

Part IV

Thinking

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Art Matters: Feminist Corporeal-Materialist Aesthetics

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So I would see understanding difference primarily in terms of the attempt to understand how we come-to-be who we are, through time.

Moira Gatens, 2004¹

It has been more than thirty years since distinctive, non-dualist perspectives on embodiment and materiality emerged in feminist philosophy, yet the resonances of ‘corporeal feminisms’² remain palpable across the arts, humanities and social sciences today. In particular, concepts of embodied subjectivity, situated knowledge, corporeal theory and the materialisation of meaning have had a profound effect upon feminist work in art, art history and aesthetics.

Some of the more compelling and experimental strands of thought to have emerged in connection with the extension and elaboration of corporeal feminisms in recent years are collected under the banner of the ‘new materialisms’. This very inclusive heading contains an exceptionally varied oeuvre – encompassing scholarly work in social and political theory, the history and philosophy of science, visual, literary and material culture studies and creative practices in the arts.

This essay proposes to explore some of the possibilities and challenges offered to aesthetics by the entanglement of corporeal feminisms with ‘new’ or ‘vital’ materialisms. While not simply reducible to one another, both corporeal feminisms and new materialisms propose modes of thought that link bodies and matter to the production of knowledge and the affective acquisition and articulation of meaning. A *feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics*³ challenges conventional concepts of subjectivity, moves away from representation and helps to rethink agency, potentially beyond the limits of a human-centred system. Such an aesthetics, posits the *work* of art as a mode of experimental and material thought – akin to the scientific proposition of the *Gedankenexperiment* (‘thought experiment’), to which this essay will return later. In every sense of the term, a corporeal-materialist aesthetics demonstrates that art *matters* and, for feminist art/theory, this is both a crucial insight and a critical challenge, asking us to think, make and write otherwise.

Entanglements: Mind/body, subject/object, meaning/matter

An extended critique of Cartesian dualism has been a cornerstone of much feminist philosophy and critical theory over the past three decades and, whilst this literature is not a homogeneous body of thought, by overturning the logic of a binary system that defines ‘woman’ and/or ‘the feminine’ as negative, lacking or ‘other’, its insights are as aligned as they are compelling.⁴ Importantly, these insights have practical, material ramifications: they *do things differently*. To realise the transformative potential of a critical feminist aesthetics, doing things differently, making meanings otherwise and materialising subjectivities through creative figurations is *vital*, in the strong sense of the term – imperative, urgent and dynamic.

Doing things differently to affirm the dynamic qualities of life in/as aesthetic transformation is characteristic of the collaborative photo work of Joanna Frueh and Frances Murray. Frueh and Murray have collaborated since 1983, but photographs for three recent book projects are especially pertinent to the entanglements being explored here: *The Glamour of Being Real* (2011), *A Short Story About a Big Healing* (2013) and their current project, *Unapologetic Beauty* (2014–2016, in progress).⁵ In their collaborative photographic work for each of these projects, Frueh and Murray have engaged the limits of conventional aesthetics by materialising a beauty that exceeds boundaries and threatens, at every turn, to become monstrous.⁶

Arguably, their collaborative photo-projects demonstrate how corporeal feminist practices that move beyond dualism can articulate concepts such as beauty differently and, through such an alternative articulation, materialise subjects otherwise. I am arguing specifically that there are three key elements of a vital feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics that are realised in the works of Frueh and Murray: an unravelling entanglement of mind-body, subject-object binary oppositions, a performative materialisation of a generous and dynamic subject (‘self’) and a move away from the logic of figurative representation toward a diffractive figuration, replete with a profoundly reconfigured concept of agency and ethical/political responsibility.

To begin to trace these entanglements, it is useful to turn to the *Self-Evidence* series, six photographs made in 2013 following Frueh’s recovery from a bilateral mastectomy (Figure 20.1). The series is suggestively placed within the recent collaborative work of Frueh and Murray: in pose and atmosphere, images from *Self-Evidence* hearken back to photos published in 2011 in the *Glamour of Being Real*; photos from the series itself were published as part of the book *A Short Story About a Big Healing* and a number of the images are planned to feature in the *Unapologetic Beauty* volume. In an aesthetic sense, the *Self-Evidence* series thus entangles a number of collaborative projects, creating a delicate web over time and space that suggests the simultaneity of continuity and disjunction in the materialisation of a ‘self’ in perpetual transformation. The ‘self’ evidenced by these works is not a finished product or a fixed object but a becoming-subject, materialised in and through the process of evidential performance.

The works are images of Frueh taken by Murray, but they defy the simplistic binaries of artist-model, subject-object, in their engaged and dialogic production. Given Frueh’s extensive engagement with feminist theory as an art historian, performance artist and scholar, in combination with Murray’s knowledge and experience of modernist

Figure 20.1 Joanna Frueh with Frances Murray, *Pink Dream* from the *Self-Evidence* series, 2013.



experimental photography, it is not surprising that their collaboration would wittingly seek to exceed a masculine-normative formalist paradigm whereby the disembodied and all-seeing artist gives form to the mute matter of the body of the model. How their collaborative works manage not to re-inscribe the subject-object, form-matter duality that so easily attends (or, indeed, re-appropriates) photographic studies of the female body is significant to the argument being made here concerning entanglement. I am arguing that the production of *Self-Evidence* through intersubjective encounter and dialogue is re-performed both in the haptic, kinaesthetic qualities of the photographic images and in their material-discursive presentation.

The photographs in *Self-Evidence* are not given to viewers as fetishistically fragmented or estranged images. Viewing the work operates within a carefully constructed environment (literally, *full of care*), whether in the context of a book project or online on Frueh's website, where her writing and moving-image presentations/performances⁷ locate the photographs within a wider project of vital self-and-other exploration and transformation. The works are always encountered serially and within a productive modulation between the artist-subject-performer-image and the artist-collaborator-viewer-photographer. The intersubjective dimension of the work, including the vulnerability, protection, pleasure and joy produced between the protagonists in their making, is present and presenced in the modulation between text and image, and between visual subject and object, *evidenced* in the series.

Likewise, the imaged body is given, generously, in the visual qualities of the work that emphasise the haptic, kinaesthesia of engaged, participant-spectatorship. Soft fabric caresses skin, warm light and shade play over the body; there is an ease of pose, a playful reverie enacted in these images and they invite a fully sensory engagement, a visceral understanding or empathic feeling of comfort and gentle pleasure in our bodies as we look at them. Again, though, there is a critical entanglement at play here, as these photographs materialise a body and a beauty that has survived life-threatening illness; this is the vital matter of the resistant matrix of the body and our incarnate subjectivity. This is not work that rejects or *overcomes* the body, but moves forward, *becomes*, in the full weight of embodiment or, as Frueh puts it, the 'joy of soul-and-mind-inseparable-from-body'.⁸

Embodied entanglements enfold and unfold, they drift from inside to out and back again, like the mathematically inspired form of the Möbius strip, so eloquently invoked by Elizabeth Grosz to describe the inter- and intra-action of mind and body beyond dualism in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994):

Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another...⁹

The Möbius strip is a mathematically inspired form that hovers between two and three dimensions, gently turning surfaces upon themselves so that they demonstrate their multiplicity and mutability (maths, 'non-orientable'). For Grosz, the Möbius strip helped to explain how thinking outside the binary limits of Cartesian dualism could proceed without simply reversing mind-body (privileging 'body,' while maintaining the oppositional logic of the two) or resorting to a monolithic monism (a single substance). The Möbius strip is thus a figuration for the both/and, the irreducibility and integral entanglement of body and mind, object and subject, matter and meaning that confronts and maintains their difference in the intra-action that constitutes embodied subjectivity.

This is a logic that focuses on processes rather than fixates on objects, or, as Judith Butler has argued, a logic that moves from *matter* to *materialisation*:

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter*.¹⁰

Like the Möbius strip invoked by Grosz, Butler's turn to *materialisation* returns the significance of body/matter to the processes of subjectification, such that bodies are no longer merely the 'ground' upon which 'gender' is inscribed by some knowing, disembodied subject. The matrix is not mute; neither is it outside the operations of meaning production. Matter and meaning are entangled.

Butler is not the only feminist scholar to have argued eloquently for the significance of corporeality to subjectivity and the re-conception of matter as vital. Drawing upon

the insights of theoretical physics on the both/and of matter as particle/wave (object/process), Karen Barad reformulated Butler's concept of materialisation as:

an iteratively intra-active process whereby material-discursive bodies are sedimented out of the intra-action of multiple material-discursive apparatuses through which these phenomena (bodies) become intelligible.¹¹

Barad's reformulation, with its focus on the 'intra-actions' through which material-discursive bodies come into intelligibility, radically reconfigures agency beyond (Cartesian) dualism and thus entangles subjects with objects at a fundamental level. As she argues:

The notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual 'interaction', which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the 'components' of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. A specific intra-action [...] enacts an *agential cut* (in contrast to the Cartesian cut – an inherent distinction – between subject and object) effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object'. That is, the agential cut enacts a *local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy.¹²

Within the space of this text, these quotations are themselves enfolding and unfolding, turning and returning, waxing and waning, like the surfaces of the Möbius figuration, enacting an agential cut to produce a material-discursive body, an argument that entangles corporeal feminist theory, new materialism and aesthetics as a vibrant locus for thinking and making *differently*. This interweaving is not proposing that these theoretical trajectories are simply reducible to one another, but rather it demonstrates, in its imbricated form and matter, their resonances as they draw new lines of thought beyond a stultifying economy of the same. They share a dynamism, a refusal to fix or locate subjects *as* objects, a sense of meaning and making able to remain fluid, flexible and full of potential to become otherwise, without rejecting bodies and the material legacies that inevitably come with them.

Feminist corporeal-materialism is neither a new 'idealism' nor an 'a-political' way of thinking that refuses to acknowledge power relations between subjects and the material conditions through which these are reproduced. Rather, it signals a deeply ethical and political entanglement with/in the world, arguing that forms of thinking/making that advance towards as-yet-unrealised possibilities can only emerge through material intra-actions in, of and with the continual phenomenal flow of which everything consists. Acknowledging that world-making does not proceed from an outside of the world is not the same as suggesting that we are confined to a teleological repetition of the past. Quite the opposite; difference emerges in the intersubjective and interobjective activities that characterise agency itself. There is no agency without entanglement; subjects and objects emerge in mutuality. This is a profoundly responsible position to hold, as it locates the very concept of the individual *in* sociality and also places humans *within*, rather than *above* a much expanded, sentient world. In light of these insights, I am arguing that aesthetics and

art-making are especially significant to a feminist corporeal-materialist project in that they mobilise materiality, the senses and response-ability towards engaged and ethical responsibility. Turning back to the Frueh/Murray series *Self-Evidence* enables this argument to unfold further.

Generous selves: Responsibility beyond teleology

It is clear that *Self-Evidence* is not 'self-evident'; the works do not propose the self as a truth beyond proof, demonstration or appearance. Rather, the series provides evidence of subjectivity-in-process, of the dynamic, corporeal emergence of a mutable and material subject, in space over time. The 'self' and the 'evidence' mutually emerge at the site of the agential cut of the photograph; there is no pre-formed artist-subject represented in the photographic series, and the photographs are not a mirror reflecting the truth of an essential identity. The collaborative process of making the images, the dialogic performance for and with the camera in the careful attentive gaze of another, facilitates an agential cut that enables this body, this subject, this photograph to coalesce, briefly, but it does not reveal or fix a singular essential entity. The evidence it provides is transformative and transitory, not teleological, intersubjective or solipsistic.

The series negotiates the production of a 'self' through 'evidence', through the visual and material traces of mass and movement (bodily gesture, stasis, light and shade) and the somatic surface qualities of skin, fabric, stone, metal and hair, produced in close dialogue and exchange with another. The 'self' emerging through the series is neither fragmentary nor complete in the conventional sense of fixed or 'finished'. The indexical qualities of the photographs reiterate the evidential trace of corporeal presence as it emerges *between* subjects and objects, through an intersubjective dynamic that in its seriality opens visceral selves to *others* in temporal unfolding. *Self-Evidence* demonstrates the generosity of mutual and intersubjective transformation.

Yet another meaning attends the term 'evidence' which further entangles selves with others in an ethical gesture of generosity, namely giving evidence, bearing witness or providing testimony. The series gives the 'self' as 'evidence', bears witness to the experience of cancer and to the capacity of embodied subjects to survive and flourish following visceral, traumatic and life-threatening events. The surviving subject is not rendered as a medical object, a documented 'specimen', but rather, in the materialising performance of vitality and transformation that is 'living proof', or *evidence of self-becoming*, an empowered, generous subject emerges – in vital connection with others. In an important sense, the evidence generously given through this series enacts an ethical entanglement between 'response-ability' and 'responsibility', such that our responsibility for others is enhanced by our ability to respond to the evidence that they bear and that we acknowledge and share as our own.¹³

On Joanna Frueh's website, the photographic series *Self-Evidence* is accompanied by a particularly compelling comment from feminist art historian Maria Elena Buszek:

How moved I am by the new *Sel- Evidence* series; its beauty, generosity, and of course as 'evidence' of your ongoing articulation of and activism for feminist eroticism and its inevitable evolution.¹⁴

This comment crystallises a number of significant trajectories within the work – the nature of evidence (held within inverted commas for contingent emphasis), beauty, activism, ongoing articulation and, importantly, the concept of generosity. Clearly, the series invokes affective responses from viewers ('How moved I am...') and these can, as in this instance, elicit astute critical thinking. Connections between affect, kinaesthesia, beauty, generosity and activism are not random or coincidental, but part of a response-able, ethical, embodied politics that acknowledge the indispensability of 'others' to any articulation of a 'self'. Feminist corporeal-materialism reiterates the significance of aesthetics, particularly of kinaesthetic response, to the articulation of the intersubjective dynamics of self-hood that can incline us toward a more generous engagement with multiple forms of difference. Or, as so eloquently described by Rosalyn Diprose: 'Corporeal generosity is a writing in blood that says this body carries a trace of the other, so this body and its cultural expression are not finished, and neither you nor I have the final word.'¹⁵

There is no final word on the potential of the becoming-subject, only further inversions of the surfaces of our entangled Möbius figuration that bring new material-discursive bodies into view. Elaborating the entanglements is a creative process, a thinking-in-making that matters. Frueh's 'self-elaborative' project frequently and with great generosity, entangles others: her family, her friends, her students, her teachers, her mentors, her admirers, her critics, her collaborators are everywhere acknowledged as *intrinsic* to her life/work. The 'self' that emerges across, in and through Frueh's performances, writing and collaborative artworks is permeable, connected to others and generously open to difference. The ethos of the current project she and Murray are developing at the time of writing, *Unapologetic Beauty*, demonstrates this corporeal generosity, ethical responsibility and activist aesthetics clearly:

Unapologetic beauty embodies loving self-acceptance. It dynamically integrates a real and imagined self... We hope that our unapologetic beauty instils resonant joy in others, so that appreciation for female variety galore will grow within our globalized society.¹⁶

Feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics welcomes others as intrinsic to the very notion of a self. This has ethical and political valences of significance: Frueh and Murray signal this with their comment on women and globalisation.

The work of Phil Sayers activates corporeal generosity toward a trans-gender exploration of the imbrication of aesthetics and subjectivity. Connecting Sayers' work with Frueh's at this point does not seek to homogenise them but to elaborate on particular qualities that they share to multiple ends.¹⁷ It is significant that Sayers' very personal exploration of transvestism and the mutability of gender identification began by making art and, in particular, emerged in and through a performative photographic series of 'self' images undertaken in collaboration with his artist-daughter Esther Sayers. These early photographic experiments in the studio preceded a more developed experimentation with gendered codes of dress, gesture and identity outside the studio; significantly, the self/subject that emerged materially/discursively through the agential cut effected by the practices of making art with/in the careful and loving attention of an/other, opened the potential of the lived subject to *become-other*.

Sayers' more recent works have continued to elaborate aesthetic dimensions of transgendered positions and identifications, while remaining a collective and generous enterprise in which the artist frequently works with other artists and models, family members and friends, as well as with historical works of art that embody the material trace or residue of the sedimented visual norms and codes of gender performance cross-culturally over time. Sayers' projects are 'self' explorations, but the 'self' is radically open, permeable, generous, dynamic, unfixd and mutable; others (past and present) are intrinsic to the work and to the ethical and political ramifications of the project as a vital materialist transformation of the limits of subjectivity. Looking more closely at a recent work will serve to demonstrate the generous and permeable subjectivity that I am suggesting is so palpably realised through the practice.

Homage to Pierre Molinier (2012–2013, performed with Monica Grohmann) is a large-scale giclée print frieze (nearly eight metres long and just over a metre high), in which eight composite bodily configurations, comprising multiple single- and double-exposed photographs, float like ornamental decorations against a black background. (Figure 20.2) The work makes direct reference to the composite studio photographs of Pierre Molinier, whose 'surrealist' reconfigurations of bodies (his own, those of female models and dolls) as complex, erotic ornaments were understood to underscore an exploration of taboo sexuality. Sayers and Grohmann, dressed in black body stockings and lace, invoke Molinier's imagery, but do not simply repeat it or retrace his steps to the same ends. The *Homage* opens the interface between bodies, sexuality and sexual difference such that the performed 'ornamentation' along the length of the frieze refuses to resolve in particular, normative, identifiable or fixed bodies *as* objects – *his* body, *her* body, a *woman*, a *man*, and so on, anon. Rather, these are emergent bodies *becoming* his, hers, ours; sex and gender are reducible neither to legible bodies nor to idealist concepts residing beyond bodies. The frieze articulates the irreducibility of sexed subjectivity, the resistant matter of the bio-cultural body and the fundamental entanglement of subjects/objects in and through the intra-actions that materialise meaning.

The work, a work of collaborative, performed and generous bodies, entangled within the material-discursive legacies of the past (the veritable over-determination of gender and sexuality described by art and dress), demonstrates what Jane Bennett understands to be the extraordinary potential inherent in vital matter: 'the persistent capacity of the natural world to surprise – to produce events not fully determined by their antecedents... (t)here are always more potential shapes and lines of development... than become actual.'¹⁸ The myriad possibilities of materialisation described by Bennett are directed not merely towards a theory of aesthetics but towards a non-dualist understanding of 'life' and matter. Matter, *materialised*, is a vital and intrinsic component of the very



Figure 20.2 Phil Sayers, *Homage to Pierre Molinier*, performed with Monica Grohmann, multiple single- and double-exposed photographs, 110 × 774 cm, 2012–2013.

possibility of be(com)ing, knowing, meaning; it is part of the condition of agency, not mute, dull 'stuff' in desperate need of an 'agent' to form it.

The ramifications of a feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics to the articulation of sexed subjectivity in and through art hinge on the resistant, surprising vitality of matter and the permeable generosity of mutable subjects. Agency as an intra-active and iterative slice in the flow that is the phenomenal becoming of the world does not presuppose any inherent difference between subjects and objects other than those configured, from within, at the moment of the agential cut that enables them to come into intelligibility. Systems of thought (epistemologies), definitions of being (ontologies) and the distribution of meaning and power that accrue from these, are not eternal, unchanging or, importantly, essential. Thus, while bodies and meanings do sediment from the continual processes of iterative intra-activity over time, and these sedimented material-discursive bodies have the effect of producing the parameters through which new bodies come into intelligibility (i.e. they produce *normative* effects), they can never wholly contain the possibilities of difference to emerge through new intra-actions.

Homage to Pierre Molinier and *Self-Evidence* materialise embodied subjects as vital, transformative, intersubjective and open to difference. They articulate 'selves' not through autobiography but through autography – there is no 'self' who stands outside a 'life' and 'writes' it (*auto – bio – graph*). Self and inscription are simultaneous, multiple, mutual, and open-ended; *autography* is not *teleology*: it does not yield a pre-determined object. The works explored here articulate embodied subject positions without collapsing these into essence; the contingency of meaning works through embodiment and matter, signifying in and through difference, corporeality and situation, without fixing future possibilities to draw different distinctions, turning subjects and objects inside out. Feminist corporeal-materialism thus unravels any lingering political oppositions that would pit essence against (de)construction in thinking sexed (and sexual, desiring) subjectivity. Bodies *do* matter and there is no becoming-other *beyond* or *outside* the material-discursive sediment through which subjects and objects emerge into intelligibility, but this neither fixes nor predetermines the limits of the new material-discursive bodies that can emerge in future.

Frueh and Sayers effect local resolutions to materialise, without apology, the transformative beauty of sexed subjectivity and radical difference as always, perpetually emergent – *both* materially located *and* becoming-other. Mobilising agential intra-action and a move away from representation, feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics entangles the political, ethical and theoretical propositions of feminist activism, strategic essentialism and queer deconstruction.¹⁹ Seeking a determinate meaning for 'woman' or 'man' (or 'straight', 'trans' or 'queer'...) is untenable (despite the long histories of sedimented, normative definitions), as 'wo/man' is produced as a category only in its contingent relationships with other subjects and objects at the point of an agential cut.

Self-Evidence and *Homage to Pierre Molinier* materialise myriad, transversal subject positions via the sedimented traces of the many agential cuts that went before them, *not* because the categories those cuts produced in their wake are real, *nor* because these works are representations of that 'reality'/'truth'/'essence', but rather, because the process of sedimentation itself has produced the conventions through which subjects can come into intelligibility. Thus, ignoring the material legacy of history within the complex intra-actions of the present is not productive of thinking differently. Rather, while acknowledging the sedimentary effects of the many material-discursive bodies of the

past, feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics argues that each new instantiation, in its iterative intra-action, has the potential to *change* those sedimented conventions.

Self-Evidence and *Homage to Pierre Molinier* are not figurative representations of Frueh and Sayers, nor are they metaphors for the ‘woman artist’ or ‘trans-wo/man artist’. I am arguing rather that these works are *diffractive figurations* or, as this text will go on to explore, *Gedankenexperiments*. Bringing the terms ‘diffraction’, ‘figuration’ and ‘*Gedankenexperiment*’ together in this argument is strategic; each of these terms has signalled a move beyond representation in material(ist) thinking in different disciplines and a change from an ontology of ‘being’ towards a productive methodology of ‘becoming’.

Arguably, artworks can contribute to this potential for change when they move away from representing and reiterating sedimented conventions towards materialising the processes of intersubjective emergence through *figurations*. Figurations are neither symbols nor metaphors; as Rosi Braidotti argues:

Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions. [...] A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. [...] A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self – it is no metaphor.²⁰

Figurations do not figure, illustrate, represent or symbolise subjects; likewise, diffraction does not reflect an external ‘real’. Even as the insoluble folded surface of the Möbius strip offered a way to think beyond the deadlock of binary dualism, it was not a mere representation or symbolic cipher of a non-dualist system. Diffractive figurations chart or map the processes whereby subjectivity comes into intelligibility through intra-actions that are within the flux of the world rather than beyond it.

Gedankenexperiments are material hypotheses for thinking/making that which has not yet come to be. In one sense, *Gedankenexperiments* resemble the hypothetical propositions commonly used in Western philosophical training in order to consider otherwise unimaginable concepts. Particularly favoured by Albert Einstein, *Gedankenexperiments* permitted experimentation in quantum mechanics to be pursued without the material limits of a laboratory, and thus played a key role in areas of scientific research where certain physical conditions or properties were not able to be realised materially, but could be proposed theoretically *in advance* of their potential materialisation. This is an important difference between a *Gedankenexperiment* and a purely hypothetical proposition – a *Gedankenexperiment* is premised upon something that could, potentially, become the case.

Operating in the registers of visual, material, spatial and somatic articulation, works of art can materialise imaginative scenarios and possibilities viscerally, and while art may only enable a glimpse of what could become (what might materialise otherwise), these aesthetic *Gedankenexperiments* are the stuff of transformation. They may be transitory, but their transformative potential should not be underestimated. In the final turn of this text, the entanglements that are here beginning to constitute a feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics, developed through a critical deployment of figurations and *Gedankenexperiments*, will extend further towards an elaboration of diffraction beyond representation that thinks agency otherwise. Moving towards this, we follow the lead of one more aesthetic ‘self’ elaboration, *Pupil* (1987–1990) by Elizabeth King.

Vital figurations: From reflection to diffraction

Pupil is a half-life-size figurative, articulated, three-dimensional object consisting of a remarkably lifelike head set on a wooden mannequin torso by a mobile jointed neck, with carved wooden arms, hands and fingers that are also carefully jointed for mobility. This awkward textual description seeks to avoid, purposely, a number of seductive terms that might be used too easily, too swiftly, to describe *Pupil*: a 'sculptural self-portrait', a 'representation of the artist', an 'artwork', in other words an object with a fixed and conceptually bounded meaning. *Pupil*, as described by King, is 'an instrument'; in King's practice, *Pupil* has no absolute boundaries as 'an artwork' but rather, as an instrument operating within a series of *Gedankenexperiments*, facilitates a number of potentially infinite critical entanglements between the categories of object, image, book, installation, text and idea.²¹ I want to suggest that *Pupil*-as-instrument operates to demonstrate that the *work* of art (the work done by art), its agential intra-activity, can configure and reconfigure specific material-discursive bodies (i.e. *this* installation, *this* photographic series, *this* animation) to facilitate an exploration of agency that is beyond the dualist logic of representation in which agency is a 'property' of subjects who act upon objects.

Pupil is a likeness of King, but like *Self-Evidence* and *Homage to Pierre Molinier*, any sense of the work being a fixed reflection of an essential 'self' of the artist is confounded by the extension of *Pupil* (as I/eye/student) through reconfiguration in space(s) over time. In these reconfigurations, the 'self' becomes other through the intra-actions effected with/in the work. In this way, questions of representation yield to a very different logic. The concept of representation is particularly entrenched in aesthetic theory, where it clings to the analysis of the visual arts as a linguistic 'false friend' that too easily returns binary thinking to the field. The visual arts are dogged by definitions of their 'representational' or 'non-representational' status which refers solely to their depiction (or not) of things outside their frame. In the terms of the argument being developed here, that use of representation is seductive, but flawed.

A feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics moves beyond representation understood as reflective of a pre-given entity or condition. That does not mean that works of art cannot play with visual mimesis. Indeed, in *Pupil*, there is an extraordinary play of likeness in the production of the facial features and part of its ability as an instrument to make meaning is derived from our kinaesthetic response to the 'human expressions' that *Pupil* can effect. The object looks and seems very life-like and, for those who have seen King, the resemblance between the artist and the small sculptural head is striking. This 'shock' of resemblance, or play with mimesis, is tantalising and certainly part of what draws a viewer to look closely at the work. However, the seductive fiction of representation in figurative art would suggest that the work *reflects* something else (here, 'human emotion'), which exists beyond the frame of the material-discursive body we encounter in each very different manifestation of the work (as object, as photograph, as animated short). I am arguing for the seductive power of the work to reside elsewhere in this case; rather than create the fiction of a knowable person behind the work, King's sculptural likeness draws us in, kinaesthetically, so to explore the processes that underlie the production of 'likeness' itself.

If we assume an uncritical stance in regard to the logic of representation, we construct the 'self' of the human original (King) through the conceit of the 'self-portrait' in an act of wilful amnesia that forgets the body of the work and occludes the

resistant matter of the matrix. A feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics moves away from representation towards figuration and thus shifts the methodological ground from reflection to diffraction.²² This, in turn, makes us aware, in the experience of any of *Pupil's* myriad manifestations, that we are engaging in the *process* of mimesis, witnessing the operations of matter *materialised* as 'expression', 'gesture' and meaning-production and that this is taking place in the intimate exchange between human and non-human material-discursive bodies. *Pupil* is not reflecting reality; it is diffracting it, making the effects of differences matter, through the materialist map of the figuration.

Barad developed the concept of 'diffraction' as I am using it here, to define a performative, non-representationalist methodology. In using the term 'diffraction' (which she opposes to 'reflection'), she is keen to make clear that diffraction is not an analogy but rather a 'material-discursive phenomenon that makes the effects of different differences evident.'²³ This is not inconsequential:

[A] diffractive methodology is a critical practice for making a difference in the world. It is a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter and for whom. [...] And furthermore, the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that *practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world.* [...] And this requires a methodology that is attentive to, and responsive/responsible to, the specificity of material entanglements in their agential becoming.²⁴

In addition to rethinking authorship and intentionality beyond dualism, diffraction as an embodied and enworlded method suggests that art-making, as a form of material intra-action, might acquire agency; the subjects and objects of art practices emerge intra-actively at the point of the agential cut that forms both, *over time* as well as *in space*. Rethinking authorship focuses upon the *subjects* of art and upon conventional understandings of 'the artist' as the underlying human agency given expression through the artwork. In its manifold variations, *Pupil* facilitates the materialisation of the *work* of art, the potential for aesthetic agency to emerge *between* subjects and objects in their intra-activity. While subjects and objects are constrained in their emergence by the traces, residues and normative sediments of the past, they are never wholly contained. *Pupil* ever becomes otherwise in and through each intra-action. That is its wonder and its power.

I want to argue further that Barad's focus on methodological accountability in a diffractive method, what she calls 'making a difference', is especially compelling for a feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics, not least as an argument for a non-representational mode of thinking that thoroughly entangles ethics, politics and knowledge production through an alternative understanding of agency. Agency is not a 'thing' (owned by an agent), but a 'doing', a 'making-from-within'²⁵, an *intra-action*, in time, between various material and discursive entities that come into intelligibility as 'components' of phenomena. Making art, therefore, need not be understood as the activity of a fully intentional 'artist-subject' expressing pre-formed meanings in and through a selection of mute materials with pre-given properties but instead as one kind of intra-action through which the 'artwork' and the 'artist' *both* emerge as entities by means of effecting a specific (local) agential cut – by the act or process of 'making art'.

If agency is not a property solely invested in human-subjects but an action whose effects yield whatever sense we have of subjects and objects (human and otherwise) then, arguably, both subjects *and* objects are vital and redolent with potential, but to neither can be ascribed a fixed identity or intention (beyond the sense of intentionality as 'being directed towards'). The mutability of objects is an effect of their vitality; the potential to make anew is always open. Critically, this sustains neither a radical relativism nor an idealist dispersal of the subject to the point of its dissolution. Corporeal feminist theory and critical feminist engagements with new materialism are not depoliticised positions that 'forget' about the effects of iniquitous power relationships in the 'real world'. Far from it. Their potential resides in their explicit commitment to understanding how the historical and geopolitical conditions of material production intra-act with the production of meaning, materially and discursively in the formation of subjects and objects in the world. These are specific and detailed intra-actions, not overarching generalities, and their analysis requires attending to their specificity. The world is not a thing out there, but one in which 'we' are formed and of which we are formative; the strength of feminist corporeal-materialism is its ability to imagine, think and make differently from within.

To argue in this way reinforces the entanglement between ethical and political agency and the vital significance of both imagination and affect to knowledge and action.²⁶ This is not a body of idealistic, abstract or transcendent theory but a way of thinking, knowing and acting in the world that binds us to others in attitudes of generous listening and open conversation. It is a way of thinking and acting that refuses androcentric, Eurocentric, ocularcentric and even anthropocentric appeals to knowing from nowhere, acting *upon*, rather than *within*, the world. Feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics connect us in our embodiment with the knowing and the making of others, such that we can think differently and 'experiment' otherwise, towards hopeful and, if not yet realised, *possible* worlds.

Imagining, thinking and making differently draw the material-discursive body of this argument toward its final turn. From the generous intersubjective self-and-other transformations of *Self-Evidence*, to the mutable, multiple, corporeal configurations of *Homage to Pierre Molinier* and the materialisation of aesthetic agency as subject-object intra-activity in *Pupil*, the 'selves' that have emerged in the material-discursive lines sketched here between art/theory, corporeal feminism and new materialism are diverse, daring and dynamic. They are not configured beyond the matter of the world, inclusive of pleasure and pain, joy and grief, yet their continual becoming, performed through art, embraces the as-yet-unknown wonder and possibility that is the material emergence of subjectivity. Art, as a space in which to explore and extend material-discursive experimentation has a significant role to play in a feminist corporeal-materialist project. It is not mute matter awaiting form but a locus for aesthetic *Gedankenexperiments* that can facilitate material explorations of conditions as yet unrealised, *but not unrealisable*.

The becoming-figurations that have emerged and sedimented over the lines and paragraphs inscribed through the intra-actions of text/image/object/articulation within this brief exegesis posit the possibility of a *feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics*, a diffractive figuration for a dynamic entanglement between ethics, politics and knowledge-production. It also posits the *possibility* of feminist futures, of spaces for feminist *Gedankenexperiments* as yet unknown, but to which art *matters*, and *matters differently*.

Notes

- 1 Mary Walsh, 'Twenty years since "a critique of the sex/gender distinction": a conversation with Moira Gatens.' *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 19, no. 44, 2004: 213–224.
- 2 I take the term 'corporeal feminism' from the title of Elizabeth Grosz's ground-breaking book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994) and extend it, with readers' permission for the use of shorthand, to include the work of other key thinkers on embodiment (i.e. Rosi Braidotti, Rosalyn Diprose, Claire Colebrook, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd). It is notable that much of this work has a link to what has now been called 'Australian feminist theory'.
- 3 There has been little comprehensive work to date that brings corporeal feminist theory together with insights from new materialisms in exploring art or art history/theory. However, Barbara Bolt was one of the earliest authors to develop materialist approaches that moved beyond representation (see: Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London: IB Tauris, 2004). In addition, Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett are developing exciting trajectories in new materialisms (see: Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds), *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts* (London: IB Tauris, 2013)). In addition, a number of scholars working in Scandinavia are moving in this direction, including Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Milla Tiainen and Ilona Hongisto; Kontturi's doctoral dissertation drew on my own work to think through a feminist materialist aesthetics. I would also note *Drawing Difference: Connections between Gender and Drawing*, co-authored by Marsha Meskimmon and Phil Sawdon (London: IB Tauris, 2016) – see, especially, Chapter 3.
- 4 The use of the term 'Cartesian dualism' refers directly to the significance of Rene Descartes within Western European philosophical conceptions of subjectivity; binary dualism and 'economies of the same' are also terms that populate much of the literature.
- 5 All of these projects are documented on Frueh's website: www.joannafrueh.com.
- 6 I am using the term 'monstrous' here to resonate with Frueh's book *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2001).
- 7 See 'Beauty Marks Not Battle Scars' on <http://www.joannafrueh.com>.
- 8 Joanna Frueh, *Monster/Beauty*, op. cit., p. 101.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 9 (emphasis in the original).
- 11 Karen Barad, 'Getting real: technoscientific practices and the materialization of reality' *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1998: 87–128 (emphasis in the original). Barad traces the performative line of thinking from linguistics to Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler and reminds us of Donna Haraway preferring 'articulation' to 'representation', p. 108.
- 12 Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter.' *Signs, Gender and Science: New Issues*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003: 800–831, 815.
- 13 See: Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Marsha Meskimmon, 'Response and responsibility: On the cosmo-politics

- of generosity in contemporary Asian art' in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette (eds) (Acton, Australia: ANU Press, 2014), pp. 143–159.
- 14 Buszek on <http://www.joannafrueh.com/news.html>, accessed 16 November 2018.
 - 15 Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), p. 195.
 - 16 <http://www.joannafrueh.com/projects/work-in-progress.html>, accessed 16 November 2018.
 - 17 Frueh and Sayers share a number of features in their work and their approaches, not least a love of gardening and a thoughtful engagement with the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. In addition, their work locates *me*, the subject-in-process through the entanglement of this writing, as I know both artists (and also Elizabeth King, the third artist whose work is brought into this discussion, later) and I owe to all three a debt of gratitude for their work and their generosity.
 - 18 Bennett, Jane, 'A vitalist stopover on the way to a new materialism' in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 47–69, pp. 52, 49.
 - 19 I am indebted to the fascinating work of Erin Silver and Amelia Jones on the complex and sometimes oppositional relationship between feminism and queer: *Sexual Differences and Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).
 - 20 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Oxford: Polity, 2002), pp. 2–3.
 - 21 See Elizabeth King's website (<https://thesizesofthings.com>, accessed 16 November 2018) for some of the photographs and animations produced using her sculptural 'instruments.' The range of work produced with and through *Pupil* attests to its exceptional ability to effect complex articulation across media and meaning; these features are critical here.
 - 22 I am following the lead of feminist historians and theorists of science such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad in developing the idea of diffraction and the move from representation to articulation/materialisation here.
 - 23 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 88.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.
 - 25 It is tempting to reconsider the ancient notion of *techne* here, where thinking and making were not seen to be so easily opposed as more contemporary notions of theory/practice would often hold.
 - 26 The significance of affect and imagination to rethinking our political and ethical agency has been argued compellingly (in very different contexts) by, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Oxford: Polity, 2002); Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present* (London and NY: Routledge, 1999); and Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford: OUP, 2006). This argument is connected to those insights.