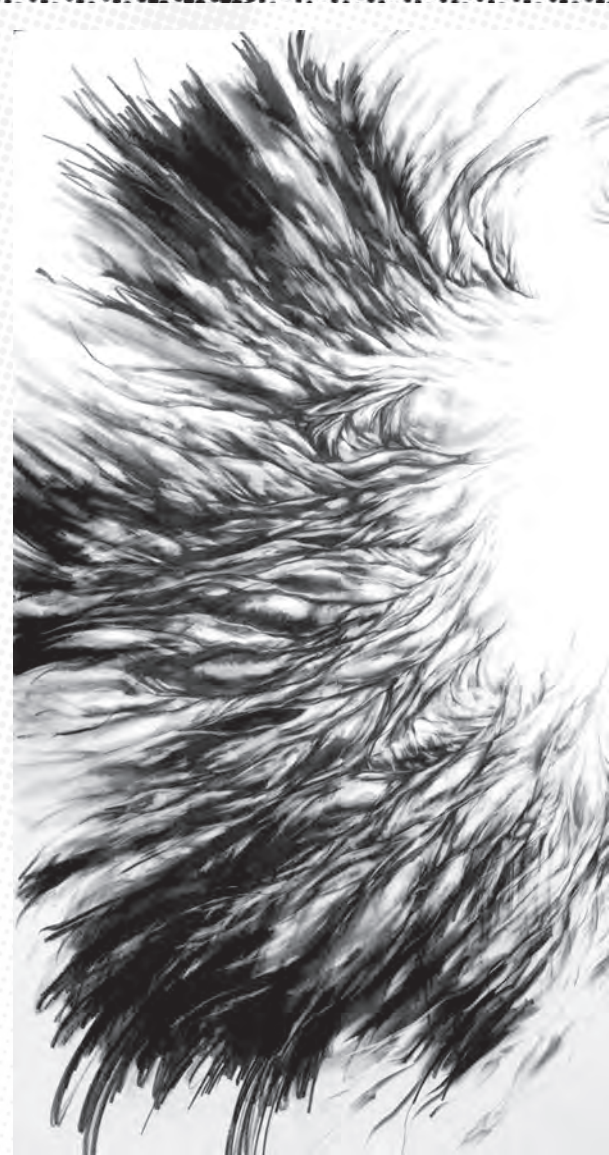
For example, in *Virgil 12* from 2014, we are confronted with a hulking mass rendered in Cahill's characteristic graphite touch. The form sits in a white, horizonless plane, and yet seems to occupy something of a corner. The weight of the form sinks lower in the center as if sagging into the intersections of the geometric **X, Y, and Z axis**. It looks disposed of, as if it had just been thrust with great force into such a state, the traces of such action are registered in the smeary lines that stream vertically from the form at its apex and just to the right of its primary composition. This is the **expelled body**, unused or obsolete, a residue. While the work is truly striking at first glance, it **reveals its abjection** further with closer examination.

As I stare enrapt in *Virgil 12*, I am caught up in its strange topography. By virtue of Cahill's application and erasure of smooth graphite marks, she is able to render a mass that **teeters disturbingly on the corporeally recognizable**. Hers is a shocking **polymorph** that immediately activates my apophenia. The work does this because its constituent parts are carefully applied. The graphite is rendered so as to appear at times like a **photograph**. The erasure of marks is not violent or even wholly gestural in meaning, but instead works to bring forth form and serve the completed image instead of registering as the **mark of the artist**. Because the work is so convincing in its presentation of rendered form, volume, and negative space, it retains a **seductive representational property**, which is one of the ways it draws you in for a better look. In this way, Cahill presents the **object** and not the **objected**. Hers is not an art of **symbolic defacement**, but instead a wholly consuming image.

[29] Ibid.153.

[30] Ibid.153.

[31] Ibid.153.





Nancy Baker Cahill, *Virgil 17*, 2014  
Graphite on paper, 55" x 55"

I cannot help but continue my exploration. As I peer closer at *Virgil 12* I see the rendering of crevasses, folds, serpentine strips of solid, yet pliable substances moving into and out of one another. At first the image reminds me of muscle tissue as it expands and breaks to grow stronger. Yet Cahill's image, in its **solitary, stagnant** state, seems more corpse-like, more a sign of desiccating innards. If this is muscle, it has been flayed and left to rot.

Then I look further into the folds and see the preponderance of dark recesses punctuating the hulking mass. Is this strange central character **penetrating itself**? See there? Near the bottom right? What is that tumescence that appears, juts slightly downward and to the right, only to disappear into a nearby crevasse? **Is it a limb? A phallus? A finger?** The form's dark spots seem to allude to the folds, holes, and **cavernous recesses** of the human body, namely the **vagina, anus, mouth, ears, and belly button**. But these bodily reference points are all out of sort, melted together. There are also less familiar disruptions in the form's surface; tiny slits, gashes, and pits. While staring at these strange instances of intense volumetric shift, something starts to **tingle** on the back of my neck, something that moves up my spine to the top of my head. I get **chills**.

Again quoting Kristeva, Foster notes that, "...the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the special distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (again the privileged realm of the abject) and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which **subjecthood** is troubled, "where meaning collapses"; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike"[32]. This seems to describe quite well the experience I have with Cahill's work (although such an experience resists, rather than supplies its own language for interpretation).

Moving closer into *Virgil 12* provides no release as the form seems to get more and more consuming and meticulously rendered. If I fill my field of vision with the drawing I am engulfed with a surface that seems both human in its **flesh-like appearance**, but also expansive, like the surface of a distant planet. If I quickly move away from Cahill's image, I get no relief from its gaze. I am now repositioned as if looking into a **microscope** at a remnant, a disembodied slice of evidence. The work **exacerbates my bigness**, and as it becomes more and more distant, it keeps relaying a symbolic and **phenomenological** charge. It haunts me. The story that binds up its construction, its still lopsided flesh-like presence, strangely becomes more and more tangible, more likely to **infect me**, like the **microcosmic intruder** that grew inside of Cahill, only to multiply in volume to the size of a third-term **fetus**. The drastic oscillation from macro to micro and back again further denies my desire to tame what I see. I am caught in my **apprehension of the abject subject**, able to see, if only through the pictorial allusion that is so very convincing, a proximity to the real in all of its confounding, displaced, and corporeally devastating glory.

I circle back, compelled to again engage **lingering** thoughts that animated this exhibition from the start. I still search for an understanding of how the **explicit** works through the **explicit**. But an answer **eludes** me. Why?

[32] *Ibid.*:153.

## Something *enters* the void.

My frustration at the forced elision of these two resistant *explicit*s is, I think, itself a key to illuminating a way of looking, which is both *engaging* and perhaps *emancipatory*. This exhibition seeps through to suggest an intriguing *otherwise*. More than a way out, the collision of works I confront provides scouring alternatives determined to erase the / separating the *explicit/explicit*.

I finish this essay (*mostly*). Settling into the space between signification, I commit these words to a *grid*, to pages, typefaces, and columns that spout of letterforms like *ejaculations* and words that refuse *legibility*. I *play* with more than I can say. I don't normally do this but I'm given *permission* by an ambiguity that *binds* me. I feel different.

Perhaps it's best to put aside a belief in a self-contained definition of the *explicitexplicit* (*if it exists*), for such a search re-inscribes the faulty *logic* that seems to give these terms salience. In the *Spice Channel's* scrambled bodies, Seror's *spectral copulations*, Weston's indeterminate *organs*, and Cahill's *tumorous abjections*, we come into contact with the *explicitexplicit* through its confounding *disruption*. As we have seen, such disruptions invite *eroticism*, *play*, *linguistic* and *sexual sliding*, and an encounter with, and not a withdrawal from, the expelled *Other*. Actively participating in this *disruption* unsettles rigid boundaries separating word from meaning, vision from language, the subject from its *Other*. In the *fissures* a new vision seeps through. In the space that remains I set my *tongue* to work.

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