

The Supernatural Sex: Women, Magick and Mediumship
Assembling a Field of Fascination in Contemporary Art



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Abstract

This thesis develops the concept of a *field of fascination* to denote the importance of curiosity in the processes of making in fine art practice. Through an exploration of the methods used in the production of my own artwork, including the appropriation of archival and found material pertaining to the history of women in the fields of magick and mediumship, it offers a way of expressing the material experimentation and selection that occurs in the development of an artwork. Additionally it references the practical exploration of how an atmosphere conducive to fascination could be established through employing techniques of theatrical staging, directly considered in my own exhibition *Escamotage* (2014). The core material of this thesis established from an interest in the shared language of 'channeling' within the fields of mediumship and fine art practice in which the body is positioned as a conduit. In particular, this thesis argues that the centrality of the female body as a 'channel' in the practice of mediumship offers a unique and unexplored nuance for the discussion of the materiality of the body in new materialist feminist theory. Through a theoretical framework employing the writing of Elisabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Judith Butler and Susan Hekman the double-edged power dynamic of the female body as a 'channel' is interrogated and repositioned within the context of artistic production. This takes account of the recent re-engagement with the work of Hilma af Klint (1862 – 1944) and Georgiana Houghton (1814 – 1884) two female practitioners who produced astoundingly important abstract painting under the guise of spiritualist mediumship. Contemporarily, it critically addresses Susan Hiller's practice as one that continues to interpret the periphery of the occult and interrogates the emergence of 'not knowing' as a descriptor of artistic methodology in the writing of Rachel Jones and Rebecca Fortnum. The original contribution of this thesis is the positioning of the term 'claircognizance' 'clear-knowing' within the field of artistic practice as a replacement for the concept of 'not knowing' as defined by Jones and Fortnum. Borrowing from the language of clairvoyant mediumship 'claircognizance' sidesteps the negative connotations of the lay meaning of 'not knowing' to describe the clarity of thought that emerges through studio experimentation as a form of 'clear knowing'. Finally, the negotiation of critical discourses from fields including feminist theory, philosophy, the history of art and contemporary artistic practice provides a unique interweaving of approaches that is useful for future interdisciplinary research.

Introduction

This thesis builds upon the paradox of 'not knowing' as a tacitly accepted feature of fine art practice and simultaneously, as a way to account for the importance of the senses as distinct from rational thinking in material practice. It developed from the recognition of parallels between the inferences of channeling and intuition in artistic discussion and the act of mediumship, which shared the staging of the body as a conduit. The concept of the artist's body acting as a vessel for creative inspiration ignited a critical discourse around the distinctly female trappings of channeling, evoking the entrenched terminology of 'woman as vessel' that encompassed a broad range of questions around the materiality of the body in both mediumship and artistic practice. This resulted in a set of original aims for this investigation:

- To examine the position of the contemporary female psychic as a channeling conduit, in light of feminist challenges to the representation/identity of *woman as 'vessel'*, interrogating how the ownership of psychic practice by women established a double-edged power dynamic providing a path to rethink what it means to view *woman as 'vessel'*.
- To interrogate atmosphere and its role in setting up a field of fascination within the practice of mediumship through a practical exploration of the logic of the senses around comfort, familiarity, prediction and expectation.
- To explore the wider question of how this field of fascination can manifest in the work of contemporary art; and to investigate through practical experimentation how a contemporary artwork can create an immersive dwelling space able to generate a compulsion to look, comparable to the psychic space.

Naturally, these original aims developed throughout the research process, but the core concept of a 'field of fascination' remained central, established through the appropriation of archival material, found footage and narratives which cite the female body as a corporeal sensitized in an entirely different way, as key methods within my artistic practice.

Chapter one undertakes a critical interrogation of the concept of 'Woman as vessel' unraveling how the power and difference of the female body can be approached through the framework of new materialist feminism. Taking Elizabeth Grosz's challenge to find new methodologies for understanding 'woman', the chapter develops a critical understanding of the centrality of the female body in the field of mediumship; citing channeling as an overlooked nuance in which the materiality of the female body is of central importance. The introduction of Karen Barad's agential realism and Susan Hekman's restaging of the feminine subject as a performative 'mangle' evidences the necessity of rethinking the concept of 'woman as vessel' as an integral fragment informing understandings of 'woman', bodily materiality and female empowerment. The recognition of this stance facilitates a critical interrogation of the female body in the materialisation of ectoplasm, from the mediumistic female bodies within the Thomas Glendenning Hamilton séance circle to Baron von Schrenck-Notzing's experiments with Eva C. The sexual connotations of materialising female bodies in the space of the séance are dissected.

Chapter two examines how the particular mode of empowerment provided by female channeling translates to the practice of art. Through an engagement with the practices of artists Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton, a critical understanding of spiritualism's role in providing a suitable façade for women's independent artistic practice emerges. This resonates in the contemporary practice of Susan Hiller and the development of the term 'paraconceptual' to denote the examination of women's role in the periphery of the occult in her conceptual artistic practice. The context of channeling then facilitates a shift toward the particulars of 'not knowing' within artistic methodologies using Rachel Jones' concept of the value of 'not knowing' in creative endeavor. This is echoed in the discussion of Tom Holert's spotlighting of the phrase "I was interested in" as a prevalent term used within contemporary artistic discourse. The acknowledgement of 'not knowing' and 'channeling' as equal components in artistic phrasing works toward a discussion of the pre-existing categories of clairvoyance, the 'clairs' – clairaudience, clairallience, clairtangency and clairgustance – clear hearing, clear smelling, clear touch and clear taste – as a unique way of framing discussions of the breakdown of the sensory capacities within artistic interaction with material, a form of claircognizance 'clear knowing' instead of 'not knowing'.

Finally, chapter three develops the concept of 'a field of fascination' specific to my own artistic practice. Through a critical discussion of fascination as a term defined by the counterparts of curiosity and abjection drawing on Andrew Benjamin, Julia Kristeva and George Bataille's authorship, the field of fascination is developed to define the compulsive gathering, selecting and material experimentation of making. More specifically for my own practice it defined the intense interconnectivity of collected images and narratives from archival and found sources on the history of women in Magick and mediumship and the translation of this material into a body of work that centrally used appropriation and editing as key methods of working. This includes critical reflection on the shift of focus toward re-situating the vanishing female body within the field of performance magic in my practice, taking to task the violence enacted upon women during stage illusions. Following Karen Beckman's analysis of the popularity of the illusion 'the vanishing lady' by Buatier de Kolta in 1886, as a reflection on the desire for a magical vanishing of the surplus of women in society, a connection is drawn between the socio-political atmosphere of the time and the enactment of magical violence upon women's bodies today.

Tracking female vanishing from the Victorian stage to its manifestation in pre-narrative cinema in which the conjuring and vanishing of the female body through Méliès' substitution trick are read as a male envy of women's procreative function by Lucy Fischer; the introduction of more contemporary versions of illusions highlight the ongoing popularity of violence toward women. P.T Selbit's *Sawing Through A Woman* provides evidence for a reading by Francesca Coppa that reflects Michel Foucault's docile bodies in which the female body is worked upon and freely re-arranged. The production of this particular illusion in parallel to the suffragette movement further added to its popularity and a unique reflection on the emancipated female body in the form of the flapper is made. This reading builds toward the critical underpinning of the performative work *Vanishing in Plain Sight*, a collaboration between artist David Cheeseman and myself, incorporating Robert Harbin's famous illusion *Zig Zag* girl, in which the female body is cut into three pieces, an ironic comment on the labour intensive role of the much overlooked magician's assistant. Central to this chapter is the underpinning of the space of female vanishing as distinctly domestic, drawing parallels with the disappearance of the female body within the home as an angel of the house,

referencing the practices of Clare Strand, Eva Stenram and Annett Reimer. Finally, the notion of experiencing a field of fascination when viewing contemporary art as a form of 'dwelling space' as outlined in my initial objectives underwent a series of changes and presents itself in this chapter in the guise of theatricality and a critical discussion of 'staging' fascination. The chapter closes with an articulation of the exhibition *Escamotage, 2014* which drew out the importance of theatrical 'staging' in the exhibition of my work and became generative of a form of disembodied female representation, in which the female body never actually 'appears' but is inferred through the exoskeleton of objects, images and scents that become evocative of a body vanished altogether.

Chapter One | *Woman as Vessel*

In the final paragraph of Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* is a plea to experiment with new types of method that might help to discuss the infinite contexts, in which the question of the female body, its power and differences, arise.¹ The discussion undertaken by Grosz crosses psychoanalytic, neurological and phenomenological accounts of lived experience, settling on the model of the Möbius strip to highlight the capacity for two disparate entities to twist, one into the other.² This twisting into a single entity forms a relationship that has no inside or outside, facilitating an escape from the Cartesian mind body split and resulting in subjectivity as a surface.³ The benefit of subjectivity formulating as a surface is its acknowledgement of materiality, it enables 'woman' to be thought as a psychical totality in which the female body can be acknowledged as having particular and socially distinctive attributes. However, Grosz also acknowledges that the model of the Möbius strip limits the understanding of female subjectivity because in place of dualism it formulates a kind of monism, linking subjectivity to a form of autonomy that does not easily facilitate the discussion of difference. Grosz asserts that theoretical risks must be taken to find approaches that recognise sexual difference as a central problem in understanding how bodies conceive of and act in the world.⁴ It is from this particular call for new methods that I present the practice of mediumship as an overlooked framework through which the representation of the female body as a 'vessel' can be re-read. I will argue that mediumship has facilitated a re-ownership of this status, snatching it from its derogatory trappings and transforming it to a mode of empowerment for women, which continues to have a contemporary resonance. I will also determine how the acknowledgement of mediumship has implications for new materialist feminist thinking, which brings the issue of the body back to the fore.

¹ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. 210

² Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 36-39

³ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, pp.115-121. See also René Descartes, "Second Meditation" and "Third Meditation" in *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) pp.23-30, 57-70

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, p. 210

The use of mediumship as a framework to discuss the female body requires a certain openness, a willingness to face the strange without attempting to assimilate it into the familiar. It is necessary for me to state at this early stage that I am not a believer in mediumship and so the call to embrace it, for the purpose of forwarding feminist discussions of the body, stems from the act of wondering. As Luce Irigaray argues, wondering is the necessary condition to awaken the appetite of curiosity. Throughout her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray argues for an openness that forces the strange to be experienced in all its strangeness and without pre-judgment. She writes:

Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An excess resists: the other's existence and becoming as a place that permits union and/through resistance to assimilation or reduction to sameness. Before and after appropriation, there is wonder. It is set apart from rejection, which expresses itself notably through contradictory positions.⁵

The embracing of mediumship as a lens through which the female body can be re-addressed offers the potential to force a re-evaluation of preconceived baselines of understanding. Contemporary philosophers such as Isabelle Stengers have been particularly vocal in arguing for openness toward practices that have been eliminated due to their superstitious context. Stengers highlights that much can be learnt from alternative fields such as tarot reading and sorcery, she states, "I do not claim we should mimic those practices, but maybe we should accept to 'seeing' them, and wonder."⁶ The use of mediumship in this thesis precisely echoes Stengers' call to see and wonder by highlighting mediumship as a practice that has provided women with an empowered status through history. In an echo of Michel Foucault's call for the necessity of re-evaluating disqualified knowledges, mediumship presents itself as a subjugated knowledge, ranked low in the hierarchical scale, due to its lack of sufficiency against scientificity.⁷ Alongside Stengers, Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledge

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 74

⁶ Isabelle Stengers "Wondering about Materialism" in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Australia: re-press, 2011) p.380

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon and translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) pp. 81-85.

contends that it is only by embracing knowledges that have been sidelined for their difference that true criticism can perform. It is only by looking to practices such as mediumship and the many others that women have been forced to adopt to seek methods of empowerment, that a real consideration of the identity of woman can be approached.

Foucault describes subjugated knowledge as any knowledge that is altogether different or unqualified in the eyes of science. Built through local or regional understanding, he states that they are knowledges that cannot be brought into harmony or those that are marginalized by their own hostility toward 'popular knowledge'; in summary they are a 'historical knowledge of struggles'. The method of approach that Foucault devises to facilitate his discussion is the concept of genealogy, the union of scholarly and local knowledge, which allows space for the discontinuous and seemingly illegitimate to function, he states:

a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse. It is based on a reactivation of local knowledges-of minor knowledges, as Deleuze might call them-in opposition to the scientific hierarchisation of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power: this, then, is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies.⁸

The dismissal of unitary erudite knowledge in favour of the sidelined sets the stage for mediumship as an appropriate, but in Grosz' terms 'theoretically risky' framework through which the female body can be re-thought. The overarching history of mediumship has been tainted by allegations of irrationality and falsehood, but in light of Foucault's genealogy it can also be freed from this unitary labeling and be reactivated as an indisputable pathway toward women's independence and empowerment. Mediumship privileged women by turning commonly accepted connotations of the female body as the weaker vessel, into desired characteristics, all to the effect of bringing women to roles of power.

i. Supernatural Vessels: Women, Performance & Power

The relationship between the common notion of female sexuality - voracious, nurturing, whorish, saintly, mothering - and the supernatural remains well established in history, with an

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.85

excess of female desire continually cited as the driving constituent of female supernaturalism.⁹ Often referred to as a vessel, through childbirth, or an exchanger within the confines of marriage, the female body has been an article of trade, trafficked by men within the boundaries of common social customs.¹⁰ Within this context, the figure of the female medium has provided a double-edged dynamic of oppression and power for women. The exploitation of young, attractive but impoverished women within spiritualist circles for sexual and monetary gain is paralleled by the rapid elevation of women to roles of power, authority and independent financial stature within the same profession.¹¹

Early forms of spiritualism afforded women an occasion to subvert the gender politics at large whilst staying within what was universally acknowledged as acceptable womanhood. The practice of mediumship did not rebel against the constraints of normal codes of female behaviour instead it subverted the stereotyped characteristics of femininity to impress women's superiority to its cause; as Anne Braude states, "mediumship gave women a public leadership role that allowed them to remain compliant with the complex values of the period that have come to be known as the cult of true womanhood...purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity."¹² The traits of the cult of true womanhood to some extent echo the stereotypes of femininity supported by Freud's account of the differences between the sexes and his perpetuation of women as less dominant and more aligned to passive aims.¹³ Although Freud is not directly concerned with anatomy he uses it to originate the psychical implications of

⁹ The belief that women are more closely connected to the supernatural is a long standing feature of history since the witch hunts, the stereotype of women being weak, impressionable and therefore more easily taken in by the devil has continued to hold a certain currency. See Brian Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*. Third edition. (UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2006) pp. 134 – 174, as well as, Darren Oldridge, "Part Seven: Witchcraft and Gender" in *The Witchcraft Reader (Routledge Readers in History)*, Second edition, (London: Routledge, 2006.) pp. 247 – 286.

¹⁰ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women" in *Deviations* (London: Duke University Press, 2011) pp. 33-65, see also Ann Braude. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) pp. 117-141

¹¹ The re-appropriation of female mediumship from its once derogatory stance to one of empowerment facilitated an escape from the common tropes of female life such as the restrictive grasps of marriage and domestication, providing an early form of independence for women. See, Alex Owen "Star Mediumship: Light and Shadows" in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) pp. 41-74.

¹² Anne Braude. *Radical Spirits*, p.82

¹³ Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXIII: Femininity (1933)" in Leticia Glocer Fiorini; Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose. *On Freud's 'Femininity'*. The International Psychoanalytical Association Contemporary Freud: Turning Points and Critical Issues Series. (London: Karnac Books, 2010) pp. 10-13

sexual difference, with the Oedipal and castration complex forcing a social construction of the female body based on lack.¹⁴

Freud establishes that anatomical science has only one point of certainty between masculinity and femininity and that is the biological production of ova or semen, which with the exception of the most unusual circumstances, can only belong to one sex. Freud dismisses the secondary sexual characteristics that take into account the shape of the body and its tissues for their lack of consistency, in favour of initiating a discussion of the bisexuality of the body. Freud emphasises that the male sexual organ, the penis, also appears in an atrophied state in the female body, the clitoris, and vice versa. Therefore presenting a body that is at once both sexes.¹⁵ This bisexuality of the physical body is also carried over into mental life, evidenced by the possibility to express both 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities. Freud makes the distinction that in common language when someone describes a person's behaviour as 'masculine' or 'feminine', they are in fact making the mistake of relating 'masculine' with 'activity' and 'feminine' with 'passivity'.¹⁶ He states,

Even in the sphere of human sexual life you soon see how inadequate it is to make masculine behavior coincide with activity and feminine with passivity. A mother is active in every sense towards her child...men are not able to live in company with their own kind unless they develop a large amount of passive adaptability.¹⁷

Freud acknowledges that the biological necessity of women to be passive in sexual intercourse often results in a greater level of passivity in the rest of female life, but he denies that this should be simplified to the status of equating femininity with passivity. Freud dismisses the association of passivity as an immediately given feminine characteristic and rebukes the claim that the role of psychoanalysis is to describe 'woman'. He argues that psychoanalysis can only aim to understand how a woman comes into being and transitions childhood with a bisexual disposition. Despite this early dismissal Freud goes on to use

¹⁴ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies*, p.57-61

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Bisexuality" in "Three Essays on Sexuality" in Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume VII. (London: Vintage, 2001) pp. 141-144

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, footnote on "The Differentiation between Men and Women" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. pp. 219-220

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 11

psychoanalysis to attempt to explain how passivity functions as an essential characteristic of femininity.

In order to psychoanalytically decipher the necessary stages of transition for a girl into womanhood, Freud begins at infancy, acknowledging that from an early age girls display a different instinctual disposition to boys. He notes that girls tend to be less aggressive and that they seek additional attention owing to a lack of self-sufficiency. Despite this difference being observable, the great variation between individual subjects forces Freud to dismiss its relevancy in favour of the belief that boys and girls go through early libidinal stages of development in the same manner. This provocation implies that in infancy a little girl is no different to a little boy and she should be viewed as a little man.¹⁸ The little boy's discovery of pleasurable sensations that derive from the penis is mirrored in the little girl's masturbation of the clitoris as a penis equivalent. Freud acknowledges that the vagina plays almost no part in the early stages of sexual excitation for girls; instead the clitoris remains the leading erotogenic zone for the phallic stage. However, the transition to womanhood requires the re-alignment of the sexual excitation and sensitivity of the clitoris to the vagina, in recognition of its importance for childbearing. Freud argues that this is the major difference between the sexes. Women must perform two additional tasks in the course of development, the change of erotogenic zone from clitoris to vagina and the change of love-object from mother to father and then eventually to another love object. This two-stage transferal is not necessary for little boys who only have to continue into maturity with the same sexual act discovered at infancy.

The twofold change of object, necessary for girls to reach maturity and normal femininity, forces Freud to acknowledge a pre-oedipal stage in development, which describes the initial attachment of a child to its mother. Following Freud's logic that in early infancy both sexes are masculine, he explicates that both must take the mother as their initial love-object. In the pre-oedipal stage it is the mother who is the seducer, as Freud states, "it was really the mother who by her activities over the child's bodily hygiene inevitably stimulated, and perhaps even roused for the first time, pleasurable sensations in her genitals".¹⁹ The question that follows is how then does the little girl break the powerful connection to the mother and

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 12-14

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 16

transfer her desire to her father, taking him as her love-object and beginning her path to normal femininity? Freud resolves that this transition will always result in hostility toward the mother. The most common accusations brought out through psychoanalysis that lead to a sense of hatred toward the mother, are not providing enough milk metaphorical for her lack of love for the child, the birth of a new sibling causing feelings of jealous hatred and finally the mothers prohibition of sexual fulfilment. Freud argues that these accusations no doubt form aggressiveness toward the mother, causing a desire to abandon her as an object, but it does not explain why the little boy, who has also taken his mother as his object, does not abandon her for the very same reasons. Freud argues that a girls' transferal of object from mother to father must be induced by other means and his resolve is the psychoanalytic concept of the castration complex.

The castration complex is initiated in both sexes when they are confronted by their opposite and realise that there is an anatomical difference in the sexual organs. For boys the sight of female genitals exposes a fear of castration, which continues to become a powerful force in future development. For girls the site of male genitals brings on an overwhelming sense of envy, which results in a desire to have something similar to the penis. Freud explains that the girl does not submit to her lack of penis easily and instead she retains the desire to have something like it throughout her development to maturity, he states "envy and jealousy play an even greater part in the mental life of women than of men. It is not that I think these characteristics are absent in men or that I think they have no other roots in women than envy for the penis; but I am inclined to attribute their greater amount in women to this latter influence."²⁰ In the development of femininity the castration complex prepares for the Oedipus complex, the girl's penis envy drives her away from her original object of desire, her mother, toward her father, which also intensifies the initial hostility felt toward the mother as she becomes a rival for her father's love. Freud notes that girls stay within the Oedipus complex for much longer than boys and often renounce it incompletely, resulting in a negative impact on the super-ego, which directly affects the character of femininity.²¹

²⁰ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 21

²¹ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 18 -25

Freud outlines that the little girls' realization that she is castrated marks a turning point in her development, which results in three possible outcomes, sexual inhibition leading to neurosis, normal femininity or a masculinity complex. He argues that sexual inhibition formulates when the little girl, who up until now has lived in a masculine capacity by aligning the excitation of the clitoris with the object of her mother, loses interest in phallic sexuality. This loss of interest owes to her penis envy and the knowledge of the little boy's superior equipment, resulting in a repudiation of self-sexual fulfillment and the object of the mother, whom she now realizes is also castrated. Freud notes that neurotic patients often blame masturbation for their troubled state, he comments "masturbation is the executive agent of infantile sexuality, from the faulty development of which they are indeed suffering. But what neurotics mostly blame is the masturbation of puberty; they have mostly forgotten that of early infancy, which is what is really in question."²² Freud believes that the discipline associated with masturbation in infancy has a powerful effect on the later sexual development of a person. The repression of masturbation induced by penis envy, causes the little girl to renounce phallic activity, which Freud argues paves the way for passivity. He states that the little girls' turn toward her father, is guided by passive instinctual processes that lead her toward completion of the Oedipal complex by the transferring of the wish for a penis to the wish for a baby, resulting in normal femininity. The only other possible outcome from Freud's castration complex is a girl's development of a masculinity complex, which arises from a refusal to accept the concept of castration. This rebellion results in increased masculine activity such as the girl clinging to masturbation of the clitoris and refusing to transgress into passivity by identifying with her father. In this case Freud argues that despite protest, the girl still takes her father as an object and only following disappointments does she regress back to her infantile masculinity resulting in manifest homosexuality.²³

Freud resolves that the development of femininity is always affected by the residue of the early masculine period of the pre-oedipal phase and the bi-sexuality of infancy. A discovery that leads him to reflect on the observable repeated alternation between masculine and feminine states in a woman's life, he comments, "some portion of what we men call 'the

²² Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 23

²³ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 26

enigma of women' may perhaps be derived from this expression of bisexuality in women's lives".²⁴ Freud also attempts to use psychoanalysis to further solidify stereotypes of feminine character, such as narcissism, vanity and shame. He muses that narcissism is largely attributed to femininity because a woman's desire to be loved is stronger than her need to give love, this in turn affects the selection of her object and the penis-envy she feels drives her to value vanity as compensation for her sexual inadequacy. Finally shame is deemed to be a direct effect of woman's "concealment of genital deficiency".²⁵ Freud's conception of femininity makes clear that the anatomy of the female body alongside its psychological desires plays a large part in its inscription as inferior. But, as Elizabeth Grosz elaborates the body is only determined to be a particular type, male or female in its social capacity, the body is in fact an indeterminable entity that is "capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it."²⁶ Despite its many flaws, Freud's construction of femininity has fundamentally fixated a social understanding of woman as passive, narcissistic and deficient; a conception which has also bolstered the acceptance of phenomena such as illness as a female prerogative, but spiritualism adopted all of these negative connotations and subverted them to become highly prized attributes for the practice of mediumship. The privileging of female illness was particularly heralded as a pathway to more powerful mediumship. Women who had prolonged bouts of sickness were considered to have had their body's cleansed in readiness for the spirit world and illness signified power and capability for spiritualist practice instead of weakness.²⁷ Spiritualism facilitated a subversion of the negative connotations of femininity and enabled women to empower their societal positions, whilst remaining in the sphere of appropriate female behaviour.²⁸ Even within the rigid social restrictions of the nineteenth century, Freud's description of the bisexuality of women could

²⁴ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 27

²⁵ Sigmund Freud "Lecture XXXIII" in *On Freud's 'Femininity'*, p. 28

²⁶ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies*, p.60-61

²⁷ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, p.206

²⁸ Robert Laurence Moore, "The Medium and her Message: A Case of Female Professionalism" (Chapter 4), *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, p.209

be read as a positive attribute for spirit channeling, as women embodied with spirit had opportunities to address audiences publicly, an otherwise unheard of phenomenon.²⁹

The trance state had become a commonly accepted proof of spirit inspiration across nineteenth century Europe and America, providing a useful cover for female mediums who wished to deliver speeches on women's rights.³⁰ The façade of conscious trance, a state in which the body remains physically in control whilst vocally channeling a spirit, facilitated a rebounding of responsibility from the female speaker to channelled spirit, relieving any possibility of rebuke for the medium in question.³¹ On several occasions the disbelief that a woman could coherently deliver a public speech, led to the heralding of spiritualism as unequivocally true. A correspondent to the *Banner of Light* journal in 1858 stated, "That a young lady not over 18 years of age should speak for an hour and a quarter, in such an eloquent manner, with such logical and philosophical clearness...[is]...a power not natural to the education or mentality of the speaker."³² The unfortunate fact that the embodiment of a spirit from beyond the grave was a more tacit scenario than an educated young woman in this situation exposes the low position of esteem women held in society during this period, but as a movement spiritualism did much to bring women to roles of leadership. A case in point is Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, more infamously known as Madame Blavatsky she became renowned the world over for her co-founding of the Theosophical Society. Established in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society was an order that followed the motto 'There is no Religion (or law) higher than Truth'.³³ Widely acknowledged as a form of esoteric philosophy determining the origin and purpose of humanity as well as divinity it had the added attraction

²⁹ Anne Braude. *Radical Spirits*, p.99-116.

³⁰ Anne Braude. *Radical Spirits*, p.89. The use of trance to deliver political messages for the advancement of women's rights was a method for many women to voice opinions within an accepted code of behaviour, however many of the most famous crusading women's rights petitioners including Annie Besant, spoke in their own right and rarely under the auspices of spiritualism.

³¹ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, pp.202-203

³² Unknown, "Banner of Light", 3 April 1858 in Anne Braude. *Radical Spirits*, p.85

³³ Helena Blavatsky. Introduction to *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888) p. xli

of privileging female psychic ability and had no issue placing women in roles of senior rank.³⁴ The opportunities provided by mediumship for women facilitated an escape from societal limitations and empowered the stereotyped irrationality of the female body; a very different scenario to the much darker and heavily documented period in which women fell foul of the supernatural stereotypes of the female body.

The figure of the sorceress, as a dangerous and powerful female manifestation, is inexorably shot through with the heinous violence of the witch trials during the early modern period.³⁵ The movement away from feudal logic towards the newness of science and rationalist thinking side-lined traditions including the use of herbal medicine and alchemy, resulting in the common village wise woman being set up as a dangerously powerful figure in need of constraint. Many women suffered at the hand of this change and as Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow explicate, “in an age in which women’s mental and moral instability, their insatiable lusts and their supposed position as ‘the weaker vessel’ were common, we should not be unduly surprised to discover that in most parts of Europe the stereotypical witch was a woman, and usually an old and poor one”.³⁶ The gender imbalance in the classification of witches has been interpreted by Deborah Willis as a relationship to motherhood and misguided nurture that re-enforces the ‘woman as vessel’ stereotype.³⁷ Willis argues that although many popular beliefs at the time of witch hunting did not immediately assume the female gender of witches, the stereotypes that led to the successful trial of many, heavily portrayed references to motherhood gone wrong.³⁸ The first and most common of these maternal inferences was the mark left by the devil on a hidden part of the female body.

³⁴ For an extensive overview of Theosophy and Anthroposophy see Rudolph Steiner, *Spiritualism, Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy: An Eyewitness View of Occult History* (Massachusetts: The Anthroposophic Press, 2001) pp. 7 – 284. To understand more fully the roles for women within occult circles, as well as the liberation provided for the female population through religious alignment with Theosophy, Anthroposophy and Spiritualism see Joy Dixon “A Deficiency of the Male Element: Gendering Spiritual Experience” “The Divine Hermaphrodite and the Female Messiah: Feminism and Spirituality in the 1890s” “A New age for Women: Suffrage and the Sacred” all in *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001) pp. 67-93, 152-176, 177-205.

³⁵ Leo Ruickbie. *Witchcraft out of the Shadows: A History* (London: Robert Hale, 2011) pp. 9-82

³⁶ Geoffrey Scarre; John Callow. *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century Europe*. Studies in European History, second edition (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) p.29

³⁷ Deborah Willis. *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-hunting and maternal power in early modern England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995) pp. 29-81

³⁸ Deborah Willis. *Malevolent Nurture*, p.28

Manifested in the form of a teat, this third nipple would be used as evidence of mothering nonhuman imps to facilitate the carrying out of magic. The second was the common representation of the witch as an older postmenopausal woman, her body being the site of contagion due to unpurged blood.³⁹ The remit of this thesis is not to delve into the much trodden ground of early modern witch hunting and its implications for gender inequality, but, the context is highly pertinent to understanding the distinctly feminine trappings of supernatural bodies in history. Furthermore, it facilitates an exposure of the sexual taboos related to the female body when in a position of power, the sorceress is established as a sexual deviant, engaging in incest and bestiality through the events of the Sabbath and this overtly sexualised status is carried through to the figure of the materialising medium. The staging around the production of ectoplasm during trance is abundant with sexual connotations, the white viscous nature of its materialisation, the inspection of the female body and the clothing of the medium in a closed chastity like garment, all proceeds to develop a sense of female sexual repression within the confines of the séance.⁴⁰ Similarly, the maternal body is a trope established in the act of mediumship through the requirement of the female body to act as a channel for the spirit world, in an alternative translation of childbirth, a point made particularly relevant in the birthing of ectoplasm.

The critical interrogation of the re-empowered status of 'woman as vessel' in the field of mediumship forces the female body back into focus and this becomes highly relevant to current debates within the move known as 'new materialism'. In short, new materialist feminism argues that the body must be acknowledged as a central construct of female representation and its materiality must be taken into account. Through the work of Karen Barad, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz a re-thinking of the female body, in all its corporeality, has come to fruition; setting a strong context for reading the practice of female mediumship as a nuance in the new materialist feminist approach to making bodies matter.

³⁹ Deborah Willis. *Malevolent Nurture*, p.33. See also Reginald Scott. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Hugh Ross Williamson (1584; Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1964) p.399

⁴⁰ See 'Experiments with Eva C.' in Gustave Geley, *Clairvoyance and Materialization*. Translated by Stanley De Brath, Kessinger Legacy Reprints (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2011) pp.182 – 197

ii. New Materialist Feminism: Bodies that matter

“The linguistic constructionists got one thing right: language *does* construct reality. What they got wrong is the idea that language alone constructs reality.”⁴¹

The privileging of linguistic constructivism in postmodern thinking created an opportunity for feminists to examine the role of language in the inscription of the female subject. Many saw this as a positive step in facilitating the rejection of entrenched social codes of womanhood, but as Susan Hekman states, “Having rejected groundings, metanarrative, and “woman”, feminists found themselves in a limitless space.”⁴² For some, this limitlessness presented the distinct advantage of removing hierarchies that categorized women, but for others it presented an unwanted diversion from real issues, such as the daily realities of women living in the world.

Postmodernism presented a problem for feminists in that it continually failed to deconstruct the dichotomy of discourse/reality by privileging language and ignoring materiality.⁴³ The acknowledgement of material as an equal to language in the construction of reality is the driver behind the new materialist feminist move. Through a sustained attack on the reductionist effect that a continual focus on language has generated, new materialist feminism breaks the conception that language is wholly representative of reality, in favour of acknowledging the importance of materiality.⁴⁴ The shift toward materiality is a logical next step in light of the bias toward the linguistic. For many years, language has been emphasized as the sole constructor of the world and everything in it, but this persistently forgets the treatment of bodies - particularly female bodies. The necessity of being able to talk truthfully about the reality of women’s experiences, including their oppression and the ongoing battle against the commonly accepted status of women as socially inferior, is at the heart of

⁴¹ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014). p.148

⁴² Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*, p.147

⁴³ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010) Kindle Edition, Location 39, 124-125

⁴⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007) p.45. See also, Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no.3 (2003): 801-829

feminism. It is the single and compelling reason why feminists hold on to the real.⁴⁵ The rigid adherence to linguistic constructivism prohibits an honest discussion of the reality and agency of the world in which female bodies exist; materiality must be brought back into the conversation. Bringing materiality back to the fore is a necessary step in finally deconstructing the dichotomy of discourse/reality, but it also presents the danger of falling into the trap of modernism. The philosophy of Modernity was entirely focused on getting matter 'right' and its creation of concepts to directly mirror nature led to the materiality of sex being used as a way to oppress women.⁴⁶ New materialist feminism seeks to re-introduce the importance of materiality, but rejects the modernist approach of privileging it autonomously, avoiding the pitfall of reinstating patriarchal systems. To some extent, the advent of linguistic constructivism showed the error of Modernism's singular focus on materiality, by arguing for the necessity of language in understanding matter. However, the eventual escalation of language to its position of privilege inverted the problem of modernism by completely effacing materiality. In order to finally succeed in deconstructing discourse/reality a new method was needed that fully embraced materiality without dispensing with language. What emerged was a wide-ranging framework known as 'new materialism', which at its core has a significant impact on feminist discussions of the body.

Karen Barad is a leading voice within the new materialist feminist move, arguing for the dismissal of power given to language in the construction of reality, she states, "The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing,' even materiality – is turned into language or some other form of cultural representation".⁴⁷ What Barad claims to offer is a more profound understanding of the ontological dimension of scientific practice, which at its core redefines realism. In order to bring materiality back to the fore Barad presents a refiguring of the concepts of physicist Neils

⁴⁵ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*, Location 50

⁴⁶ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*. p.148

⁴⁷ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) p. 132

Bohr, a founder of quantum physics, to deliver what she labels as an epistem-onto-logical feminist framework that centers on the concept of agential realism.⁴⁸

Barad's choice of Bohr owes to his astuteness in calling into question foundational assumptions that western epistemology has taken for granted, centrally, the subject/object distinction and the representational status of language.⁴⁹ Bohr disputed the traditional philosophical assumption that language is secondary to reality and dismissed the notion of language lying beneath reality as inappropriate; he states, "We are suspended in language in such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down. The word 'reality' is also a word, a word which we must learn to use correctly."⁵⁰ The dismissal of the relationship between language and reality in Bohr's work is also a warning against theorizing as representing, for Bohr theorizing must be understood as an embodied practice and not a simple matching of linguistic representations to things already in existence.⁵¹ This point is further emphasized in Bohr's acknowledgement of the importance of apparatus; he believed it was impossible to differentiate between an object and the agencies of observation, because measurement and description necessitate one another.

The use of Bohr's writing as a foundation enables Barad to develop a new type of realism that centers on the concept of intra-action between theory, apparatus, and material, which she calls phenomena.⁵² Intra-action is a term coined by Barad, which appropriates 'interaction', taken in its standard definition of separate entities coming together in a formulation, and shifts it to recognize that distinct entities do not exist. Therefore agencies can only emerge through intra-action, they can never precede it.⁵³ Barad argues that Bohr's ontology facilitates an understanding of reality as composed of phenomena, she states "reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but things-in-

⁴⁸ Karen Barad refers to agential realism as an epistem-onto-logical framework, a new approach that refers to the inseparability of being and knowing.

⁴⁹ Karen Barad "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (1998) p.89

⁵⁰ Niels Bohr as quoted in Aage Petersen, "The Philosophy of Niels Bohr" *Niels Bohr: A Centenary Volume*. Ed. A. P. French and P.J Kennedy. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) p.302

⁵¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p.53-54

⁵² Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1055

⁵³ Adam Kleinman, "Intra-action", *Mousse* 34 (2012): pp. 76-81. See also, Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p. 33

phenomena".⁵⁴ For Barad phenomena enact the inseparability of object and apparatus, they are constituted by the intra-action between the object, the observer and the measuring apparatus. Phenomena are not given or discursively constructed but they are what Barad denotes as material-discursive.⁵⁵

The concept of material-discursive phenomena is the ground upon which Barad builds her concept of agential realism, a reality where theory has material effects, she states, "That reality within which we intra-act - what I term agential reality - is made up of material-discursive phenomena. Agential reality is not a fixed ontology that is independent of human practices, but is continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions."⁵⁶ In order to illustrate the power of her conception of material-discursive phenomena Barad uses the example of the sonogram, an apparatus used to observe a developing fetus in the womb. This practice is chosen specifically for its multi-faceted nature and the clear evidence it provides of intra-action with other practices that have material implications. Barad argues that the practice of fetal imaging is constituted from a number of elements, both material and discursive. The first is technological: the sonogram is an apparatus that has constructed our perception of the reality of the fetus in the womb. The second is medical: the developments in science that have made it possible to see the fetus and monitor its health. These initial elements intra-act with the discursive in understanding what the fetus 'is' and how the sonogram can be understood to 'see' it. The constitution of the fetus is also materialised through the political, which demands the fetus to be seen as autonomous with its own subjectivity. It is through the intra-action of all of these elements that the identity of the fetus is produced.⁵⁷ Therefore the fetus is not a pre-existing entity that can be observed through the use of a sonogram, but it is a phenomenon that materializes through the intra-action of scientific, technological and political elements.

The basis of Barad's argument centers on the concept of entanglement, where the emergence of individual identities is brought about through intra-action. As the example of

⁵⁴ Karen Barad "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." p.104

⁵⁵ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1080

⁵⁶ Karen Barad "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." p.104

⁵⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p. 216-222

fetal imaging shows, the state of being entangled does not simply imply an intertwining with another, it is a lack of independent or self-contained existence, “individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.”⁵⁸ This also implies that agential realism offers a political and ethical method of observing. Entanglement indicates that the only way to cause a separation or ‘cut’ is the act of observation and the act of observation is always guided by cultural habits, in which certain things are made highly visible, whilst others are not, all dependent on who is observing.⁵⁹ In Barad’s thinking it is these temporary observations that structure the production of knowledge resulting in fragmented understanding. This lays out an entirely different way of thinking about matter and meaning, agential realism outlines a framework in which meaning comes into existence through intra-action. This unravels dualities such as nature/culture, particularly useful for advancing feminist discussions of the body.

The ripple effect of Barad’s agential realism, as well as the wider new materialist feminist move, is a refreshed approach to feminist discussions of the body. Barad is very clear that agential realism forms an attack on representation, seeing it as a form of social construction that is not relativist or dismissive of objectivity, but is a reality that takes account of the real consequences of intra-acting with the world.⁶⁰ The body has always been an unavoidable and problematic ‘thing’ within feminist theory because it is the intersection of the reality of women’s lives and patriarchal structures.⁶¹ Feminist theory has not been able to avoid the fact that in reality it is women’s bodies that feel the effects of patriarchal structures and are noted as the cause for women’s inferiority - weaker, softer, childbearing. This is further impressed by the connotation of women as ‘leaky vessels’, incontinent, bleeding, secreting, gossiping.⁶² Barad’s agential realism offers a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between discourse/material that allows for a discussion of the body in all its

⁵⁸ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. ix

⁵⁹ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p.154

⁶⁰ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1060

⁶¹ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*. p. 152-3

⁶² Gail Kern Paster. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993) p. 1-112

complexity and she attests that it is only through rethinking this traditional dichotomy that the problematic issue of the body within feminist studies can be broached.⁶³

Agential realism denies the separation of nature and culture by focusing on material-discursive phenomena. Phenomena are the result of what Barad denotes as boundary-drawing practices that make some identities intelligible or determinate, whilst excluding others. She argues that those identities that are determinate should not be understood as representing inherent or essential characteristics of subjects, because subjects are constituted through practices that they can never pre-exist; materialization within agential realism can only be understood as a “dynamics of intra-activity.”⁶⁴ Barad’s acknowledgement of matter’s dynamism is a vital turning point in forwarding feminist discussions of the female body because it introduces the concept of performativity. She attests that it is only through the acknowledgment of matter’s dynamism that a move toward a relationality that forwards the theoretical tool of performativity for feminist theory can occur.

The discussion of performativity as part of Barad’s concept of agential realism stems from the ideas laid out by Judith Butler in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Butler was one of the first feminists to address the complexities of the female body in the advent of linguistic constructivism. *Bodies that Matter* continued to develop the radical concept of gender performativity first outlined in Butler’s earlier book *Gender Trouble*, which proposed gender to be individually constructed through the repetitive performance of gender.⁶⁵ Butler offered a reading of the female subject that overcame social determinism and unraveled the roles of discourse and power as constituent factors in shaping subjects. Fundamentally, Butler proposed the re-introduction of the materiality of the body and designated that it was directly linked to subject formation through gender performativity.⁶⁶

Despite the pioneering arguments laid out in *Bodies that Matter* the text was subjected to heavy criticism. Many argued that Butler ultimately failed to escape the modernist approach of defining the body as either a “brute given or a representational effect”

⁶³ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*, p. 148

⁶⁴ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 208

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007) pp. vii-xxix

⁶⁶ Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter*, p.21-50, see also, Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p.191.

and that her continued privileging of discourse effaced her claim to recognize the centrality of materiality in discussions of the body.⁶⁷ Karen Barad is among Butler's critics particularly for her account of matter as a process of materialisation. Barad questions whether this formulation of matter can withstand being pushed beyond the dualisms of passive/active and nature/culture, she highlights that although Butler dislodges matter as an entity with fixed boundaries, her account of matter as a temporal process of materialization is only analysed in terms of how discourse comes to matter and not how matter comes to matter. For Barad understanding how matter comes to matter is of vital importance and it is this issue that she sets out to address.⁶⁸

Butler begins *Bodies that Matter* by asking if the materiality of the body can be linked to the performativity of gender and if so how the category of "sex" figures within such a relationship. In Butler's argument "sex" is not simply a pre-given condition of the body, it is an idealized construct that is forced to materialize through time and in relation to norms. She argues that it is these regulatory norms that are performative in the constitution of the body and its sex. Butler formulates the matter of bodies as an effect of power, she states that her rethinking of the materiality of the body puts at stake "the recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialisation and the significance of those material effects."⁶⁹ Karen Barad reads this statement as an indication that Butler understands bodies to be material-discursive phenomena, created through intra-action with particular apparatus of bodily production that make them intelligible.⁷⁰ The resonance that this has with Barad's developing agential realist framework results in her retaining Butler's notion of performativity and reading it alongside her own formulation, she states,

Reading agential realism and Butler's theory of performativity through each other is not about some proclaimed *symmetry* between subject and object, or social and scientific practices, but rather about the production of mutually informative insights that might be useful in producing an enriched understanding of

⁶⁷ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1157

⁶⁸ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p.191-192, see also, Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter*, p.9

⁶⁹ Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter*, p.2

⁷⁰ Karen Barad "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." p.107

materiality, agency, and the nature of technoscientific and other social processes.⁷¹

Barad's quest is to deliver a materialist theory of performativity, which introduces materiality in equal measure to the discursive. Unlike Butler's concept of performativity, Barad's agential realist account of performativity provides materiality with dynamism and an understanding of matter as an active participant in the constitution of the world.⁷² The benefit of Barad's performativity is an escape from representational thinking; it avoids the demands of thinking the world in terms of words and things. Instead, it offers a framework that has the capacity to understand the complexity of materiality and the body outside of representation, through material/discursive phenomena. This is fundamental from a political perspective because it implicates theory with real world consequences. Barad explicates that unlike the theoretical "play" of linguistic constructivism in which any chosen discourse has no material implications in an "observation-independent world", agential reality explicitly shows that the choice of different material-discursive apparatus directly influences the resultant agential reality.⁷³ For Barad, objectivity is about being accountable to what is real, she states, "We are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped."⁷⁴

Barad's agential realism is the first to come close to answering the call of many feminists for an approach to the female body that does not require a choice between discourse or material, nature or culture. It facilitates a reading of the female body in all its complexity whilst keeping a firm grip on the realities women's bodies face. Prior to Barad, Elizabeth Grosz was perhaps the most successful in being forthright about the need to think about bodies in a non-dualistic way and to remember that the body is a corporeal being.⁷⁵ In her work *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz argues that essentialisms and dualisms must be avoided, as

⁷¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p. 208

⁷² Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1096

⁷³ Karen Barad. "Scientific Literacy-Agential Literacy=(Learning Doing) Science Responsibly" *Feminist Science Studies: A New Generation*, ed. Maralee Mayberry et al., (New York: Routledge, 2001) p.236

⁷⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. p. 390

⁷⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994)

they are the backbone of the problematic definition of the body in western thought. She asserts that it is only through taking to task the sex/gender distinction, as a pillar of feminist thought, that approaches to the body can be transformed.

Grosz states “Gender is not an ideological superstructure added to a biological base.”⁷⁶ The body is not a blank slate onto which gender is inscribed and masculine and feminine gender can never be neutrally attributed to either sex; inscriptions take on a different meaning when placed on a male or female body.⁷⁷ Through this line of thinking Grosz can be understood to align with Barad’s later concept of intra-action, where the material and discursive are never considered separately, for subjectivity, as Grosz elaborates, is a form of materiality that encompasses desire, language and signification. Grosz attempts to provide an account of the body that addresses the fact that biologically, human bodies are always sexed and that the sex of a body will always have implications for the social subject that body will become, she states,

It is not enough to reformulate the body in non-dualist and non-essentialist terms. It must also be conceived in specifically *sexed* terms. Bodies are never simply *human* bodies or *social* bodies. The sex assigned to the body (and bodies are assigned a single sex, however inappropriate this may be) makes a great deal of difference to the kind of social subject, and indeed the mode of corporeality assigned to the subject.⁷⁸

Central to Grosz’s argument is an understanding of the body as indeterminate; she states it is “a series of uncoordinated potentialities that require social triggering, ordering, and long term ‘administration’.”⁷⁹ At the heart of what Grosz is asking is what is it in the nature and biology of bodies that leaves them vulnerable to cultural and social transcription. How does the biology of a body make it amenable to “the kinds of cultural variation that concern politics and political struggle.”⁸⁰ The issue of biology is a radical step for Grosz to take as it has for so long been accepted as a root cause of sexism linked with essentialism. However, she begins

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, p.58

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, p.154-156

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Grosz. *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995) p.84

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, p.104

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Grosz. *The Nick of Time*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) p.2

to contravene this limitation in her book *The Nick of Time*.⁸¹ Grosz explicates that biology is the very thing that makes social, political and personal life possible and that instead of a limitation it should be viewed as a system of differences.⁸² In order to illustrate this point, Grosz turns to Darwin's understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. The use of Darwin is problematic in light of many feminists accusing him of biological determinism but Grosz reads Darwin differently; she takes his explanation of the relationship between nature and culture to be productive to her project. Darwin states that, "culture produces the nature it needs to justify itself, but nature is also that which resists by opening according to its own logic and procedures."⁸³ Grosz does not simply re-interpret Darwin, instead what she takes from him is that language is incapable of representing life and matter, she uses this ontological provocation to understand dynamism as the condition of life.⁸⁴ Through Darwin, Grosz establishes nature as dynamic and in turn formulates an attack on representation, she states,

Once we have a dynamic notion of nature, we don't need representation to dynamize the world, the world is already dynamized. What we need are representations to slow down the world, to make the world temporarily comprehensible, to cohere it. So representation comes to have a more negative role than a more constructive role. Its purpose is to slow down, to make outlines of things that are continually blurry.⁸⁵

Grosz argues for a new way of knowing that focuses on ontology not just epistemology, the importance of focusing on the real instead of just the production of knowledge, she shares with Barad a desire to talk about the effects linguistic constructivism has had on the experiences of women in the world, the everyday implications of patriarchal systems on the female body and in short she pre-empted Barad's formulation of agential realism.

The necessary leap that new materialist feminism has enacted in bringing the body back to the fore has affected an understanding of the identity of "woman" as a phenomenon

⁸¹ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*. p. 156-157

⁸² Elizabeth Grosz. *The Nick of Time*, p.1

⁸³ Elizabeth Grosz. *The Nick of Time*, p.72

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Grosz. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005) p. 42

⁸⁵ Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Milla Tiainen. "Feminism, Art, Deleuze, and Darwin: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz" *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, November (2007) p.248

produced by the intra-action of various apparatuses including language, science and technology. The female body can now be understood in terms of the intra-action between nature and culture and not its separation. Karen Barad's agential realist framework has built on the work of Grosz and Butler to transform dichotomies into performative entanglements. The split of discourse/reality where language is overly privileged to the effacement of material is disbanded, in favour of the material and the linguistic in equal measure. The resultant effect on bodies is that they are inscribed by corporeality as much as by language resulting in the demolition of representation and a focus on the real. All of this is of great benefit in understanding how mediumship is an entanglement of the materiality of the female body with a wider spectrum of political themes but the one thing that has been left out of Barad's onto-epistemology is the social.⁸⁶

Susan Hekman is forthright in arguing that what has escaped in the new materialist move so far is an ontology of the social. Although Barad's agential realism is fundamentally about realizing that theoretical arguments have a direct impact on the real world, the extension of new materialism into the realm of the social is limited; she states that because new materialism is a feminist approach it must encompass the social as well as the scientific. Hekman sets out to question the possibility of a social ontology, arguing that feminism is necessarily a social theory, which fights for the rights of women as embodied human beings and to ignore the social is to restrict it to the linguistic, re-establishing a dichotomy that new materialism argues against. Hekman states, "It seems abundantly obvious that unlike the natural world the social world is entirely constituted by our concepts."⁸⁷ The very real effects of these purely social phenomena appear to be entirely situated in the power of discourse, but accepting this status denies an ontology of the social, reifying the nature/culture dichotomy that new materialism fights so hard to demolish. To counter this Hekman turns to a consideration of politics, economy, religion and most importantly systems of kinship as institutions that can be considered as purely social. They have no specific material component and yet they have material consequences for subjects in the real world.

⁸⁶ Susan Hekman. *The Feminine Subject*, p. 159-162

⁸⁷ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1274

Hekman argues that contemporary social and political theorists who explore the possibilities of a new ontology overly emphasize its status of flux, causing them to lose sight of reality; what is needed is an ontology that encompasses both flux and reality. A case in point is the fluidity of Karen Barad's agential reality; created through material discursive phenomena it always has a tight grip on the material consequences of discourse. Hekman argues that tools must be developed that can examine the parameters of such a fluid reality and its role in structuring the social world. For the purposes of putting forward her ontology of the social she designates 'disclosure' as the tool through which reality can be brought to light.⁸⁸

Disclosure in Hekman's thinking is not to be understood in its common formulation of uncovering or exposing. Hekman's definition of disclosure is practical in that it sets out to bring reality to light, but it avoids the pitfalls of emphasizing a singular or 'right' way by seeking to express how varying perspectives create alternative understandings. Shining light on an object in one direction produces one reading, but shining light on the same object in the opposite direction creates an entirely new perspective. For Hekman 'disclosures' emphasize this through acknowledging the multifaceted nature of reality but she also underlines that different disclosures produce different material consequences. In order to advance her argument for a social ontology that takes account of material effects, Hekman turns toward Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

Despite the problematic association of linguistic constructivism through Butler's earlier texts such as *Gender Trouble*, Hekman is adamant that Butler's later writings come the closest to discerning an ontology of the social through raising questions about the relationship between the identity of a subject and its ontology. In her books *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler begins to map the role of social norms in defining personhood, she argues that in order for a subject to be deemed as 'living' that subject must have an identity structured by underlying social constructs and it is only when a challenge is made to these constructs that the definition of personhood can be rethought.⁸⁹ In order to address

⁸⁸ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*. Location 1285-1291, 1317

⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 1-16, 204-231. See also, Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) pp. 83-136.

these claims, Butler highlights kinship structures as a central feature of gender and identity construction in social life. She argues that challenging kinship systems will help provide a better understanding of the root cause of inequality and the struggle for rights.⁹⁰ This includes the roles that women have been subject to 'play' in light of such systems, encompassing the stereotypes of womanhood: domestic goddess, chattel, medium. Butler is not alone in recognizing the powerful effect kinship systems have had in society, Gayle Rubin directly took to task the role of women within kinship structures in her essay *The Traffic in Women*.⁹¹ The transaction of women, in addition to slavery and prostitution across cultures, is for Rubin fundamental to underpinning the sexual oppression of women. The title *The Traffic in Women* is borrowed from Emma Goldman who in 1910 wrote an essay that argued marriage was on a par with prostitution due to its regular arrangement on the basis of monetary consideration. Goldman argued that the issue with prostitution is not the fact that a woman sells her body, but that she sells it out of wedlock, a non-legitimized alternative to the trading of the female body in marriage for the financial benefit of another.⁹² Rubin takes on this analogy and uses it to begin a critical re-thinking of kinship structures and the role they play in the oppression of women. She states,

The "exchange of women" is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology...Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold. Far from being confined to the "primitive" world, these practices seem only to become more pronounced and commercialized in more "civilized" societies.⁹³

Rubin begins by asking the simple question: what are the relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman? In an echo of Karen Barad's notion of entanglement, Rubin explicates that women only become stereotypes in certain sets of relations and the only way to negotiate such relations is to better understand the sex/gender distinction. Rubin re-labels this distinction as a system, the sex/gender system, defining it as the set of arrangements

⁹⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.14

⁹¹ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women" in *Deviations* (London: Duke University Press, 2011) pp. 33-65

⁹² Emma Goldman, "The Traffic in Women" in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969) p. 25

⁹³ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.45

through which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. In order to support this formulation of a sex/gender system Rubin turns to Karl Marx, Levi Strauss and Sigmund Freud.

Rubin explicates that the Marxist theory of class oppression has been fundamental to the discussion of the question of woman cross-culturally. She argues that the recurring concept of the capacity of women as reserve labor within the capitalist system has reinforced the usefulness of women within the capitalist mode of production. The material reality of women's lower wages, provides surplus for employers and their dual contribution through consumption as administrators and familial providers, evidences a positive contribution to the Capitalist system at the expense of women's labour. This is solidified by the primary exploitation of women's labour in the home through the alignment of housework with the reproduction of labour, placing women at the center of the definition of capitalism. Rubin states: "Since it is usually women who do housework, it has been observed that it is through the reproduction of labor power that women are articulated into the surplus-value nexus which is the sine qua non of capitalism."⁹⁴ Housework is often unwaged work reinforcing the surplus contribution of women to the capitalist mode but the result of arguing such a point is merely a reinforced understanding of the usefulness of women within the capitalist mode of production; it is an entirely different point to argue that the same 'usefulness' explains the origin of female oppression. This point is supported by the fact that women are oppressed all over the world outside of capitalist systems, Rubin states: "In the Amazon Valley and the New Guinea Highlands, women are frequently kept in their place by gang rape when the ordinary mechanisms of masculine intimidation prove insufficient."⁹⁵ Therefore the analysis of the reproduction of labor power becomes less useful in the discussion of the origins of female oppression outside of capitalist systems. On this point Rubin appropriates and extends Engels' method of examining kinship systems as observable forms of the sex/gender system, drawing on Levi Strauss's book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.35

⁹⁵ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.37

⁹⁶ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.39-41 see also Claude Lévi Strauss. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1977)

Kinship systems take many forms but for the purposes of Rubin's discussion of the exchange of women, the role of marriage and the ritualistic taboos that aid the 'gifting' of women take central focus. The notion of gifting becomes important because it is a method of understanding the exchange of women as gifts, as a form of economy in cultures that do not engage with a capitalist system. The act of gifting occurs in almost all indigenous cultures as a manner of formulating the distribution of power, this is something that Rubin directly addresses through Marcel Mauss's book *The Gift*, which discusses the role of exchange and gift giving in archaic societies.⁹⁷ Rubin gives the example of the Big Man system of Highland New Guinea, where a person who wishes to become a Big Man will always gift more than can be received in return, instead of receiving an equal material exchange they receive political prestige. Kinship systems are therefore a method of organization but also givers of power.⁹⁸

What strikes at the heart of Rubin's argument is the 'what' or more pertinently in this case the 'who' that is organized - and in turn given power. Most kinship systems work on the basis that the giver of a gift and the receiver of a gift become mutually bound in a beneficial relationship based on respect and acceptance but the gift itself remains surplus. If the gift in this instance is a woman, transacted for the purposes of marriage, then it is the two men in the exchange who benefit from becoming linked and the woman remains only a conduit.

Rubin states:

Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights, and people - men, women, and children—in concrete systems of social relationships. These relationships always include certain rights for men, others for women. "Exchange of women" is a shorthand expression for the social relations of kinship systems specifying that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Marcel Mauss. *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. (London: Routledge, 2002) pp.1-59

⁹⁸ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.43-44

⁹⁹ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.46

The recognition of the exchange of women as a central component within kinships systems by Lévi Strauss enables Rubin to present an argument that the oppression of women originates in the 'economy' of sex and gender and the only way to address this is by proposing a political economy of sexual systems. The revolution of kinship structures that removes the property rights of men over women to produce a sex/gender system that frees women from automatic structures, such as the labour intensive domain of housework, is what Rubin's argument works toward. Along the way it also highlights woman's role within a phallic exchange system, supported by Lacanian theory and a discussion of Freud's Oedipal complex. Rubin discusses how the phallus is always framed as passing through the woman, who appears to act purely as a conduit, woman is never in possession of the phallus as it can only be given as a gift by a man, but as Rubin explains if the exchange of woman and the concept of gender were to collapse so too would the psychoanalytic framing of femininity, therefore what Rubin argues for in the same vein as Judith Butler is a complete "revolution of kinship."¹⁰⁰

Butler's approach to rethinking kinship systems falls on the subject of 'postkinship' as observed in anthropological studies, where kinship systems no longer form the basis of culture. Instead she draws on new kinship relationships such as gay marriage, which pose challenges to traditional kinship structures. These new challenges move kinship structures beyond heterosexuality and fundamentally question the relationship between nature and culture, which also translates to discussions on sexual difference. Butler describes the ontology of sexual difference as indefinable, for her sexual difference can never be fully given or fully constructed, instead it sits somewhere between these two poles, she states:

Sexual difference has psychic, somatic, and social dimensions that are never quite collapsible into one another but are not for that reason ultimately distinct. does sexual difference vacillate there, as a vacillating border, demanding a re-articulation of those terms without any sense of finality? Is it, therefore, not a thing, not a fact, not a presupposition, but rather a demand for re-articulation that never quite vanishes—but also never quite appears?¹⁰¹

Butler's remarks imply that sexual difference is merely the site upon which the relationship between biology and culture can be debated, but the desire for a clear resolve will remain

¹⁰⁰ Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", p.58

¹⁰¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.186

unsatisfied. Critics of Butler see this as an easy escape from dealing with the difficult domain of sexual difference but Susan Hekman argues that it gives reference to the entanglement that Karen Barad instigates in her agential realism through an understanding of the subject as a mangle. In this instance biology and culture can be seen to intra-act with each other and an undefined number of variables to produce the multifaceted categories of male and female. As Hekman states:

Subjects are mangles in the sense that they are constituted by distinct elements that intra-act to constitute the “I.” My argument here is that defining the subject as a mangle in this sense is the best description of the ontology of the subject available in contemporary feminist theory.¹⁰²

Hekman’s resolve of the subject as a mangle speaks to the agency that is so fundamental to Karen Barad’s new formulation of realism, and despite the use of Butler, as a figure of contention for her early linguistic constructivist approach, the result is a specifically materialist method of rethinking the female body. The attempt to broach a redefinition of ‘woman’ through building on theoretical predecessors instead of dismissing them also evokes a form of entanglement; it respects the importance of acknowledging what has gone before and provides a rigorous, albeit tumultuous, foundation for the development of future readings. There is no singular ‘right’ approach to ‘woman’ and Hekman’s concept of the subject as a mangle fundamentally reiterates the complexities of engaging with finding new approaches. Yet, it remains a highly pertinent task, necessitated by the proverbial female vacuum of western tradition, which has so fundamentally branded the feminine subject as inferior.¹⁰³ Practices such as spiritualist mediumship and the broader terrain of occult Magick provide a path to explore the double edged dynamic of inferiority, inverting its negative stance to one of empowerment. Incorporating supernaturalism and mysticism into the mangle of Hekman’s constitution of the feminine subject, allows for a new dynamic that speaks to an overlooked context for the female body; a context that expands social understandings of “woman” and exposes sidelined modes of empowerment. The framework of new materialist feminism sets up a discussion of the importance of the female body’s materiality but an extension of this into

¹⁰² Susan Hekman, *The Feminine Subject*, pp.182-183

¹⁰³ Susan Hekman, *The Feminine Subject*, pp.184

broader bodily materialisations also sets the stage for a critical engagement with the mediumistic phenomena of ectoplasm.

iii. Bodily Materialisations: Ectoplasm

The framework of agential realism does not limit its reassessment of the matter of bodies to the realm of the human. In fact, it calls for a critical examination of the practices by which the differential boundaries of the human and nonhuman are drawn, for these very same practices are always already implicated in particular materialisations.¹⁰⁴

The boundary between human and non-human materialisations within a bodily context has never been more apparent than in the production of ectoplasm. Etymologically, ectoplasm derives from the Greek *ektos*, meaning external and *plasma*, meaning to be moulded, but in primary sources it is also interchangeable with the term teleplasm; *Tele*, from the Greek meaning at a distance, establishing ectoplasm as a form of external bodily moulding. The physical materialisation of a deceased soul originating in the body of a medium, often referred to as physical mediumship, is a particularly visceral translation of the fluidity of the body. Ectoplasm is consistently described as extending beyond the body's boundaries, often through any available orifice, including the mouth, eyes, ears, nose, vagina and anus.¹⁰⁵ Yet, this graphic description sits in opposition to the photographic documentation of its production by psychical researchers, doctors and scientists alike, as well as the only known material example of ectoplasm. Held at Cambridge University Library within the Society for Psychical Research archive, the sample is an innocent fragment of dressmaker's lining silk. Yellowed through age and unassuming it is difficult to imagine that such a 'prop' successfully duped audiences but as the residue of Helen Duncan, a Scottish materialising medium, more famously known for being the last woman trialed under England's witchcraft act in 1944, the fabric carries a substantial history.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Karen Barad "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (1998) p.107

¹⁰⁵ Stanley De Brath, "Ectoplasm", *Quarterly Transactions B.C.P.S.*, pp. 14-26, Box 19, Folder 14, T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba. See also, Gustave Geley and Stanley De Brath, *Clairvoyance and Materialisation: A Record of Experiments*. Kessinger Legacy Reprints (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2011)

¹⁰⁶ Marina Warner. *Phantasmagoria*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 299. See also, Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches* (London: 4th Estate, 2001)

The use of fabric offcuts of cheesecloth and silk were common substitutes for ectoplasm, with mediums swallowing and regurgitating lengths of material smothered in starch to make regurgitation more comfortable. But, increasing demands for authenticity and transparency led to a more rigorous routine of checking the mediums body prior to the commencement of séances. This included measures to verify that mediums were not swallowing props. A common test involved forcing several ounces of water tinted with Cudbear, a natural red dye, into the mediums body so that any material concealed would be stained and the fraudulent act exposed.¹⁰⁷ The physicality of these tests cannot help but evoke an impending sense of brutality and the distinctly female trappings of ectoplasmic manifestations heighten this. There is limited evidence of male mediums materializing ectoplasm, the Polish medium Franek Kluski is the most commonly cited, but on the whole the production of ectoplasm was a distinctly female affair. In light of this, the descriptions that document the preparation of mediums prior to channeling, raises questions over the sexual exploitation of the female body in the practice of mediumship. Additionally, it throws into light the accusations of homosexuality that prevailed in the particular case of medium Eva Carrière (Eva C) and her female protector Madame Bisson; a pairing that existed under the watchful eye of German psychologist and sexologist Baron von Schrenk-Notzing.¹⁰⁸ The notes kept by Schrenk-Notzing extensively document the process of ritual checking between Madame Bisson and Eva C prior to each séance, he states:

Eva undressed completely before Mme Bisson...The medium gave us several times the opportunity of examining her body while she was still in a half-dressed state and before the dress was sewn up...but after this was done she also allowed us to touch the entire surface of her body...it was impossible for the subject to touch her body, particularly its lower parts, without tearing or ripping the material.¹⁰⁹

The emphasis placed by Schrenk-Notzing on the impossibility of Eva being able to touch the lower parts of her body, highlights the side stepping of female masturbation and more broadly female sexuality in the context of the séance. Despite this, Eva's sexual provocativeness is

¹⁰⁷ Philip S. Haley, "Studies of Ectoplasm by Daylight", *The Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. xxv, No. 10 (October 1931) p.414

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1983) pp. 151-53

¹⁰⁹ Theodore Besterman, *Some Modern Mediums* (London: Methuen, 1930) p. 84

not concealed but seemingly emphasized in photographic documentation and notes, she regularly appears legs apart and is described as moaning and sighing throughout the ecstatic deliverance of ectoplasm, which Schrenk-Notzing describes as a “sticky, cool, living substance...moist from contact”.¹¹⁰

Immediately following manifestations, Schrenk-Notzing noted that Eva would demand further inspections and checks from Madame Bisson. These were often deemed unnecessary by the wider circle but were carried out due to Eva’s adamantness of their necessity, her requests would regularly include further gynecological examinations and she would remove her tights in readiness.¹¹¹ These particular instances have led to a substantial amount of conjecture over the relationship between Madame Bisson and Eva C and Bisson is described throughout Schrenk-Notzing’s scripts as Eva C’s ‘protectress’. It was not uncommon for mediums to have a female chaperone that would assist with the intimate checking of the body and make sure that séance conditions were met. In a time period where homosexuality was suppressed and socially rejected, the séance also seemingly offered women opportunities to work in close quarters without suspicion.¹¹² However, the stripping and checking of the female body was not exclusively instigated by “protectresses” to the medium, in October 1929, during a séance at the home of Thomas Glendenning Hamilton a spirit guide known only as ‘Walter’ announced:

Strip her naked, but don’t touch her in this room! I have asked her clothes to be removed and her body to be washed. The person who removes her clothes should examine her; examine her; every part of her body – ears, hair, mouth, every part of her; but let there be no examination in this room without my permission.¹¹³

The medium on this occasion was Mary Marshall, a central figure in the Thomas Glendenning Hamilton sittings. Marshall was of Scottish decent, strongly built and by all accounts a

¹¹⁰ Schrenk-Notzing quoted in Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* (London: Duke University Press, 2003) p.83

¹¹¹ Baron Von Schrenck-Notzing, *Materialisation of Phenomena: A Contribution To The Investigation Of Mediumistic Teleplastics*. Translated by E. E. Fournier d’Albe (London Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1923) p.159

¹¹² Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, pp.80-81

¹¹³ “The Mary M. Teleplasm of October 27, 1929,” *Quarterly transactions of the British College of Psychic Studies*, Box 2 Folder 2, T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

strongly willed woman, so the passivity necessary to fulfill demands upon her person, raises questions over the control of the female body within the séance room. To some extent women who worked as mediums had a greater level of social power, financial independence and in some cases celebrity, but within the séance room, the stereotypes of passivity and subservience had to take central stage. The recognition that mediumship facilitated a subversion of stereotypical traits of femininity that resulted in empowered positions in society without breaking social norms was undoubtedly attractive to women. But it also required an acceptance of behavior during séances more closely aligned to traditional stereotypes of woman, including passivity toward aggression and sexual harassment. A case in point are the events which unfolded during a séance in December 1910 and January 1911 involving Eva C. Eva described her breast being brutally grabbed, forcing her back into an armchair, which was somewhat lightheartedly reported as putting her out of spirits.¹¹⁴ The brutality of these accounts in light of the fraudulent nature of each séance, underpins the precarious position women practicing mediumship were placing themselves in. Mediums could forge a career providing independence but the price paid for such freedom often encompassed abuse, both sexual and physical. In addition, mediums ran the risk of being exposed as fraudulent and those unfortunate enough to be debunked, faced a life of infamy and in extreme cases, such as that of Helen Duncan, imprisonment.

The silencing of female mediums, through the exchange of their own voice for the channeled spirit, heightens the undertones of sexual aggression and repression played out in the séance room. The silenced female medium sheds new light on the swallowing and regurgitating of fabric to produce ectoplasm as a form of female gagging. Marina Warner's elaborations on Eva. C paint her as a "disturbingly fetishized and erotic figure" often masked with swathes of semi translucent fabric and this is echoed in the concealment of the medium's body through the use of chastity style garments, sewed up for limited access.¹¹⁵ The securing of the body through fabric, straps and ties recur as motifs of physical mediumship and the resultant photographic documentation evidences a deep visual resonance with fetish. (Fig. 1). Common fixings used on the neck, hands and feet named *controls* metaphorically translate

¹¹⁴ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, p.207

¹¹⁵ Marina Warner. *Phantasmagoria*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 295

the restraint of the female body whilst materialising, into one of struggle and ecstasy. The practical implementation of controls was used as a form of proofing that the medium in question was not fraudulent, but it also restricted the excessive convulsions of the body which were often described as reminiscent of hysteria. Schrenk-Notzing noted of Eva C: “On a few occasions I have observed a trace of hysterical supersensitiveness and affectation. When her nerves are shaken by the shock of the sudden flash-light, or when she tries in vain to produce phenomena”.¹¹⁶ The link between mediumship and hysteria also brings onanism back into the fray, exposing the sexual overtones of the female body’s behavior within the context of physical mediumship. The highly sexualized connotation of the séance room, particularly in the experiments with Eva C, cannot escape a fetishistic reading.

The term fetish originally derived from the Portuguese ‘feitico’ a word used to describe the proliferation of illegal talismanic objects in the middle ages but it also has an origin in the Latin ‘facticum’ meaning artificial.¹¹⁷ In subsequent years the term became associated with charm, bewitchment and witchcraft, with the latter carrying connotations of the subordination of women through the introduction of laws, which made the use of amulets to inflict ill will, a punishable crime.¹¹⁸ The development of the term fetish from its earliest foundations in western thought has undergone an array of evolutions including the Freudian pathological, sexual, fetish. But, it is the connotation of an object imbued with spirit that presents an intriguing connection to the materialisation of ectoplasm. In this context of fetish, an object is believed to explicitly embody spirit or show signs of a spirit acting or communicating through it. Equally, if the object were treated as having particular power or a level of human consciousness, if it were worshipped or prayed to, it would also be described as a fetish object.¹¹⁹ This description echoes the ritual of manifesting ectoplasm through the embodiment of silk, or biologically generated secretions, with the spirit of the dead. Ectoplasm

¹¹⁶ Baron Von Schrenck-Notzing, *Materialisation of Phenomena: A Contribution To The Investigation Of Mediumistic Teleplastics*, p.153

¹¹⁷ Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism: A New Look*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1994) p.14, see also William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II. The Origins of the Fetish”, *Res 13* (spring 1987), p. 24

¹¹⁸ William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II. The Origins of the Fetish”, p.34

¹¹⁹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1871] p. 145

became a living, independent and unpredictable 'thing' given energy through the willingness of belief by those participating in its materialisation. The viewing of ectoplasm as an object of fetish also indicates its differentiation from the totemic, and this is supported by James George Frazer's discussion of the fetish object existing in isolation.¹²⁰ Unlike, the totemic object, which is nearly always part of a class of objects, the fetish object remains isolated.¹²¹ The fetish object is precious in that it exists in its own independent status of power, within this context ectoplasm is very rightly considered fetishistic, it was always unique in each manifestation and required certain rules to be in place before it would manifest. In an excerpt from October 1929 in the Thomas Glendenning Hamilton's transcripts, the ectoplasmic manifestation transmitting the messages of spirit guide Walter, through medium Mary Marshall, announced that due to incorrect conditions a photograph would not be possible during a sitting:

Walter, through Mary M, angrily informed us that he would be unable to give the "picture" as he had intended, due to the fact that we, contrary to our usual custom, had examined the medium's head and upper part of her body without his signal to do so. As a result we had destroyed his "work".¹²²

The control and power of the fetish object exerted over its followers, exercised here through the channeled spirit Walter, emphasizes the conditions that were demanded in order for manifestations to take place and be 'captured' through the camera lens. Tangential to this is the recurring motif of touch in the séance room, the touching of the medium's body all over to prohibit fraud; the touching of each other's hands in a circle. An object of fetish is untouchable, in the sense that as soon as a peak is reached there is a disappearance. Although some, including Schrenk-Notzing claimed to have touched a materialisation, documents suggest that upon doing so the ectoplasm would vanish; as Thomas Hamilton commented, "It seems to have the same kind of distrust as a defenceless animal, and protects itself by retreating into the body from which it has issued. It seems to fear being

¹²⁰ James George Frazer, *Totemism & Exogamy* (London: Macmillan, 1910) see also Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by James Strachey. (London: Routledge, 2001)

¹²¹ Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism: A New Look*, p.17

¹²² Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "The Mary M. Teleplasm of October 27, 1929" *Publications by TGH, Quarterly transactions of the B.C.P.S.*, p.3 in Hamilton Family writings and lectures, Box 2, Folder 2. Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

touched, and is always ready to avoid this by resorption".¹²³ The implication of not being able to touch brings into play the sensual and translates the particular use of silk in the production of ectoplasm into the erotic. Krafft Ebing's 1886 *Psychopathesis Sexualis* the pathological study of 'fetichism' set out that the crimes of fetish include the "theft of female linen, handkerchiefs, shoes and silks".¹²⁴ The adornments of the female body, the objects that restrict and sexualize it, are fetishistic. In an unusual turn of events this parallel became explicit when the production of ectoplasm through the medium Mary Marshall of the Hamilton circle took a particularly decorative turn. Instead of its more common amorphous mass the ectoplasm took the form of a delicately detailed silk scarf that entirely enveloped Ms. Marshall's head, to which Hamilton applied the label 'supernormal handkerchief' in addition, ectoplasmic jewellery adorned her body, described as: "teleplasm resembling a pendant ear-ring; and most remarkable of all teleplasm, which has taken on the form of a bow...the "ear-ring and the "bow" appear to be unique. The whimsical effect is marked".¹²⁵ The spirit guide in this case was Walter and Hamilton expanded his notes to include a reflection on the humor of the teleplasm created, he states: "Walter can answer; and his answer is a boyishly simple one: since the medium was wearing a "party" dress, she must have all the trimmings – hence the beads, the "ear-ring", the "bow" and the "cap" - a fairly successful attempt, it must be admitted, of "having his little bit of fun".¹²⁶ The description of the playful nature of this event deviates from the context of fetishizing the female body but this is reinforced through the single image of the supposed 'supernormal handkerchief'. The covering of the head, although lightheartedly referenced, cannot avoid the broader visual references to gagging and suffocation. (Fig. 2 - 3)

¹²³ Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "A lecture to the British Medical Association" *Quarterly transaction of the British College of Psychic Science*, Vol. IX. No 4 (January, 1931), p.265. Box 2, Folder 2. Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

¹²⁴ Richard von Krafft Ebing, *Psychopathesis Sexualis*, tenth edition (London: Rebman, 1899) p. 517 see also Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism: A New Look*, p. 39

¹²⁵ Notes taken from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton's sketchbooks see figures 5-8. T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

¹²⁶ Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "Teleplasmic Phenomena in Winnipeg (remarkable illustrations)" *Psychic Science* Vol. IX. No. 2. (July, 1930) p.93. Box 2, Folder 2. Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

The inability to touch and therefore capture ectoplasm resulted in its documentation solely through the medium of photography. Séances for physical mediumship were set up with a strange illusion to scientific experiments with the exposure of the camera lens as a central feature in understanding each experience. The exposure of a light sensitive plate producing an object of evidence post séance, also provided a level of authentication to proceedings, a reflection on the entrenched belief in the camera seeing what the naked eye cannot.¹²⁷ Thomas Glendenning Hamilton (T.G.H) was particularly formal about the scientific rigor of the study of ectoplasmic manifestations having trained as a medical doctor at Manitoba College and as President of the Manitoba Medical Association his interest in paranormal activity was motivated by the scientific proving of life after death, almost certainly driven by the personal experience of losing his son at a very young age.¹²⁸ The documentation of manifestations photographically was deemed of vital importance to T.G.H and the control of the room, choice of cameras even the development of photographic plates were all undertaken by himself. The extensive camera bank built to document the second floor séance room in 185 Kelvin Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba the Hamilton's family home evidences the variety of photographic equipment that was used to record the developments of ectoplasm as it was produced. (Fig. 4) The room was never accessed outside of séances and was kept in permanent darkness. Windows were boarded and covered with heavy black paper to prevent light leaks as well as the doorway, which was always locked and cloaked with a generous black curtain. The battery of cameras that flanked the circle of the séance were made up from an array of different lenses to best capture any event that may occur and were placed in a fan shape facing the medium's cabinet. In total eleven cameras were installed including stereoscopic, rapid rectilinear, wide-angle and quartz. A film camera was never permanently included in the Hamilton séance room and even when one was made temporarily present the resultant material would only ever be shown photographically. A common practice was to present photographic images taken moments apart, in a form of animation presented as evidence of the veracity of production.

¹²⁷ Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations" in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*. Patrice Petro Ed. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp.42-71

¹²⁸ "Hamilton Family Fonds: Biographical Sketch", accessed 21 September 2015, http://umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/archives/collections/rad/hamilton_family.html

Cameras were located on wooden supports at various elevations and focused using a single red light located in the assumed position of the medium. T.G.H was very specific about the quality of the red lamp, stating:

This red lamp should be of ruby glass sufficiently dense to be a safe light for ordinary photographic plates. The lamp itself should be shaded entirely except for an opening on the side adjacent the camera to be focused. In this way the damaging effect of light within the cabinet may be avoided.¹²⁹

The use of flash powder to illuminate manifestations added a further complication in relation to the damaging effect of light. T.G.H regularly commented on the negative impact the flash would have not only on the medium but also on the spirit being channeled, as well as the problematic addition of smoke caused by the ignition of the flash. These issues led to a specific development in the Hamilton séances where the spirit channeled would instigate when the flash was to be released. The moment to shoot would be signaled either through automatic voice or bell ringing but at times Hamilton noted that the group would be instructed to: “shoot when you like”.¹³⁰

To some extent the séance room has shared attributes with the photographic dark room in that they are both controlled spaces arranged to capture the ephemeral. Alexander Gehring directly addressed this parallel in his series *Messages from the Dark Room*, 2011. Throughout the project Gehring took to task the embedded link between photography and the occult reflecting on the photographic darkroom as séance-room and the camera itself as a medium in trance.¹³¹ Inspired by images from Schrenck-Notzing's materialisations Gehring explores the photographic darkroom and the paraphernalia of analogue processing as a form of mediumship. The camera becomes an object of mystery in his photographic portraits, a channeling device that is capable of producing a unique aura of its own. In *Medium in Trance* (Fig. 5 - 6) Gehring stages the camera positioned between the narrow opening of a black curtain and beneath a red light, reminiscent of the heavily curtained séance cabinet of Eva C.

¹²⁹ Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, “Photography of Teleplasm” Hamilton Family writings and lectures, Box 2, Folder 2. Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

¹³⁰ Thomas Glendenning Hamilton speaking in a letter corresponding with Mr. Francis A. Hilton of Detroit Michigan, March 15, 1934, Hamilton Family writings and lectures, Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

¹³¹ Alexander Gehring, “Messages from the Dark Room”, accessed 20 September 2015 <http://www.alexandergehring.com/work/messages-from-the-darkroom/>

Its aperture is left open, a channel for filtering the surrounding environment but also a reference to the empty stare of trance states adopted by mediums when channeling spirits. Gehring presents the camera as a medium capable of producing its own visual affectations by appropriating the language of the séance to the paraphernalia of photography.

The series also experiments with the broader language of the séance room through references to the controls placed on mediums, Gehring shrouds the camera in heavily stitched fabric, evoking the chastity garments enforced upon mediums prior to entry into the séance room. The metaphor of the control of the medium translates to the control of the photographer over the camera, in a poetic blurring of practices historically tinted with alchemy. The seductiveness of Gehring's photographic series also evokes a double disappearance of the camera, echoing the spectacular hiding in plain sight of the medium whilst channeling messages from the dead. One camera is clearly evident as the subject, but it intentionally loses its traditional function in its metaphor for the spiritual medium. The other is the unseen camera, which has created the final photograph, both presences of the camera in this scenario are inferred by Gehring's reference to the physical mediumship of Eva C. Through the restaging of famous positions from her séances, in which Gehring substitutes Eva's body for the camera, he implies a gendering of the camera as female. The relationship between camera as medium and female body as medium sets up an entirely different reading which evokes the multiple meaning of terminology within photographic practice. Terms such as exposure in a corporeal context imply a sexual uncovering and the intrinsic mode of reproduction central to photographic practice takes on an entirely new meaning in the framework of the female body.

The relationship between the technology of capturing images and the body is more extensively touched on by Lindsay Seers in the work *Optograms (mouth camera)*, 1997-2013. This series presented the marriage of body and camera in the most literal of senses. Through a process of using her mouth as an aperture, Seers transformed her body into a hybrid living camera, producing images that create an intimate portrait of the body as well as her environment. The sensual red hue created by light filtering through her cheeks, the circular scale equivalent to the diameter of her mouth and the foginess generated by the imperfect

atmosphere of humidity and wetness, all bears a direct relationship to her body.¹³² Presented next to photographs taken at the same moment but on a standard camera, *Optograms* provides the viewer with an internal/external visual dialogue and narrative. Seers has spoken about becoming a living camera as a process in which to free herself from the control of photographic technique, a way of avoiding the feeling of being possessed by automatic actions that involuntarily manifest when taking a photograph, the necessity of obeying the camera to satisfy a craving for the photographic image, as Pavel Büchler states:

She had to obey, do what a camera has to do, to fulfil her desire for photographs. Yet there is a release in this submissive gesture. It lies in the implied erotic fantasy: she gives herself, her body and her being, to photography, she becomes invisible for the voyeuristic gratification of others.¹³³

The suggestion that Seers feels possessed by involuntary actions when using a camera is in opposition to Gehring's metaphor of the camera controlled by the photographer as a medium in a séance. However, Seer's notion of 'becoming invisible for the voyeuristic gratification of others presents an interesting parallel to mediumship and the enforced disappearance of the female body translated to vessel. This takes on a particular pertinence during later developments in the Hamilton séances in which the medium Mary Marshall began to channel ectoplasm containing photographic images (Fig. 7). Despite the fraudulent claims of the Hamilton circle that the embedded photographs were three-dimensional likenesses of deceased parties, the photographs set up Marshall's body as conduit not just for spirits but also for the production of photographic images. In a unique parallel with Seers' work, the production of ectoplasm references the female body as a site for photographic process. Photography is central to the phenomena of ectoplasm, without it there would be little evidence of its existence, but the revelation that ectoplasm also contained photographic images creates a cycle in which materializations echo the photographic process.¹³⁴ The idea of the invisible world conversing with the visible world via a kind of pictographic code is reminiscent of comments made by Gaspard-Félix Tournachon that every person continuously

¹³² "Optograms (Mouth Camera)" accessed 20 September 2015, http://www.lindsayseers.info/work_node/320#3

¹³³ Pavel Büchler, "A True Story" in *Human Camera* (Birmingham: Article Press, 2007) p. 27

¹³⁴ Karl Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography", *Art Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 38

radiates images in a process similar to a constant shedding of an immaterial skin.¹³⁵ Although never documented on film, ectoplasm can be seen to have a unique connection to the term through its description as 'an image projected onto a screen'. The translation of the term 'film' into the French 'pellicule' indicates its derivation from 'pellis', meaning skin and even the English definition for film begins with 'membrane' that equally sets up a connection to the body.¹³⁶ The materialisation of ectoplasm is seemingly an intra-action of the technology of photography and the female body.

This chapter sought to establish the beginnings of a 'new' new materialist feminist approach toward the female body by introducing the practice of mediumship. Mediumship, socially and historically, has been gendered female and by acknowledging this and entering it into the 'mangle' of 'woman' building on Susan Hekman's shifting notions of the feminine subject and initiation of an ontology of the social, it becomes possible to once again rethink the problematic of the identity of woman. The dichotomy of mediumship as a tool used to oppress and empower women, side steps the irrationality of using it as a framework to further explore the identity of woman by highlighting its unique reading of the importance of bodily materiality. The centrality of the 'body as a conduit' in mediumship is expressly focused on materiality and this is emphatically emphasized through physical mediumship and the production of ectoplasm. Equally, the entanglement of meanings for ectoplasm sets up relationships with artistic practices such as film and photography, evoking an unresolved conflation of female struggle in the artistic field. Subsequently, what needs to be developed is an understanding of how the concept of channeling and the female body as a vessel has affected broader artistic practices, opening up an interesting connection between the social acceptance of woman artists and the art of mediumship as a cover.

¹³⁵ Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations" p.43

¹³⁶ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, p.78, 86

Chapter Two: On 'Not Knowing': Art and the Spirit

The extent to which artists have claimed to produce artwork via supernatural methods is by no means slight. In 2007 the exhibition *The Message: Art and Occultism* brought together, for the first time, a comprehensive group of artists who claimed to work under the influence of occult forces.¹ Held in Cologne at the Kunstmuseum Bochum the exhibition was initiated to acknowledge the artistic relevance of works produced in the genre of spiritualism and the occult. Leaving aside judgments related to the manner in which they were produced, curators focused on the artistic quality of each work in an attempt to encourage thinking outside of usual constraints and to consider in a more serious way, the unconventional aspects of artistic production.² Prior to this exhibition the art world had been reluctant to acknowledge artists claiming occult inspiration, but the public's appetite for all things otherworldly appears to have had a renaissance. In the last few years there has been a marked increase in the number of creative outputs that draw from supernatural or occult references, most notably within the media, with commissioned television series, documentaries and films permeating popular culture.³ But, the present need to make the spectral legible has also taken hold in contemporary art, with many visual artists re-engaging with spiritualist practices and histories. The current political climate has generated a desire for a return to the imaginative possibilities of the spiritualist movement and its distinctly anti-authoritarian stance. Resonances of Theodore Adorno's musings in the 1950s, on the presence of an astrology column in the LA Times, highlights how peaks in occult interest can be read as a compensatory measure against the neglect of interpretive thinking. In a society erased by the pressures of consumption, standardization and reproducibility, individuality suffers and the imaginative space of the occult facilitates a form of resistance.⁴ Contemporary society seems to be

¹ Claudia Dichter, Michael Krajewski and Susanne Zander, Editors, *The Message: Kunst und Okkultismus* (Germany: Kunstmuseum Bochum, 2007)

² Claudia Dichter, Michael Krajewski and Susanne Zander "The Medium as Artist" in *The Message: Kunst und Okkultismus*, pp. 57-136.

³ Michael Mangan. *Performing Dark Arts: A cultural history of conjuring* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007) pp. 190-195

⁴ Theodor W Adorno: 'The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column' (1953) in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, edited by Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 1994) pp.46-81

yearning for a similar active resistance and once again occultist sensibilities are taking hold. The translation of mediumship in today's highly connected digital age forces a new reading of seeing the unseen. In a society where the exchange of information globally happens almost instantaneously and images proliferate on digital portable screens, the spiritualist sentiment of phantasmagoria may be used as a useful cipher for a deeper discussion of fleeting materiality.⁵

The resurgence of interest in the relationship between occultist practices and the history of art has a tangential impact for feminist studies, in that the most recent works uncovered as part of the current renaissance of spiritualist practices have been by women. This initiates an entirely different set of questions over the use of mediumship within women's artistic practice. The recently exhibited work of artists Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton may have had a natural origin in spiritualism, but it is pertinent to question whether the use of mediumship in their work could not also be read as an 'acceptable' cover for sustaining an independent artistic practice as young unmarried women. In addition, the quality and vision of Hilma and Georgiana's work has instigated a revival of interest in the problematic sidelining of female practitioners in the canon of art history. The female body as 'vessel' within the context of mediumship facilitated a re-empowerment of the typecast irrational, spiritual and sexual representation of woman, but to some extent this also echoes the stereotypes of being an artist - irrational, spiritual and isolated. As young, unattached women from respectable backgrounds Hilma and Georgiana may have preferred the more acceptable cover of spiritual divination, as the cause of their artistic output. The alternative of living and working as artists would've been a radical break from accepted social norms, making the likelihood of sustaining a studio slight.

Hilma af Klint prolifically produced paintings and sketches during her lifetime, but always denied authoring her work in favour of accepting her status as a marionette to higher creative spiritual forces. The exhibition of af Klint's paintings at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm in 2013 sent a ripple through the art world with the claim that her painting practice anticipated abstraction pre-dating Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich.

⁵ Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi 'Spectres of Art' in *Georgina Houghton Spirit Paintings* edited by Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen and Barnaby Wright (London: The Courtauld Gallery, 2016) pp.25-33

The exhibition entitled *Hilma af Klint, a Pioneer of Abstraction* displayed a large collection of paintings dating back as early as 1906, allegedly produced by spirits guiding Af Klint purely as a medium.⁶ Since its first showcase, Hilma's work has continued to gain momentum, surfacing in contemporary exhibition spaces as a lost fragment of the art historical canon. The exhibition of her work at the Serpentine Gallery in 2016 shortly preceded the exhibition of Georgiana Houghton at The Courtauld Gallery, evidencing a trend in institutions recognizing female practitioners working within the vein of the occult as precursors to abstraction. The boldness of this claim will not be labored over within this discussion, but the recognition of female artists working within the genre of the occult is a developing thematic and one that leads toward the resonances of the occult in contemporary art practices such as Susan Hiller. Hiller regularly makes reference to events sidelined as irrational in culture, including early spiritualism and the occult. Together with Alexandra Kokoli she has developed the term 'paraconceptualism' to frame the use of supernatural interests in her artistic oeuvre, but this also establishes a link with the concept of 'not knowing' in artistic practice.

'Not knowing' speaks to the impossibility of fully articulating artistic methodologies and it is a useful framework for talking about the process of making work because it includes scope for change and experimentation. The portrayal of artists in the state of 'not knowing' echoes the context of channeling, in which the artist's body becomes an open vessel for inspiration. The mysticism implicit in 'not knowing' and channeling makes it possible to establish the concept of a clairvoyance of contemporary art. This side-steps the negative connotation of artistic genius, but forces intuition, wonder and curiosity into a mangle of creative practice that begins to lay the path toward understanding how fascination functions in the realm of contemporary art.⁷

⁶ Hilma af Klint's show 'A Pioneer of Abstraction' has since become the most successful exhibition to date at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. The curator Iris Müller-Westermann stated, "nice mothers, in control and perfectly dressed...found themselves crying but unable to explain". The Museum has since installed an entire room devoted to Af Klint. See, Kate Kellaway, "Hilma af Klint: a painter possessed", *The Observer*, February 2016. Accessed July 21, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/21/hilma-af-klint-occult-spiritualism-abstract-serpentine-gallery>. See also, Pascal Rousseau and David Lomas, *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, edited by Iris Muller-Westermann (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2013)

⁷ To understand further the connection between the artist and genius see Immanuel Kant, "Essay VI: Art and the Artist" in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. Third Critique. Trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) pp. cxviii – cxlv. See also, G.W.F Hegel. *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M Knox. Volume 1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 283 "Genius is

i. Fragmenting the Canon: Hilma af Klint (1862-1944)

Born in 1862 near Stockholm in the naval college of Karlberg Castle, owing to her father's posting as an admiral and mathematician, Hilma af Klint described a very different motivation for the production of her painting practice. During her late teens she developed an interest in the ideas of spiritualism and began to regularly participate in local meetings and séances. The cause for Hilma's spiritual awakening is to some extent unknown but the death of her younger sister Hermina from influenza in 1880 is often cited, alongside the description of her as a child who showed particular talent for spiritualist mediumship.⁸ As an adult, af Klint founded a women's circle for spiritualists that gathered on a weekly basis between 1896 - 1906, it was during this period that she, along with Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman and Mathilde N. known as "The Five (de Fem)," produced a vast amount of automatic writing and drawing under the guidance of higher spiritual forces.⁹ Hilma claimed to have several spirit guides who frequently visited her during séances called Gregor, Esther, Clement, Amaliel and Ananda and it was through their instruction that her distinctive graphical and symbolic imagery manifested, she states "The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke."¹⁰

Preceding 1906, af Klint's paintings had been relatively naturalistic, shadowing her early artistic training at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, but following a séance in which her spirit guide Amaliel announced that she had been commissioned to create paintings on the astral plane, her style radically changed and production began on *Paintings*

the general ability for the true production of a work of art, as well as the energy to elaborate and complete it."

⁸ Jennifer Higgie, "Longing for Light: The Art of Hilma af Klint" in *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen* Press Pack, (Serpentine Galleries, 2016) p.13-19 Accessed 21 July 2016. <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/press/2015/12/hilma-af-klint-painting-unseen>

⁹ Kate Kellaway, "Hilma af Klint: a painter possessed"

¹⁰ Iris Müller-Westermann. *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*. Edited by Jo Widoff (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013) p. 278

for the Temple.¹¹ During the period between 1906-1915 af Klint created an astounding one hundred and ninety three paintings, all of which she framed as direct products of spiritual channeling. Transcriptions of the directives from af Klint's spirit guides during this period, were regularly recorded in her personal diaries and an entry from November 1906 describes Amaliel stating, "Listen H (Hilma), when you're to interpret the colour, hearing and seeing the tones, try to attune your senses in harmony and pray: Give me thou, in my innermost realm the image of clarity. [...] Amaliel draws a sketch, then Hilma is to paint."¹² Despite Hilma's artistic training, the concept and production of her works were seemingly completed without her conscious intervention. Hilma never acknowledged her role in making artistic decisions in early works and for an extended period of her life she was happy to resign herself purely to the role of medium. However, during the production of *Paintings for the Temple*, af Klint became deeply involved with the writing of Rudolf Steiner and her attitude and style began to change.

Steiner's career began in theosophy but he later founded the anthroposophy movement, which promoted belief in an ideal world where opposed forces were balanced. It is speculation to suggest that Hilma's involvement with anthroposophy stemmed from an undisclosed desire to address the gender imbalance within the social constructs of her day, echoing Steiner's binary balances, but she certainly supported anthroposophy's advancement of spiritualism as a credible equal to natural science. Hilma's involvement with spiritualism has often been a point of contention as descriptions of her character define her as "mathematical, scientific, musical – curious" but the tarnish of spiritualism read into her practice retrospectively, derives from a contemporary standpoint.¹³ It is important to remember that during the years af Klint was producing work, radical discoveries including Heinrich Hertz's electromagnetic wave in 1896 and the origination of the X-ray in 1895 by Wilhelm Röntgen did scientifically prove that invisible forces could have physical effects.¹⁴

¹¹ Claudia Dichter, Michael Krajewski and Susanne Zander "Hilma af Klint" in *The Message: Kunst und Okkultismus*. (Germany: Kunstmuseum Bochum, 2007) pp. 155-156. See also, Jennifer Higgle, "Longing for Light: The Art of Hilma af Klint", p.16

¹² Hilma af Klint, diary note of November 7, 1906 in: Claudia Dichter, Michael Krajewski and Susanne Zander "The Medium as Artist" p. 166

¹³ Iris Müller-Westermann in conversation with Kate Kellaway in "Hilma af Klint: a painter possessed"

¹⁴ Jennifer Higgle, "Longing for Light: The Art of Hilma af Klint", p.14

This provided a form of affirmation for spiritualism and the dubious authenticity of its claims gave way to a new intellectual respectability on a par with science. Hilma's engagement with spiritualism may well have developed from a curiosity over its status as a form of science rather than a religious or fanatical belief.

In later years, af Klint's interest in Steiner's teaching led her to apply for his mentorship, a role to which he agreed enthusiastically, even visiting her studio on occasion. Steiner was greatly influential in Hilma's practice and the effect of his mentoring can be seen in her move away from automatism toward a more deliberate and personal interpretation of the messages she received during mediumship. Through Steiner's notion of introspection and his emphasis on personal artistic expression, af Klint ceased acting as a mere medium and began to interpret in greater detail the initial spirit inspiration she received. The most recognizable effect of this shift is Hilma's use of symbolism - spirals, circles, flowers and geometric shapes, can all be read as references to her interest in the newly confirmed scientific discovery of waves as well as esoteric philosophies. The abstracted floral and geometric forms allude to her passion for depicting botanical plants developed during study at art school, whilst the series 'The Swan', 1914-15 and 'The Dove', 1915 use the motif of a bird, a traditional symbol within alchemy, possibly informed by Madame Blavatsky's comment that the swan embodies the 'mystery of mysteries' and the 'majesty of the Spirit'.¹⁵ (Fig. 1 - 4) The integration of animal representations can also be traced to a period when Hilma worked as a draughtswoman for the veterinary institute in Stockholm, a point that further evidences support for her expressed interest in science and Darwin's theory of evolution.¹⁶ Hilma directly used the term 'evolution' in selected works across her 'Primordial Chaos' series as well as the title for her 1908 series, which centered on representations of the opposition of male and female unfolding toward eventual abstraction. (Fig. 5 - 6) A key feature throughout many of Hilma's works is the symbol of the spiral, it functions as an echo of unraveling in the sense of Darwin's concept of everything being in a state of becoming, but it also resonates with

¹⁵ Madame Blavatsky quoted in Jennifer Higgin, "Longing for Light: The Art of Hilma af Klint", p.17

¹⁶ Julia Voss, "The first abstract artist? (And it's not Kandinsky)" in *Tate Etc.* Issue 27: Spring 2013. Accessed 31 March 2015 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky>

Hilma's choice to continuously work in series post 1906. The production of each new painting seemingly acted as an unfolding of its predecessor, a visual manifestation of the theory of evolution.

The lack of acknowledgement of af Klint's body of work prior to the display of *Paintings for the Temple* had as much to do with her involvement in spiritualism as it did with her artwork's reception into a broadly male dominated art scene. The connection to spiritualism was often commented on in a manner that undermined the quality of her work, as Maurice Tauchman, former curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, suggested after he included a selection of af Klint's pieces in his 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*,

'Spiritual' is still a very dirty word in the art world...When the prejudice against the idea of the spiritual life in af Klint's work is overcome, which will require scholarship, then perhaps she will really take hold in the broader conversation.¹⁷

The commentary around af Klint's work is to some extent limited by its spiritualist context, the fascination inspired by the possibility of a spiritualist methodology for painting has seemingly overshadowed the artistic merit of Hilma's paintings. It may be closer to the truth to suggest that Hilma's involvement with spiritualism was to profit from its ability to provide a creditable façade to the rise of her independence as an artist. Spiritualism would have provided an appropriate guise to her celibate and unmarried status facilitating a diversion from social pressures, but it would also have enabled her to stabilize her studio and production during a time unaccustomed to female artists - particularly those producing such radically different and contemporary work.

The fact that it is only in recent years that a discourse has been established in which the material quality of Hilma's work is being discussed is virtue to the fact that scholarly engagement with female artists producing under the guise of spiritualism are being re-addressed. Aside from the broader esoteric context within which the production of af Klint's paintings sit, the skill with which each work has been considered compositionally, the choice of colour and the symbolism that pervades throughout has maintained a remarkably modern aesthetic. There is a confidence and vivaciousness to the entirety of Hilma's oeuvre enriched

¹⁷ Natalia Rachlin, "Giving a Swedish Pioneer of Abstraction Her Due".

through the vast scale of many of her canvases and this has contributed to the popularity of her recognition and the ongoing debate as to whether she is one of the first abstract artists. It is a credit to Hilma's artistic savvy that she placed a sanction on the display of her paintings arguing that the world was not yet ready for such visionary works. It is clear that Hilma's production began several years prior to the recognized breakthroughs of abstract artists and so it is appropriate to question her position in the art historical timeline. However, what would be more refreshing is to see how the recognition of af Klint's work could actually spark a fragmentation of the concept of a linear development of art, where one thing directly leads on from another. Such a fragmentation could provide a platform to discuss how spiritualist and esoteric practices have been integral to the development of creative practices that challenge the established canons of art history.¹⁸

The exhibition of Hilma af Klint's work at the Serpentine Gallery in 2016 was closely followed by the first ever retrospective of the work of Georgiana Houghton at the Courtauld Gallery. The parallels between af Klint and Houghton appear symbiotic, both women had undertaken artistic training prior to becoming involved in spiritualist practices and both denied authorship of their works in favour of positioning themselves as artistic mediums to a higher realm. Similarly both women were completely ignored by the canon of art history up until the current climate for re-addressing the spiritual in artistic practice.¹⁹ But, the many similarities between Hilma and Georgiana are fractured by the very different attitude they held toward their status as artists.

ii. Spectres of Art: Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884)

Georgiana Houghton was born on the Island of Grand Canary in 1814 but she spent most of her life in London living as a single woman in discreet poverty owing to her father's misfortunes in trading.²⁰ Little is known of her life prior to her involvement with spiritualism but

¹⁸ Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi "Spectres of Art" in Simon Grant, Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi, *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*. Edited by Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen and Barnaby White (London: The Courtauld Gallery) p.31

¹⁹ Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi "Spectres of Art", p. 30

²⁰ Simon Grant and Marco Pasi "Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings" in *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, p.9

it is thought that having trained as an artist Houghton gave up her practice when both her sister Zilla Rosalia and brother Cecil Angelo unexpectedly died at young ages. The grief of losing two siblings led Houghton toward spiritualism and in 1859 she took part in her first séance with a spirit medium of some reputation known as Mrs Marshall. The experience left Georgiana enlightened and instilled her with the belief that she had the innate skills to become a medium herself. The parallels between Hilma af Klint and Houghton are strong at this point, both women turned toward mediumship following the death of close relatives and both claimed to gain inspiration from a number of spirit guides. However, whilst Hilma channelled anonymous spirits, Houghton, boldly claimed to channel master artists including Titian and Correggio. This was not uncommon in the practice of mediumship, particularly as it added an additional spectacle to the event, but it immediately shifts Houghton's work into a different context to that of af Klint.

Despite Houghton's later star mediumship the earliest of her divine inspirations came through the guidance of a spirit she called Henry Lenny. The drawings created under his influence took the form of freehand botanical sketches, which Houghton referred to as spiritual flowers and fruit and many of which were dedicated to her sister Zilla. On several occasions Houghton discussed her belief that the flowers in her drawings were symbolic of people in the material world, living or dead.²¹ Each image created was inferred to have symbolic meaning through colour and shape as well as representational form and Houghton went to great lengths to stress the importance of interpretation. In the catalogue to her exhibition at the New British Gallery in London she provided a colour key to her works so that they could be better understood, yellow became symbolic of God the Father, faith and wisdom whilst orange was power and violet happiness.²²

The representational beginnings of Houghton's paintings soon evolved into a non-figurative style of working that centred on the intricate interweaving of colour. These works presented intricate wefts of thinly applied watercolour evocative of her early botanical specimens viewed in microcosm. The only deviation from her new found style was the

²¹ Simon Grant and Marco Pasi "Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings", p.15

²² Simon Grant and Marco Pasi "Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings" in *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, p.16

inclusion of a rather crude portrait of Jesus Christ in 1862 (Fig. 7 - 8). The inclusion of this portrait, within one of her more recognisable non-figurative works, is a pointer to Houghton's belief that Spiritualism and Christianity were compatible religions, a belief shared by many spiritualists despite the rejection of certain dogmas within the Christian church. Houghton particularly believed in her works' ability to articulate the dawn of the age of the Holy Ghost, also referred to as the third dispensation after the Father and the Son, representative of an age of increased spirituality.²³ Despite appearing abstract in technique, each painting is accompanied by a large amount of written text that highlights the symbolic nature of each detail, implying a process more closely aligned to representational practices. The texts would often be the result of automatic writing sessions and they would appear on the back of each work, indicating the symbolic aspects included. Houghton was adamant that her audiences understood the full meaning of her works so as not to lose the gravitas of their importance, but this also differentiates Houghton from other artists working under the guise of mediumship, including Hilma af Klint.

The importance of audiences' understanding the 'true' meaning of Houghton's work was a key component. Despite her denouncement that her works were poor representations of the unrenderable hues of the spiritual realm, Houghton was clearly very aware of her audience and interested in what they made of her work.²⁴ Unlike Hilma af Klint, who actively prevented her works from being seen and never claimed credit for their artistic value, Houghton almost bankrupted herself through attempts to exhibit her work. The radical style of her paintings gave Houghton a strong sense of belief in the artistic quality of her work and although she gave ownership of the content to the spirit realm, the artistic merit of the works was something she adamantly took as her own, sincerely believing that they conveyed a modern artistic value.

In 1871 Houghton curated her ten-year collection, which included an impressive one hundred and fifty five artworks, into a single exhibition. Through the encouragement of friends

²³ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance, Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, first edition (London: Trübner & Co, 1881) pp.v-vi

²⁴ Georgina Houghton, *Catalogue of the Spirit Drawings in Watercolours, Exhibited at the New British Gallery, Old Bond Street by Miss Georgiana Houghton, through whose mediumship they have been executed* (London: W. Corby Printers, 1871) p.8

and their broader networks, as well as her own adamant belief in the value of her work, she spent her entire inheritance, £30,000 in today's money, on the solo showcase. In the second volume of Houghton's book *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, she describes in great detail the methods of acquiring an exhibition space, through an acquaintance she was able to use the New Bond Gallery in London, creating a catalogue and advertising the event.²⁵ Houghton framed and hung the entire exhibition single-handed and during its opening to the public, over four months, she attended everyday tirelessly talking to visitors and promoting spiritualist concerns. Those who were interested in Houghton's methods were invited to watch her work at her home and she discussed interest from other artists as well as clergy as the most sympathetic.²⁶ The exhibition also attracted the attention of Leah Fox Underhill, one of the famous Fox sisters who had first initiated the spiritualist movement with her two younger sisters in their apartment in New York through a series of rappings.²⁷ However, the positive reviews received by friends and those sympathetic to the spiritualist movement, were greatly outweighed by scornful reviews in the press.

The broader reception of Houghton's work was an unwelcoming mix of bewilderment and rejection, the press particularly berated Houghton's modern style as reminiscent of a tangled trail of Berlin wools, a popular coloured house decoration placed on soft furnishings and comments included in the *1871 Examiner* stated: "We should not have called attention to this exhibition at all, did we not believe that it will disgust all sober people with the follies which it is intended to advance and promote."²⁸ The press response was of little surprise to Houghton who to some extent had prepared herself for public defaming having known the general negativity of the press on spiritualism. She dismissed reviews as ignorant and uniformed stating that her work "could not be criticised according to any of the known and accepted canons of art."²⁹ Despite its apparent arrogance, Houghton's statement was

²⁵ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance, Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, second series (London: E.W Allen, 1882) p. 72

²⁶ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance*, second series pp. 101-102

²⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism (complete)* (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006) pp. 43-58

²⁸ *The Examiner*, 27th May 1871 in Simon Grant and Marco Pasi "Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings" in *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, p.19

²⁹ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance*, second series pp. 91

essentially correct, the more familiar artworks that surrounded her radical exhibition in 1871 would have appeared sobering next to the non-figurative nature of her paintings; rendering a critical engagement with her work an almost impossible task. Despite this, some reviewers did attempt to describe the effect of her paintings making comparisons as distant as Turner, *The News of the World* stated, “The idea presents itself to the imagination of a canvas of Turner’s, over which troops of fairies have been meandering, dropping jewels as they went.”³⁰

The varying degrees of scorn, bafflement and enjoyment that pervaded Houghton’s reception lays a seed of doubt over whether anyone would have visited such an exhibition had it not been presented under the guise of spiritual inspiration. Even the current pristine existence of Houghton’s collection owes to the preservation of the Victorian Spiritualists’ Union in Melbourne, Australia, but how many similar works by female artists working outside the spiritualist oeuvre have been lost without similar protection? The likelihood of Houghton attracting a professional gallery as an unknown and independently funded female artist is unlikely without the spectacle of spiritual divination. In addition, it would have been much easier for reviewers to degrade her to a hobbyist female water-colourist, had she not had such a curious method of working. Houghton’s adamantness that she should be accepted and viewed as an artist in her own right presents a more explicit support for the argument that her involvement in spiritualism was purely on the basis of its ability to provide freedom to practice independently as a female artist. This is reinforced by Houghton’s submission to exhibitions including the Royal Academy. In 1865 two of her works were accepted for exhibition at the RA but in unexplained circumstances they were never shown, following her 1871 exhibitions all other submissions were rejected indicating that respected institutions at the time disassociated themselves from any tarnish of spiritualism.³¹

The cost of Houghton’s solo exhibition almost financially ruined her and without the support of the wider spiritualist community she would have almost certainly fallen into poverty; once again the involvement with spiritualism provided a safety net. Intriguingly, this did not deter Houghton who attempted to initiate a larger curated exhibition of her artwork and other

³⁰ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance*, second series pp. 77

³¹ Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in a Spiritual Séance*, second series pp. 113, 128

spiritualist artists, which never came to fruition. The fact that Houghton considered herself primarily an artist implies that the radically different quality of her work came from a more sober origin of discovery through experimentation. The use of society's fascination with spiritualism and the curiosity inherent in producing drawings through divine inspiration undoubtedly provided Houghton with a platform assured to gain attention, whether good or bad. The determination of Houghton to exhibit her works, undeterred by rejection, implies an ambitious and irreverent woman clinging to a method that provided a level of independence as a female artist.

The renaissance of interest in Houghton's work today follows a period of complete anonymity, owing to her collaboration with the spirit photographer Frederick Hudson. Houghton's interest in spirit photography led her to appear in many of Hudson's spirit images and she publicly expressed her belief that his photographs evidenced the true existence of the spirit realm. Hudson's exposure as a fraud brought Houghton's practice into disrepute and despite being remembered within British Spiritualism, she continued to work as an artist under the influence of spiritual powers, in virtual anonymity.

Both Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton provide historical perspectives on the use of mediumship as a tool to facilitate female artistic practice but this leads to a natural questioning of the relevance of discussing female mediumship as a route to empowerment in a contemporary context. To take to task the phrase 'woman as vessel' credits it with a contemporary currency that could appear problematic, but it is an entirely necessary act in light of the surge of contemporary practices dealing with occult subject matter in a feminist context. The contemporary critique comes from the margins, unpicking the various ways in which stereotypes such as the female medium proliferate in contemporary media. Susan Hiller is a key component in this move through her ability to articulate the legacy of spiritualism in terms of the current status quo, her work is not about belief but it sharply cuts to the problems within society around irrational processes and how reality gets defined.

iii. Contemporary Resonances: Susan Hiller

Susan Hiller's artistic practice has continually provoked the concrete parameters of rationality through the examination of cultural phenomena and human experience that stands outside of scientific reasoning. Her work often employs irrational modes of thought in order to subvert baseline knowledges that silently impose limitations and shape collective thinking.³² In discussion with Dr Alexandra Kokoli Hiller aided the formulation of the term paraconceptualism, developed to denote a form of conceptualism that borders the paranormal and generates an undervalued space in which women have always been advantaged with a strange privileging. Kokoli describes the term as a hybrid of combining the prefix 'para' with that of conceptualism, forcing a type of corruption between the two terms and leaving neither intact. It is this corruption that affects the certainty with which boundaries of knowing are accepted and provides fluidity to solid limitations; leaving space for curiosity about the "repressed periphery of culture".³³

The repressed periphery of culture is precisely where Hiller's work flourishes, her background as an anthropologist results in the use of material deriving directly from human experience, particularly experiences that fall short of rational or scientific explanation. In her 2013 work *Channels*, Hiller used the social phenomena of near death experience to create an audiovisual installation that forced audiences to contemplate on the gaps that exist within modern belief systems (Fig. 9).³⁴ When installed, *Channels* consists of one hundred and six television monitors, incongruously stacked to an imposing height that dominates the space. Each monitor switches between a spectrum of blue light, analogue static noise and depictions of oscilloscopes that visualize voice recordings of individuals who believe that they have had a near death experience.³⁵ The narratives are delivered in a variety of languages, evidencing

³² Susan Hiller, eds., *The Provisional Texture of Reality* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008)

³³ Alexandra M. Kokoli, "Susan Hiller's Paraconceptualism" in *Technologies of Intuition*, edited by Jennifer Fisher (Toronto: YYZBOOKS, 2006) pp.119 – 136, 122

³⁴ Near Death Experience also formed the basis of Hiller work 'Clinic' which was commissioned by BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in 2004 as part of *Recall* a solo show by Susan Hiller, see, Susan Hiller, *Susan Hiller: recall: selected works, 1969-2004*, edited by James Lingwood (Gateshead: BALTIC, 2004)

³⁵ *Channels* Press Information, Matts Gallery, accessed 20 August 2015.
<http://www.mattsgallery.org/artists/hiller/exhibition-4.php>

that despite a distinct lack of scientific proof for near death experience, the number of people who claim it to be real constitutes a global cultural phenomena. In a way *Channels* functions as a unique contemporary sound archive for near death experience, without ever revealing its collector's standpoint. Hiller never explicitly reveals her own thoughts, instead she enhances the metaphor of 'standing by' through the blue screen produced when a monitor is placed in 'standby' mode, creating a metaphor for the purgatorial space between life and death.

When discussing the work Hiller also described how the blue screen on a computer is often referred to as the death screen, but for televisions it is only indicative of standby. Noting this nuance and its affective resonances with the material at hand, Hiller was further enamored to discover that all televisions do not share a universal blue screen, instead each has its own individual hue, a personality of sorts.³⁶ Through this translation the bank of screens in *Channels* suddenly becomes personified with the spectrum of blue lights evoking individual stories. This is enhanced through the animation of each voice through an oscilloscope. The peaks and troughs of the voice create a unique pattern undulating between crescendos of voices and moments of clarity when individual stories take center stage. The work swings between an overwhelming and impenetrable chorus and intimate pockets of revelation enhanced by a lack of visual stimuli. *Channels* forces an intimacy with its audience through sound, as Susan Hiller comments, "sound touches the ear in contrast to something that we see does not touch our eyes. It sets up a close relationship with those speaking".³⁷ The use of television as a medium for messages also becomes evocative of the historical links between technology and the occult. Hiller makes reference to the experiments of Konstantin Raudive in *Channels* through exploring the idea that voices of the dead can be recorded through the medium of white noise.³⁸

³⁶ Susan Hiller interviewed by Kasper Bech Dyg in connection with her exhibition 'Channels' at Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, February 2015. Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, accessed 25 August 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhBpq1suHQM>

³⁷ Susan Hiller interviewed by Richard Grayson, *Talking Art at Tate Modern*, London, June 14, 2008, accessed 25 August 2015 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/susan-hiller-talking-art>

³⁸ Stefan Andriopoulos, "Psychic Television", in *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel and Optical Media* (New York: Zone Books, 2013) pp. 139-157

There is something unmistakably removed about *Channels*, provoked by the fact that as an audience member you are always mediated by a screen. This makes the work feel disjointed in parts but it also functions as a reminder of Hiller's collection of each story from the removed space of the web. Hiller curates each story in order to create a sense of cohesiveness in experience that stands outside of accepted norms. The uniqueness of her approach is to remain impartial toward the artifacts and narratives that feature in all of her works. Hiller does not set out to answer questions about the subjects selected, she aims to provoke with the purpose of inciting more questions.³⁹ It is this unbiased move of placing the audience in her own position, a between place of 'undecidableness', that provides Hiller's work with the platform to unsettle.⁴⁰

In a similar terrain to *Channels*, is the installation *Witness*, 2000 (Fig. 10), an immersive work that focuses on eyewitness reports of UFO sightings, exploring the crossovers between the visible and the visionary.⁴¹ Once again, Hiller used as source material accounts found on the Internet, she describes the web as a new alternative confessional for those who have been witness to extraordinary sightings. The Internet provides a space for those who need to know that people are listening to their experiences, even if that act of listening takes place through the disconnected interface of a screen.⁴² Listening takes on an empowered status in the work *Witness*, developing an intimate and empathetic connection between the audience and the narratives delivered. The intensity of this intimacy is heightened through the delivery of the audio through three hundred and fifty miniature speakers suspended from the ceiling. The audience is free to move through the installation, placing their ear next to one or several of the speakers providing a continuously changing effect. Dependent upon proximity, either one voice or a layering of many can be heard and when at a distance a whispering of mass voices becomes an evocative metaphor for the suppression of irrational human experiences in contemporary society. The installation

³⁹ Dr Janet McKenzie, "Susan Hiller: Channels", *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture*, accessed 25 August 2015 <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/susan-hiller-channels>

⁴⁰ See the transcript "Susan Hiller in conversation with Roger Malbert", *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 5, Spring (2007) p. 8

⁴¹ Susan Hiller, *Witness*, (London: Artangel Publishing, 2000)

⁴² "Susan Hiller in conversation with Roger Malbert", p.14

of *Witness* has a very particular layout that uses the shape of a cross within a wider circular perimeter. From a distance this design creates a playful reference to the stereotyped descriptions of unidentified flying objects, further enhanced by the glimmering speakers in a midnight blue light, but for Hiller the structuring also generates an important reflection on religious symbolism. She states, "the cross in the circle is crucial because the stories are examples of contemporary visionary experience. Only today people see UFOs where once they saw angels".⁴³ The narratives depicted include a variety of visionary experiences, from seeing beings to bright lights. Simultaneously comical and intriguing, each narrative creates an odd reflection on the difficulty of expressing a visual experience that sits outside of rational thought. Recordings evidence the broad spectrum of descriptions, some of which fit with stereotyped visual identities of aliens entrenched through popular culture, "very handsome, hideous, very thin and luminous from inside, corpulent with four legs, like little dolls, almost a giant, large blue protozoa, hazy as though formed of cigarette smoke, head like a rugby ball, a reddish face and fine teeth."⁴⁴

The complexity of Hiller's work is in re-establishing sidelined cultural phenomena as subjects worthy of further reflection and tangential to this has been the role of women within such phenomena. Hiller has been vocal about the feminist context within which the topics of her work most frequently manifest, but it was through her 1999 installation *Psi Girls* that she directly addressed the representation of the supernatural female body within Hollywood film. (Fig. 11) *Psi Girls*, appropriates a number of film clips taken from five Hollywood movies including, Brian De Palma's *The Fury*, 1978, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, 1979, Mark L. Lester's *Firestarter*, 1984, Danny DeVito's *Matilda*, 1996 and Andrew Fleming's *The Craft*, 1996. Each film was selected for its depiction of a female character performing telekinesis, playing on the stereotype of young women being psychic and powerful.

Hiller's intervention is bold, vividly re-tinting each scene with a single hue of colour spanning red, yellow, blue, green and purple and standardized duration to two minutes to

⁴³ Kirstie Bevan, "Susan Hiller: Witness – Behind the Scenes", *Tate Blog*, 2 March 2011, accessed 21 August 2015 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/susan-hiller-witness-behind-scenes>

⁴⁴ An excerpt from some of the descriptions of unidentified beings recorded as part of *Witness*, see, Susan Hiller, "Lights, Objects, Beings", appendix in *Witness* (London: Artangel Publishing, 2000) accessed 25 August 2015 http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2000/witness/susan_hiller_the_three_kinds_of_ufo/susan_hiller_on_witness

create a series that runs sequentially. The clips are projected floor to ceiling in a sequence of five, filling a single wall and fueled by a dynamic soundtrack of strong rhythmical beats and handclaps created by the Gospel Choir of Canon's Cathedral, Charlotte, North Carolina. The effect of the euphoric soundtrack is a sweeping of the audience towards a pacing belief enhanced by the immersive scale of images and colour. The soundtrack lasts for a one-minute burst and is followed by a minute's silence concluding with a rotation of the projected images into a new order.⁴⁵ Hiller discusses the switch between experiencing images in silence and with sound as an attempt to echo her in-between standpoint. She articulates that when seen in silence the viewer can be more critical and interrogate the images but the addition of the pacing, almost evangelical, soundtrack sweeps the viewer towards a feeling of belief.

The title of the work references 'Psi' the name for aspects of the mind that can exert extra-perceptual effects, this includes telekinesis and clairvoyance. Hiller has spoken about *Psi Girls* as a metaphor for her own artistic practice, stating "It was a redemptive project to look at the shadow side of modernism, the mediumistic practices, to make sure they got acknowledged, which was the thing that Greenberg drove out, like trying to get rid of witchcraft and all the women."⁴⁶ The mediumistic practices that Hiller makes reference to, as unacknowledged undertones within artistic method offer the possibility of agency and the re-imagining of artistic practice as form of clairvoyance, clear-seeing. This clairvoyance is not irrational in its channeling of spiritual divination, in the case of Hilma af Klint or Georgiana Houghton but it speaks to Susan Hiller's approach of rethinking the presence of occultist sensibilities at the periphery of the social and making a space in which to contemplate their resonance.

The unconventional nature of thinking about a clairvoyance of contemporary art practice brings into focus the concept of channeling as a central feature of creative making. This provides space to unravel the persistence of terms such as intuition in the discussion of artistic methodology and question the role it has played in perpetuating the idea of artistic

⁴⁵ Susan Hiller, *Psi Girls: Susan Hiller*, exhibition catalogue (Sheffield: Site Gallery, 1999) as well as, Ann Gallagher, editor, *Susan Hiller* (London: Tate Britain, 2011) pp.96–7

⁴⁶ "Susan Hiller in conversation with Roger Malbert", p. 9

genius; a concept outmoded in contemporary thought. What evolves is a reconsideration of the relationship between artistic practice and intuition that takes into account the contemporary standpoint of 'not knowing' in creative practice.

iv. 'Not Knowing' in artistic practice

The concept of 'not knowing' that has recently been denoted as a constituent part of contemporary artistic production encompasses an unraveling of the prolific use of intuition as a descriptor for artistic methodology. The problematic concept of intuition was first introduced in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and it functioned as a component of the stages of consciousness, these being: 'the now' (intuition), sense-certainty, perception, understanding and, finally, pure knowledge.⁴⁷ In general terms this framework describes the stages through which one becomes acquainted with an object, in order to make sense of it; that is, in order to develop a reasoned relation to an object without losing the sensuous, immediacy of that encounter. In this respect Hegelian intuition is the immediate attempt to grasp an object - in the most basic embodied sense of sensual grasping - without having to provide a definite interpretation of that object. One could say it is exactly what artists' name 'gut feeling', the immediacy of a kind of unspecified 'knowing' provided through an interaction with material at first sight or touch. The knowledge produced in this initial interaction has for Hegel a sense certainty. It feels as though it has a richness of sensory inquiry but it remains abstract until it is sublated and dialectically synthesized to create the concrete form of sense certainty.⁴⁸

Hegel puts the question of immediacy, intuition and the sensuous as follows:

The artist must fashion his work not in the exclusively spiritual form of thought but within the sphere of intuition and feeling and, more

⁴⁷ G.W.F. Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). pp. 58-103. As well as, Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (USA: Northwestern University Press, 2000) pp. 3- 139.

⁴⁸ Sense-certainty (the embodiment of immediacy, 'the now', and intuition, is then further developed when counter-poised with 'Perception', then further, with the Understanding, and finally with Knowledge as the highest form of that encounter - an encounter which enables Knowledge to become the highest state of immediacy and also its 'ground'. The intricate discussion of this move goes beyond the scope of the argument pursued here; see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 58 -103.

precisely, in connection with sensuous material and in a sensuous medium. Therefore this artistic creation, like art throughout, includes in itself the aspect of immediacy and naturalness, and this aspect is which the subject cannot generate in himself but must find in himself as immediately given.⁴⁹

The abstract knowledge that Hegel speaks of as immediate, natural and accessed through intuition offers a way to unite the senses with intellect, but it does so through the question of genius.⁵⁰ The connection between intuition and genius can be traced through the history of metaphysics from Hegel to Kant and beyond, but the problem it creates in the discussion of artistic practice is that it perpetuates the stereotype of artistic genius.⁵¹ The relation of genius to artistic production can be read in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* as a channeling of the spirit of knowledge through the body, seemingly translating every artist into a medium. He outlines that fine art is a form of mediated nature and that nature itself *is* art, though a form of 'superhuman art'.⁵² In contrast, Maurice Blanchot argues that the idea of artistic genius is wholly self-satisfied, in his thinking the artist is never 'divinely possessed' in the creation of artwork but dispossessed through the labour of making it. Blanchot describes the work of an artist as a work of bad faith, in that the artwork made never becomes available to them. The intention that drives the production of artwork precludes an ability to set limitations and this results in the work of art never appearing finalized in the eyes of the artist; it could continue being developed infinitely.⁵³ The difficulty of not knowing when an artwork is finished is developed as a form of ventriloquism in David Goldblatt's writing. Goldblatt imagines that the artist loses their voice through an attempt to bring the work of art into being – giving it a voice of its own – resulting in the artist standing outside of him/herself, Goldblatt states: "In a work in progress the artists will be dealing with something very much like another voice... paint as

⁴⁹ G.W.F Hegel. *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art*, p.284

⁵⁰ G.W.F Hegel, *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M Knox. Volume 1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 280-289

⁵¹ G.W.F Hegel, "Common Ideas of Art" and "The Artist" in *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M Knox. Volume 1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 25-41, 280-289. J.N Findlay foreword to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by G.W F. Hegel. Translated by A.V. Miller. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). pp. v-xxx. See also, Carolee Schneemann, "On Intuition", in *Technologies of Intuition*, edited by Jennifer Fisher (Toronto: YYZBOOKS, 2006) pp.92-97

⁵² Immanuel Kant, "The relation of genius to taste", in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. Third Critique. Trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) p.173.

⁵³ Andrew Warstatt, "Unteachable and Unlearnable: The Ignorance of Artists" in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, pp.45-47

another voice and so on. Yet the source of this voice is no ordinary other, since it is the voice of ecstatic exchange – the voice... of the artist.”⁵⁴ Not only has the complexity of articulating artistic production led to the concept of the genius practitioner, but also a strange sort of mysticism related to artistic production. The development of ‘not knowing’ as a framework for making has disrupted this by working as shorthand for the consensus of artists over the necessity to embrace honest discussions of contemporary approaches to making. As Sol Lewitt famously stated, “Conceptual artists are Mystics rather than Rationalists. They leap to conclusions that Logic cannot reach...illogical judgments lead to new experience”; the journey that ensues from ‘not knowing’ forces a channeling of resources from a wild variety of places, producing the illogical but sensuous affects of contemporary art.⁵⁵

Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum have developed the concept of ‘not knowing’ within contemporary art practice, in the collaboratively edited book *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*.⁵⁶ Drawing on a variety of essays from practitioners and theorists the volume highlights the potential of not knowing as a moment within artistic production where play and experimentation thrive. The territory of the unknown is denoted as a positive and desired state for artists where anything can happen; holding the potential to surprise, provoke curiosity and render accepted logics useless. Not knowing speaks to the potential of art to become a space in which things can happen and it establishes the necessity of curiosity and experimentation in developing artistic practice. In an echo of Socrates’ belief that wisdom is born out of knowing that you simply do not know, not knowing but continuing to make leaps into the void by beginning a journey with an unspecified destination.⁵⁷

Equally, the relationship between art and research and the acknowledgement that ‘making’ is an equivalent form of ‘knowing’, relies on an entirely different way of thinking about the production of art, as Simon Sheikh elaborates, viewing art production as knowledge

⁵⁴ David Goldblatt, *Art and Ventriloquism* (London: Routledge, 2006) p.4

⁵⁵ Sol Lewitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p. 75

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum, Eds., *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013)

⁵⁷ Simon Sheikh, ‘Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research’ *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*. Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp. 1-8. See also, Plato, ‘Apology’ in *Five Dialogues*, second edition. Translated by G. M. A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) pp. 21-44

production requires a different set of parameters for discussion, which are yet to be established. The evaluation of artwork as a form of knowledge production requires thinking about art as a mode in which ‘things can happen’, rather than its previous understanding as a thing or object that simply exists. Central to this is challenging ways of knowing, asking the difficult questions about how knowledge comes to be accepted as ‘truth’. Finding out *how* we collectively come to know rather than the simpler acceptance of what is already known or not known.⁵⁸ The definition of not knowing in lay terms could very easily imply negative connotations but this is not inherent in the context of artistic experimentation. In this circumstance not knowing can be acknowledged as a positive and sought out catalyst for the beginning of production. Rachel Jones develops not knowing as a condition of life, a necessary status for successfully grasping what has not yet come to fruition, whilst preventing the domination of the past. In her thinking, artistic endeavor is the risking of not knowing what comes next and discovering through the condition of transformation. The transformations that unfold are part of the becoming of the artwork and they call on different methods of knowing.⁵⁹ She states:

in the absence of knowing what something is or where we are going, we draw on many other kinds of knowledge to open paths forward: *practical knowledge*, in the Kantian sense of knowing what to do, our moral sensitivity and Judgement; *bodily knowledge*, born of the repeated gestures of habit and acculturation; as well as what Plato calls *techné*, the craft and skill involved in making.⁶⁰

What is central to Jones’ concept of not knowing is the importance of materiality, learning to know through material interaction. In her analogy, material has the ability to speak of the forms it can hold and those that it can’t, and it is in the attuning of the artist’s ear to listen that knowledge from material experimentation emerges. Rebecca Fortnum enhances this point through her description of the phenomena of an artist’s medium taking on a force of its own. No matter what the material, there is a consensus that artwork can be guided by the medium

⁵⁸ Simon Sheikh ‘Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research’ *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*. Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009. P. 6

⁵⁹ Rachel Jones, ‘On the value of not knowing, wonder, beginning again and letting be’ in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. Ed. Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013) pp. 16-28.

⁶⁰ Rachel Jones, ‘On the value of not knowing, wonder, beginning again and letting be’, p.27

through which it is made without conscious decision. Fortnum states: “the artist may ‘suspend’ their conscious deliberations, creating a sense for them that the medium has its own volition and that the work ‘talks back’ to them.”⁶¹ The notion of an artwork ‘talking back’ can not help but evoke a sense of magical transformation which echoes the reference made by Goldblatt to the ventriloquism of art. But, it also highlights the difficulty of writing about a work of art by asserting the necessity of waiting until it articulates itself in language.

The ripple that has been created by the concept of not knowing in artistic practice is a closer look at the ways artists judge and articulate method. One approach has been to critique the unusual linguistic manoeuvres that practitioners employ when speaking about their work. In particular, Tom Holert highlights the regularly occurring expression ‘I was interested in’ as a phraseology that has become embedded in artistic discourse.⁶² Differing from what is simply ‘of interest’, Holert coins ‘artistic interest’ as a verbal tool that can be used to infer the rigor of artistic production, whilst acknowledging the uncertainty of experimentation. The term enables a laying claim to the importance a certain ‘interest’ has had in structuring an artwork, or a whole body of works. It provides a stage for conversations into artistic process, which otherwise may be inaccessible to the artist. Isabelle Stengers has also remarked on the ambiguity of the term ‘interest’, stating:

Either we use it as what explains our questions, or we affirm that to be interested by something has the character of an event, since it gives to that something a power it does not generally possess: the power to cause us to think, feel and wonder, the power to have us wondering how practically to relate to it, how to pose relevant questions about it.⁶³

On the surface, the concept of wonder appears to fully embrace the positive connotations of ‘not knowing’ in artistic practice because it speaks of the curiosity toward materials that establishes during experimental modes of making and imagines how things could be different.

⁶¹ Rebecca Fortnum ‘Creative Accounting: Not Knowing in Talking and Making’ in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. Ed. Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013) p. 76

⁶² Tom Holert, “‘I was Interested In . . .’ Interest and Intuition in Art Discourse” (paper presented at the Figurations of Knowledge, European Conference of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts, Berlin, 3 June 2008) p. 1 Accessed 27th January 2015 <http://frontdeskapparatus.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/TH.pdf>

⁶³ Isabelle Stengers “Wondering about Materialism” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Australia: re-press, 2011) p. 374

However, the difference between the terminology of 'wonder' and 'not knowing' is that the latter can not escape the negative implication of its meaning in lay terms. To not know something in common understanding implies a certain level of ignorance and for me this created problems when using it as a term to describe methods of making. I strongly felt that the consequence of using 'not knowing' as a framework to collectively describe artistic practice was the continued proliferation of stereotypes such as the 'mystical practitioner' and the problematic reliance on intuition as an all encompassing term for artistic method. It was clear from reading Jones and Fortnum's discussions on 'not knowing' that what was intended by the phrase was a recognition of the necessity of not forcing ideas and allowing natural connections between materials and concepts to form, a position which reflected my own methods of working, but the term itself left me cold. Reflecting upon these issues highlighted the possibility of developing a new concept that focused on clairvoyance as a potential framework to discuss contemporary artistic practice. The pre-existing categories of clairvoyance, which build upon the five bodily senses, provide a unique lens through which to take account of the status of 'not knowing' in artistic practice whilst providing an opportunity to more successfully convey its intended meaning. In particular the term 'claircognizance' meaning 'clear knowing' emerges as a more pertinent descriptor for the knowledge embedded in practice.

V. Towards a Clairvoyance of Contemporary Art Practice

To begin the journey toward outlining the clairvoyance of artistic practice, it is necessary to frame the various 'clairs' of clairvoyance in their sensory categories, providing scope for their application in artistic practice. The first use of the term clairvoyance, with its spiritualist connotation, was recorded in England in 1847, in a personal letter from the medium Jane Baillie Welsh Carlyle. But its development into permutations of the human sensory faculties really flourished within the context of theosophy.⁶⁴ The term 'clair' derives from the French

⁶⁴ "clairvoyance, n.". OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33658?redirectedFrom=Clairvoyance&> (accessed March 31st, 2015). See also, F. W. H. Myers, "Glossary of Terms Used in Psychical Research," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, XII (1896-1897) pp. 165-174.

meaning *clear* and as a prefix to voyance 'clairvoyance' can be interpreted as a form of clear seeing, a visual clarity imbued with the supernatural ability to see beyond the parameters of natural vision.⁶⁵ Clairvoyance also acts as the overarching category for the specific sensory capacities within mediumship, which include claircognizance (knowing), clairsentience (feeling), clairaudience (hearing), clairalience (smelling) and clairgustance (tasting). Thus the 'clairs' depict clarity of the human sensory categories of sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing through supernaturally enhanced means. Claircognizance (clear knowing), stands slightly apart from the other categories of clairvoyance, in that it outlines a form of knowing that exists without material evidence. The discussion of 'not knowing' in the production of art appears to have an affinity with claircognizance in the form of an artistic clarity of thought. But, claircognizance has an additional lucidity, which avoids the pitfalls of the negative connotation of 'not knowing' and instead speaks of the clarity of thought brought about through practical experimentation.

The curiosity of the 'clairs' offers a parallel to the curiosity of artistic experimentation with material and it is pertinent to examine each deferential to see how individual sensory aspects underpin material components of creative practice. Beginning with clairsentience (clear feeling) it is possible to make a connection to touch, this particular form of mediumship relies on physical feeling and is a variant of clairtangency (clear touch), which specifically relates to the gaining of knowledge through the physical touch of an object. Clairaudience (clear hearing) describes the ability of a medium to clearly hear the voice of a spirit and ventriloquize their body as a channel to deliver messages. The remaining faculties to which the clarity of clair has been attached are the less tangible of the senses, taste and smell. Clairalience (clear smelling) also known as clairolfactory is the particular clarity of scent and its addition to the preceding categories moves towards a completion of all five sensory capacities of the body: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling.

The subcategories of clairvoyance build toward a sensuousness of art practice that pulls on tactility, auditory, atmospheric and fleshy nuances, but the suggestion of a methodological framework that incorporates the categories of clairvoyance is not an attempt

⁶⁵ Gustave Geley, *Clairvoyance and Materialization*. Translated by Stanley De Brath, Kessinger Legacy Reprints (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2011) p.29

to re-instate the notion of the artist as supernaturally gifted. Instead it attempts to express, in the sense of Susan Hekman's mangle, the close intertwining of the language that surrounds the practices of art and mediumship, specifically the centrality of the body and its senses. It works as a metaphor for the importance of privileging the senses over language and it speaks to the sentiments of new materialist feminism in placing the body center stage. What is left to establish is the effect a framework of clairvoyance might have on the ability of a work of art to *assemble* what will be denoted here, as a field of fascination.⁶⁶

The ability of an artwork to fascinate has many shared characteristics with the compulsion to watch experienced in the field of mediumship. Both situations have a generative logic that avoids the limitations of accepted notions of normality, rational/irrational, truth/falsity. Instead, the work of art and the act of mediumship initiate a space and a sense of their own making, working from a different point of logic that could be described as 'nonsensical,' elaborating the Deleuzian discussion of the condition of truth; Deleuze states: "The condition of truth is not opposed to the false, but to the absurd: that which is without signification or that which may be neither true nor false".⁶⁷ The nonsense logic that propels a work of art into making sense - without really making sense (in any known logical way) equates to the ability of mediumship to conjure a substantial fascination, through the nonsense logic of speaking with the dead. What is at play in both the experience of art and the experience of mediumship is a unique field of fascination that functions within the nonsensical whilst generating logic of its own.

Fascination within the field of mediumship has little to do with whether a clairvoyant reading is true or false; the reasons for visiting or watching a clairvoyant at work vary greatly. But, the proliferation of psychic television channels, books and magazine columns implies that the appetite for prediction in contemporary society remains embedded as an irrational norm. There are several aspects that need to be taken into consideration when talking of society's appetite and curiosity for mediumship; these include comfort, familiarity, prediction and the evolving category of pure entertainment, for which contemporary mediumship now

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translation and foreword by Brian Massumi. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) pp. 3-25

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.18

provides a majority proportion. It was through an engagement with the mediumship of Sally Morgan that led to the production of a piece of my own artwork called *Spectral Spectatorship*. The questions raised through the process of making this work seeded the basis for this thesis, as well as the development of practical work that explored the possibility of assembling a field fascination in art.

The artwork *Spectral Spectatorship* was inspired by witnessing the live performance of Sally Morgan, a British medium who has gained celebrity status through mainstream television programmes such as 'Sally Morgan Star Psychic' and 'Psychic Sally: On The Road'. Morgan's career had always fascinated me, through playing on the history of the empowerment of women through spiritualist practice, she had forged, in a contemporary framework, an international reputation and company, which marked a new era in media saturated mediumship for entertainment. The motivation for seeing Morgan live, having watched many of her programmes, was a curiosity to see her performance unmediated. The question of belief was a moot point, if not slightly tinged with cynicism for the scenario of talking to the dead. What was not anticipated was the overwhelming proportion of audience members who actively sought comfort from Morgan's messages. This provided a different kind of clarity to my own skepticism, which had facilitated a viewing of Morgan's performance purely for entertainment. What developed in its place was a magnified fascination for the abject manner in which mourning audience members were willingly exploited, disillusioned by a form of suspended disbelief. It cannot be overlooked that mediumship provides a unique form of comfort for those seeking consolation for bereavement, even if it is acknowledged that this solace may be falsified, evocative of Deleuze's concept of a false proposition equally holding its own sense or signification.⁶⁸ During periods of mourning, false propositions are more easily accepted, through the sheer willingness and desire to make the false claim true.

The suspension of disbelief that occurs during periods of mourning facilitates the acceptance of scenarios that in normal circumstances would be considered non-sensical. The desire to remain connected with what is lost persists as an overriding sensation. Therefore the comfort that mediumship provides derives from its ability to maintain a seemingly living

⁶⁸ Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*, 22.

relationship with the object of loss. It is this imagined relationship that Freud refers to in

Mourning and Melancholia as a clinging to the lost object, he states:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.⁶⁹

What Freud initiates in this discussion is the overwhelming power of the desire to remain connected with the lost object. This is enough to create a different form of logic that sits outside of rational thought processes. The making of sense in the practice of mediumship seemingly sits within this plane, it derives its power from the sheer willingness of an individual to believe it is true, as Deleuze elaborates, “sense resides in the beliefs (or desires) of the person who expresses”.⁷⁰ The fact that mediumship prevents the successful recovery from grief is never in question; the rational acceptance that the person being mourned has gone and cannot return is wholly ignored in a desperate suspension of disbelief.

The fascination generated by the abject exploitation of grief in such absurd circumstances was enforced by the recognition that Morgan’s constructed stage identity referenced tropes of womanhood, with an emphasis on the caring and maternal. The embodiment of a character, comical and self-deprecating, presented a difficult juxtaposition with the highly emotional audience interaction, which oscillated from highly poignant to raucous laughter within seconds. The experience of seeing this first hand forced a reflection on the performative qualities of Morgan’s mediumship and its ability to enthrall even the skeptical. The drive to unpick the stagecraft of Morgan’s performance manifested in a process inspired by Susan Hiller’s use of found material from the web. I began collecting every online video I could find of Morgan’s live shows from the professionally filmed to the amateurishly captured, in an attempt to build enough material to find gestural repeats in her performance.

This use of found footage, particularly the professionally filmed videos, presented an

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001) P.244.

⁷⁰ Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*, p. 21.

interesting contention in their status as already edited - with an unsurprising bias toward successful readings. The consideration of my own position as an editor led to a strong sense of not wanting to implicate an obvious opinion in the work. My interaction with the footage was not based on a desire to enforce belief or expose disillusionment, it was closer to a practical working through of the experience I had undergone seeing Morgan live, as well as an observation on the meaning of mediumship in a contemporary context. Much like Derrida's discussions of the impossibility of a complete meaning, the experience of seeing Morgan live made clear the varying desires mediumship fulfilled for different parties, for me it was entertainment and tangentially a body of artwork, for others it was curiosity, counseling and wish fulfillment.⁷¹ The meaning of mediumship is postponed dependent upon the relations in which it sits, the experiences, belief systems, desires of the individual creates its own set of relations to which the meaning of mediumship defers. Again, this is evocative of Derrida's comments on *différance*, he states: "*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name "origin" no longer suits it."⁷² *Différance* is that which cannot be named, cannot be given fixed meaning, it is the nuanced practice and interpretation of mediumship. The manner of enacting this thought, manifested in a process of editing, separating the dialogue in each frame to create a fragmentation of the conversations between Morgan and her audience. What guided this was a desire to examine the differential of language and meaning within the wider performance of Morgan's contemporary mediumship.

The process of editing using fast paced jump cuts to dissect the narrative, left behind a large array of dismembered dialogue that had a natural malleability. The original footage now sat in two camps, Morgan's script and her audience's responses. The method of rebuilding a pattern of dialogue was led by a heuristic approach of mixing moments of coherence with more impenetrable sections of non-sense, and through this process fragments slowly began to build a dynamic. The decision to keep the dialogue of Morgan on a separate track to that of her audience facilitated a closer study of the repetitive gestures in Morgan's performance whilst in isolation. Through repeatedly watching back footage during

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated with additional notes by Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982) pp. 1-27

⁷² Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, p.11

the editing process it became apparent that pockets of meaning were emerging in places unintended, reinforcing the complexity of Derrida's *différance* and the multifaceted dynamic of mediumship, as an event that exists without a totalising explanation; its sense emerges entirely dependent on the context within which it is read.⁷³ The splitting of Sally Morgan from her audience additionally highlighted the spectrum of emotions that permeate the act of mediumship, sometimes hilarious, often poignant and occasionally uncomfortable, its staging encapsulates a microcosm of experiences.

What developed in the latter stages of editing was a questioning of how each dissection could work in relationship to another. I wondered if it were possible to evoke moments of coherence that self generated beyond my control. This resulted in the decision to install the work as a suspended dual sided projection screen. The layering of tracks in their newly edited form was created through two separate projections, one on either side of the screen. Although the projectors were synchronized each loop of footage appeared to generate a new variation of dialogue, a nuanced version of the previous sequence, which now appeared to occur between Morgan and her audience. This effect evoked the screen as a metaphorical conduit for live messages in the absence of the physical body of a medium, physically dividing each projection but also acting as a moment of cohesion with the images bleeding into one another. The fluidity of *Spectral Spectatorship's* fragmented dialogue again echoes the play of language that Derrida refers to when speaking about *différance*, "what is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that "produces" – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these differences, these effects of difference."⁷⁴ The newly formulated interplay of medium and audience was further enhanced by the intentional positioning of the screen at an angle in the space. This generated a circular pathway that invited movement around the screen causing an ongoing interference with the projected images. Viewers cutting across the space impair either side of the projector as they move, creating a sense of quarrelling between images.

⁷³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Corrected Edition. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) pp.1-43

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, p.11

The establishing of a persona in contemporary mediumship is something that also pre-occupied the making of *Spectral Spectatorship*, observing the language, dress and physical performance of Morgan to expose her stagecraft. The importance of a clairvoyant's demeanor is being able to successfully portray the messages received through mediumship, but this requires a multiplicity of performances. The audience not only anticipates the expression of physical characteristics of those channeled, but there is also a honing of personality for the medium themselves. This is where the privileging of women as a peculiarity of mediumship becomes most interesting. In order to create an atmosphere, conducive to the often-poignant moments generated, a sense of familiarity is vital and this is often reliant upon the stereotyped attributes of womanhood. Whether matronly or mothering in manner, the ability to operate within the language of familiarity and trustworthiness via a constructed external identity is common ground for mediums and one that brings into question performativity and issues of embodiment, as Peggy Phelan suggests:

Performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the "real" physical matter of "the performing body" and the psychic experience of what it is to be embodied. Like a rickety bridge swaying under too much weight, performance keeps one anchor on the side of the corporeal (the body Real) and one on the side of the psychic Real. Performance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between.⁷⁵

The manipulation of found footage made it easier to cut through the façade of identity Morgan had built around tropes of maternal womanhood but it also generated interesting reflections on the use of a working class demeanor when in dialogue with her audience. This enactment has always jarred with the stadium tours, television shows and celebrity readings that scale Morgan's position as "Britain's best loved psychic" and the image of an approachable, slightly overweight 'everywoman' has most recently been turned on its head, with her surgery to install a gastric band. Having seen live performances both before and after this surgery the change in stage demeanor is quite remarkable reinforcing the centrality of appearance in undertaking the profession of mediumship.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 167.

⁷⁶ Official website of Sally Morgan, accessed 9 September 2015, http://www.sallymorgan.tv/psychicteam/?gclid=CP6k_7On6scCFUY8Gwodh6gHZQ

The conscious decision to implement a metaphorical conduit for channeling, in the presence of a suspended projection screen, established the exhibition space as the auditorium in which Morgan's performances usually occur. (Fig. 12 - 14) The theatricality of the environments within which psychic shows take place adds to the impact of their effect and the angled positioning of the screen echoed this in employing a tool used within magical illusions to prove that nothing is being hidden – the 360 degree spin to evidence an empty vanishing box. This is enhanced through the sensitivity of the projected images to viewer's shadows as they move across the space, the fascination created by witnessing Morgan's performance is constantly broken by an interruption of the image, much like the interference of a person walking past the projection lens in a cinema, immediately breaks the illusion of being elsewhere. The field of fascination in this work is intentionally set up to be broken, evoking the theatricality of staging at the core of mediumship.

Whilst *Spectral Spectatorship* presented a nuanced work that remained ambiguous in its disclosure of my own standpoint on Morgan's mediumship, the subsequent work, *V for Val*, engaged with the more lighthearted result of cold reading and fishing within Morgan's performance. The work followed on from the process of editing already established, working through hours of footage to trim out any male or female names called out by Morgan to her audience, in a variety of performative ways. The continuation of the use of a sharp jump cut generated a fast paced edit that provided a rapid glimpse of the humorous theatricality prevalent in contemporary mediumship. At just thirty seconds duration, the context for the work is established through the format of Morgan's delivery and brief glimpses of the dress, location and staging of each clip. Yet, very few miss the interpretation of cold reading, highlighting the potency of subliminal leads such as clothing, lighting, tone of voice, movement and staging in the art of mediumship. *V for Val* also marked a shift in tone from *Spectral Spectatorship* establishing mediumship within the context of whimsical entertainment. The developing audience for mediumship that is located purely within entertainment also opens up the wider remit of prediction and its daily nuances within contemporary society. Although predictions for horoscopes and the weather seem partially removed from the theatricality of live stage mediumship, they help to generate a similar effect of calm through the simple proposition of being able to know what to expect.

Knowing events in one's life before they come to pass provides an unparalleled reassurance and a confirmation that whatever has happened or is happening will eventually manifest in a specific way. This form of prediction has a strong link with curiosity and in particular a curiosity that is a form of appetite.⁷⁷ The idea of prediction relies heavily on the belief that something can be predicted, in an echo of Lyotard's libidinal philosophy, reality can be thought of as made up from unpredictable happenings and events, rather than from a rigid or predictable structure.⁷⁸ In this line of thinking prediction is impossible; there is no interpretation that can accurately ascertain happenings ahead of their occurrence. When a prediction is attempted there always remains a residual element, an amount of excess or left over that cannot be encompassed. In this formulation, the concept of prediction presents an interesting contention to the discussion of 'not knowing' in artistic practice, and the two terms become explicitly entangled in *Telemistica*, a work by the artist Christian Jankowski.

Commissioned to create an artwork for the Venice Biennale, it is rumored that Jankowski had little idea of what work he would make prior to arriving in Italy. It is alleged that he spent days walking the streets to find inspiration, before finally discovering the popularity of Italian television mediums. Jankowski decided to use these television psychics to provide predictions for how successful his artwork would be at the Biennale. The process for making the work involved contacting mediums during live call in shows and recording the outcome. None of the mediums used were aware that the resultant footage would in fact become the submitted work of art, but all provided a positive prediction for the success of the piece.⁷⁹

Jankowski's infiltration of live television, where the audience is left unaware, is a central feature of much of his work and it provides him with a privileged position of being able to question the line between art and entertainment, a line that he regularly asserts is imaginary.⁸⁰ Jankowski instead sees his work as a critique of the contemporary art world,

⁷⁷ Andrew Benjamin "Curiosity, Fascination: Time and Speed" and Sue Golding "Curiosity" both in Sue Golding, eds. *The Eight Technologies of otherness*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) pp. 3-10, 11-26

⁷⁸ Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*, pp. 253-254.

⁷⁹ Harald Falckenberg, "Thank you, God. Thank you for making this possible: Christian Jankowski's contribution to the Pathology of the Culture Industry" in *Parkett No. 81* (Zurich: Parkett, 2008) pp. 76-81

⁸⁰ Christian Jankowski. *Telemistica. The Holy Artwork. Talk Athens.* *DeSingel International Arts Campus*, accessed 9 September 2015,

using humor to expose the day-to-day realities of life and demystifying the elevated position of the artist. In his piece *The Holy Artwork*, Jankowski broached the world of televangelical shows and working in partnership with Pastor Peter Spencer of the Harvest Fellowship Church in Texas, he created a performative intervention that was broadcast live as part of Pastor Spencer's weekly sermon. In preparation for the work Jankowski met with several televangelists, over thirty in total, in order to find the right collaborator and it is rumored that Pastor Spencer was finally settled upon after preaching to Jankowski about the divine inspiration of the artist.⁸¹

The exhibited work exists as a document of the broadcasted footage transmitted as part of Spencer's televangelical show. The piece begins with a video montage introducing the widespread popularity and appetite for evangelicalism in the US, followed by Pastor Spencer's introduction to Jankowski as his 'special guest'. The event is filmed on studio cameras regularly used to broadcast but during his introduction footage cuts to a hand held device, providing an eyewitness perspective of Jankowski walking up to greet Pastor Spencer by shaking his hand. Almost instantaneously the image cuts back to the studio to show Jankowski collapsed on the floor. The performance continues with Jankowski remaining lifeless on stage, a prop enigmatically propelled by Pastor Spencer's delivery of the pre-written sermon, scripted by Jankowski entitled *The Holy Artwork*,

To reach into the hearts of those watching one-dimensionally and let them know that there are many dimensions to the body, soul and spirit...Let this art, this Holy Art, last beyond even our lives ...May this artwork last and continue to teach the message. May it even expand our definition of art. And let this artwork - Father, God, we pray - question and challenge the art world and bring it to a level of spiritual dimension. Father, we want this Holy Artwork to make people in The Church understand the value of contemporary art, and we pray that this artwork, this Holy Artwork, will be a bridge between art, religion and television.⁸²

The critique of the theatrical environment of the televangelical, within which Jankowski has chosen to set the work, does not detract from the humor so evidently intended to provoke a

<https://www.desingel.be/en/programme/dedonderdagen/7055/Christian-Jankowski-Telemistica-The-Holy-Artwork-Talk-Athens>

⁸¹Imogen O'Rorke, "Christian Jankowski, *The Holy Artwork*, 2001" *Tate*, November 2009, accessed 10 September 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jankowski-the-holy-artwork-t12910/text-summary>

⁸²Christian Jankowski, *The Holy Artwork: Christian Jankowski*, exhibition booklet (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2002) pp. 220-221

re-evaluation of the status of the spiritual in art. Inspiration for the work has been claimed by Jankowski to come from Juan Bautista Maino's *Saint Dominic in Soriano Ri*, which illustrates an artist collapsed in front of his unfinished painting whilst an angel completes the work on his behalf.⁸³ Jankowski satirically throws mud at the status of artistic genius and spiritual divination in both *Telemistica* and *The Holy Artwork* but in doing so he also establishes the proliferation of occult phenomena within society, similar to Susan Hiller's *Psi Girls* and the development of my own artworks *Spectral Spectatorship* and *V for Val* the success of his work relies on the ability to subvert found material and re-present it as a critical comment which undermines the very nature of the material selected.

This chapter sought to establish the context of the materiality of the body in mediumship/channeling in the framework of artistic practice, discussing how female practitioners such as Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton can be understood to have established independent artistic careers unusual to their social status and time period through the façade of spiritualism. An overview of the current renaissance in interest in their practices echoes a broader recognition of female practitioners making work on the periphery of occult phenomena in society. In a contemporary capacity, Susan Hiller and her conception of paraconceptualism as a field of practice that takes into account the strange privileging of women within issues of the occult, lead the move toward better understanding the relationship between, women, art and the irrational in culture. Finally, the discussion of 'not knowing' as a methodological approach to artistic production facilitated a consideration of how terminology including channeling and intuition have a shared use in art and mediumship, making it possible to critically discuss a clairvoyance of contemporary artistic practice which privileges the sensory capacities of the 'clairs' in material production and puts forward 'claircognizance' as a more appropriate descriptor for artistic methodology. The discussion of the start of my own artistic practice and its integral development in the seeding of this thesis now sets the stage to underpin how fascination functions within my own artistic practice.

⁸³ Christoph Jankowski and Suzette Lee, *Dramensatz: Christian Jankowski* (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2003) pp.15–17

Chapter Three

Assembling a Field of Fascination in Contemporary Art

*It was not knowing how not to look. Fascination was a holding of the eye that forced it there.*¹

The definition of fascination that I will establish here relies upon two nuanced counterparts, curiosity and abjection. In common use the term fascination has been exacting in its connotation of bewitchment by denoting the power of an object, person, or moment to completely take over the senses and hold a viewer dumfounded.² This state characteristically implies a temporary abandonment of control over the senses, a metaphorical echo of the 'not knowing' attuned to artistic production. In my own approach to making work, fascination fundamentally underpinned my approach to selecting it was by trusting the curiosity I had for specific images, narratives and materials found within the archival research I had done, as well as additional found material that the seeds for new work germinated. The time spent collating material and experimenting with varying methods of appropriation in my practice never felt akin to 'not knowing' but it more closely aligned to a claircognizance or 'clear knowing' about how work would or could develop. Andrew Benjamin's description of fascination became particularly relevant to my formulation of claircognizance through its inclusion of a discussion of abandoning oneself through the release of apriori knowledge, arguing that such a position requires a certain form of spacing.³ He states:

The particular of fascination is almost self-defined. It need not reach beyond itself – demanding a form of actual potential incorporation – in order that it be what it is. Here particularity will announce itself. Part of the particular, part of what holds it in place, is space. However, the space in question is not that which would otherwise be defined as an absence which came to be filled; space as empty. Here, space is an activity. Spacing holds the object in place by defining and maintaining a place in which fascination can reign.⁴

¹ Andrew Benjamin, "Curiosity, Fascination: Time and Speed", in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, ed. Sue Golding (New York: Routledge: 1997) p. 4.

² *The casting of a spell; sorcery, enchantment; an instance of this, a spell, incantation* "fascination, n." OED Online. September 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68366?redirectedFrom=fascination>(accessed October 28, 2014).

³ Benjamin, "Curiosity, Fascination: Time and Speed", p. 4.

⁴ Benjamin, "Curiosity, Fascination: Time and Speed", p.7

It is the 'space' in which fascination reigns as outlined by Benjamin that I would like to build upon in this chapter, developing a definition of a *field of fascination* that is specific to the work of art. The ability of an artwork to fasten onto you, to hold your attention, to provoke questions and generate its own logic results in a fascination equivalent to what I will argue is the 'psychic moment'. In this context, the 'psychic moment' can be understood as the experience of being absorbed by an overwhelming sense of curiosity, in which the ground of knowing is temporarily destabilized, resulting in a moment of sensuous clarity. The development of this definition into a particular form of fascination that speaks to the work of art facilitates a discussion of the ability of an artwork to resonate with a broad spectrum of references without being explicit. The necessity of terming it a 'field' of fascination is a desire to establish this entanglement of references. The expression *psychic moment* also implies an explicit theatricality in its relationship to the staging of psychic mediumship encompassing spectacle. This moment shapes a very specific type of power that only theatrical mediumship can produce, whilst also delineating the unique form of compulsion that has curiosity as an inherent characteristic.

The development of a field of fascination that denotes an effect akin to that of the psychic moment speaks to the ability of an artwork to establish a moment of compulsive looking, as well as a generative logic that sits outside of rational understanding. It is not for the viewer to make sense of an artwork or to fully understand its meaning, the very nature of art is to dwell in the moment of its own articulacy, the co-presence of sense and non-sense visually situated. The difficulty of constantly trying to find a finite understanding for an artwork is a metaphorical digging down to the next layer of the ground without realizing that the ground only gives the impression of depth.⁵ This does not imply shallowness but a destabilization of ground in the traditional concept of grounding knowledge.⁶

The connection between the fascination experienced in the making of a work of art and the experiencing of an equivalent to the psychic moment consequentially sets up a relationship to the gallery space as a particular form of theatrical space. This echoes the

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*. Third Edition. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees, G. H. Von Wright. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) p .333

⁶ Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012) pp. 173-221.

problematizing of the gallery space's unique form of power in Brian O'Doherty's rigorous contextualizing of the white cube. In O'Doherty's thinking the gallery has always been spoken about in terms of the transcendental and this problematically raises the work of art towards spiritual status, he states: "the problem with transcendental principles is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one. It is this other world, or access to it, that the white cube represents."⁷ He goes on to elaborate that the force fields within the chamber of the white cube are so powerful that once art is removed from these settings it returns to a secular status. He states: "equally, things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion."⁸ The implication of O'Doherty's comment that the artwork becomes a medium through which ideas manifest aided by spaces such as the tradition of the white cube gallery space, lends itself to the concept of the *psychic moment* in art and its translation into a field of fascination. In Benjamin's definition of fascination an insistent hold is placed on the viewer, which "yields a me that is not just mine" a statement that could be taken as a metaphor for channeling. To view the artwork as a medium through which ideas are channeled could equally be used as a practical description for the broad reference points that come together to create a fascination between the viewer and the artwork.⁹

This is evocative of John Paul Ricco's concept of the blank stare. Ricco elaborates, in reference to Deleuze, that the event of perception occurs only in the act of unfolding because pure perception involves the impossibility of sight seeing itself seeing, which can only take place within the folds.¹⁰ This pure perception is what presents the potential for visuality, both seeing and not seeing, and allows for what Ricco determines as a sense of visual fascination that is a blank stare, a visually inattentive attention that merely sits within sight and between the folds. However, this form of fascination implies a negative connotation of not thinking, the

⁷ Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube, The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. (USA: The Lapis Press, 1986) p. 11.

⁸ Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube, The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, p.14.

⁹ Benjamin, "Curiosity, Fascination: Time and Speed", 10.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. (London: Continuum, 2006) p. 107. See also, John Paul Ricco. *The Logic of the Lure*, p. 67

blank stare reduces the curiosity of experiencing a work to a simplistic level that evades critical engagement and displacement. The definition of a *field of fascination* pertaining to the assemblage of contemporary art in this thesis does not induce the negativity of a blank unthinking stare instead it takes its stems from the nuanced undercurrents of curiosity and abjection.

Abjection functions as an undercurrent in the field of fascination through its ability to viscerally puncture the senses. As a term, it is synonymous with Julia Kristeva's 1980s text *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, which developed a specific relationship between abjection and desire. The unsettlement produced by the abject creates an atmosphere in which curiosity thrives and together the effects of curiosity and abjection work to generate fascination. Abjection presses on the human desire to look, stimulating the pressure point that forces a visual devouring of what lies in front, a mix of both fear and desire it propels an overpowering sensation, a need to look akin to an ocular appetite in which the eye becomes a thirsty, even lustful marionette. This forceful coercion of the eye derives from abjection's ability to externalize 'that which cannot be thought through' - the other or the unknown - precisely what has been acknowledged in the periphery status of the occult and mediumship. The resultant preoccupation with looking is an attempt to figure out meaning and it is this fixation with understanding that fuels the overwhelming alteration of time when in the presence of something abject, as Kristeva states: "The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth".¹¹ Abjection has the ability to extend time through a doubling that creates a different sense of duration. The feeling of time passing is changed through the holding of the eye in a generative moment of deceleration.

The unsettling generated by the abject is often aligned with the Freudian concept of the uncanny but within the context of fascination, abjection's unsettling, is arguably different. It is not based on the provocation of fear or dread, nor does it demand the emergence of sense in the Freudian denotation of intellectual uncertainty.¹² The attribution of uncertainty

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 9

¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London, Penguin, 2003) p. 125

within the context of the familiar all play a part in the definition of what is deemed abject, but the specific form of abjection that functions as part of fascination thrives in the unknown. It is 'the other' that unsettles and holds the eye without the need to understand. The 'things' that curiously draw the eye in the context of abjection are often associated with the taboo, images of violence, death and sex all inspire a coercion that externalizes the eye from the control of the body and this invokes shame as a constituent element of abjection.¹³

The attraction of the eye is the unique power of abjection, as Kristeva announces "what is *abject*...draws me toward the place where meaning collapses", there is no totality of the abject, it emerges in the splinters of fragmented meaning.¹⁴ The focus on the eye as the central organ through which a powerful coercion can take place, ravenously devouring the unsavory, violent or sexual evokes the excremental philosophy of Georges Bataille. Bataille's dubbing as an excremental philosopher came as a personal slight from the Surrealist leader André Breton, who deepened the blow by accusing Bataille of suffering with a form of morbid compulsion, tantamount to psychasthenia, that forced a continual flirtation with the decaying and degraded.¹⁵ Of all of Bataille's writing, the theme of particular relevance to fascination is his compulsive attraction to the eye. This is complexly developed through his musings on the hybrid concept of the Pineal Eye, which draws on the pineal gland within Cartesian philosophy. René Descartes was a pioneer of early western philosophical thought that problematized the functioning of the mind and body and he developed what has become known as mind body dualism. Descartes' approach opened up a different way of thinking about the mind and body as independent of one another and in his musings on the possibility of existing outside of his own body, he presented a fresh approach to the human soul or spirit as immortal, inciting the possibility of it enduring outside the body after death. He states:

I have on the one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself insofar as I am a thinking, non-extended thing and, on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of the body insofar as it is merely an extended, non-thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and that I can exist without it.¹⁶

¹³ An elaboration on the fascination attributed to abject images of violence can be found in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003)

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.2.

¹⁵ Stuart Kendall. *Georges Bataille*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2007) p.81-82

¹⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*. Translated with an introduction by Desmond M. Clarke. (London: Penguin Books, 2000) pp. 62

In 1649 Descartes first published *The Passions of the Soul*, which expanded on the reflections made during his earlier work the *Treatise of Man* with the core purpose of delineating the physical body, the limbs and organs as separate to the mind. Descartes purported that the human corporal worked as a machine or automaton of sorts, linked only to the notion of the spirit or soul of the mind through the section at the center of the brain denoted as the Pineal gland.¹⁷ For Descartes the Pineal gland was the seat of the soul in the body and it controlled the various passions, which in modern thinking would be called emotions. In contradiction, Descartes also described the soul as being fully combined with the limbs, only escaping if the frame were harmed or dismembered. The concept of the pineal gland is much refuted, but the curiosity of its materiality in the brain sparked numerous attempts to find it. In 1515, Leonardo Da Vinci was labeled a sorcerer for attempting to discover its location through dissection and this type of experimental anatomical exploration encompassed a much frowned upon dabbling in the dark that Bataille draws on to develop his concept of the Pineal Eye.¹⁸

The Pineal Eye developed ideas set out in Bataille's earlier work *The Solar Anus*, which re-imagined the pineal gland replaced with an eye. This eye acts as an opening or cavity at the top of the skull through which the most violent and indecent energy within the body is discharged, much like Bataille's discussion of the mouth as a source of visceral primitive expression, stating "human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth: rage makes men grind their teeth, while terror and atrocious suffering turns the mouth into the organ of rending screams."¹⁹ The pineal eye is more than just a violent, messy yet satisfying release, for Bataille it is akin to a sexual organ located deep within the brain, providing a stimulating vibration that releases the ejaculatory screaming of internal desirous excesses.²⁰

¹⁷ René Descartes. *The Passions of the Soul*. Translated by Stephan Voss (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989) pp. 18-49 and René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*. pp. 23-30, 57-70

¹⁸ Len Fisher. *Weighing the Soul: The Evolution of Scientific Beliefs*. (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011) Kindle edition, no page numbers.

¹⁹ Georges Bataille. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*. Edited with an introduction by Alan Stoekl. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) pp. 59

²⁰ Georges Bataille. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, pp. 77-90

The sexual nature of Bataille's Pineal Eye introduces the notion of taboo as a nuance of the abject that also has a strong foothold in the assembling of the field of fascination. Taboo carries with it a magical connotation that echoes bewitchment and as a concept it was extensively investigated in Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Throughout Freud's study much energy was given to the definition of Taboo, with the main focus being placed on what it encompassed within more traditional and primitive cultures, as well as its possible relevance to the formation of modern psychoanalysis.²¹ His enquiry begins with a discussion of the persuasive influences Taboo has had over human law enforcement within early Polynesian tribe cultures; describing its practices, objects and rituals as a method of generating self policing. The fear of rebuke for misuse or breaking Taboo codes was enough to enforce a kind of self-censoring.²² The formulation of a definition of Taboo in an anthropological capacity, led to its association with the imbuing of lifeless objects with magic. In an early study drawn on by Freud, Northcote W. Thomas states "The source of taboo is attributed to a peculiar magical power which is inherent in persons and spirits and can be conveyed by them through the medium of inanimate objects."²³ The conveying of magical power onto a physical object through touch sets up an interesting metaphor for the work of art as a form of taboo. Irrational as it may appear to present the work of art as a material object imbued with a magical or spiritual power, it resonates with the outlined clairvoyance of art practice as a process of sensuous engagement with material, directed by the clarity of claircognition (clear knowing) but through the process of 'not knowing' in an odd methodological dichotomy of creative making.

Fascination builds on this sensibility by fixing the senses' attention without hope of resolving its complexities into complete knowledge; its lure derives from curiosity. The logic of curiosity is the simplicity of imagining what it would be like if things were otherwise.²⁴ The need to explain everything, to always have an answer, to deny awe and wonderment in favor

²¹ Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by James Strachey. (London: Routledge, 2001) pp. 21-86

²² Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Second Edition. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) pp.195 - 228

²³ Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo*, p. 24

²⁴ Sue Golding "Curiosity" *The Eight Technologies of otherness*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 11

of rationality is a form of disease that drives curiosity.²⁵ In light of this, curiosity can be viewed as an ailment without cure because an explanation can never be fully given, instead what becomes important is the journey travelled. Sue Golding develops this sensibility of curiosity as a technology of otherness, she states:

‘Supposing that’ we were never interested in anything any more ever again; supposing that our senses were so dulled and flattened (for whatever reasons: drugs, overwhelming odds, boredom, torture, homelessness, too little money or too much) that we lay prone all day and night, forever, not even wiping away flies that might migrate over our noses and our eyelids. We have a picture in front of us of utter dejection and hopelessness: the handmaidens to all things eternal, infinite and indistinguishable.²⁶

To borrow the idea of curiosity as a technology and extend it to abjection formulates an understanding of fascination as a practical tool at work within artistic practice and it is at this interval that a discussion of its manifestation in the development of my own artwork can be instigated.

I. Fascination in Practice: Visual Articulations

The methodology of using an edit to place the narrative of found footage in a different context had been firmly established in my practice from the creation of *Spectral Spectatorship* and *V for Val*. Although, I was still interested in the potential of the cut to expose, I sought a departure from the visual qualities of Sally Morgan’s performance and the gestural movements of her body. Through the development of research around the connotation of clairaudience (clear hearing), I became interested in the potential of using just the voices of mediums to enact a moment of intimate fascination; echoing the discussion in Susan Hiller’s work *Channels*, in which the use of sound is described as intimately touching the ear of the listener.²⁷ The act of stripping back to the voice also sparked an interesting reflection on Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée*. In throwing out Newton’s hypothesis of an absolute time, Bergson presented the idea of lived time, facilitating a way to understand the possibilities of

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*, p.333

²⁶ Sue Golding “Curiosity” *The Eight Technologies of otherness*, p.25

²⁷ Supra. ‘Contemporary Resonances: Susan Hiller’, pp. 61-66

channeling spirits from the past, through its implementation of simultaneous time zones and therefore life cycles; The channeling of a voice from the past through a medium in the present.²⁸

A particular instance that inspired the context for this shift was the *Search for Bridey Murphy* by Morey Bernstein, a novel which captured the events of Virginia Tighe, known as Ruth Simmons in Bernstein's book, who in November 1952 was hypnotized and began to recall in vivid detail, the life of a Cork born woman called Bridey Murphy. The hypnotist's sessions in which Murphy was channeled were recorded on to vinyl and work as an accompaniment to the book.²⁹ The use of sound recording as a method of documentation for this process echoes a wider acceptance of audio as particularly sensitive to the communications of spirits. The particular instance of Electronic Voice Phenomena, EVP, is evidence of this and the British Library's acquisition of sixty tapes produced by Dr Konstantin Raudive acts as an archival monument to sound's close relationship with spiritualist communication.³⁰ Friedrich Jürgenson first heard unrecognized voices on recordings of his own voice and then of birdsong in 1959, which he believed to be the spirits of the dead. The continuation of his research set the beginnings of what would become EVP and it gathered attention from researchers interested in its possibilities, including Konstantin Raudive.³¹ Raudive strongly believed that radio waves could aid communication between the living and the dead and so undertook a number of experiments to evidence this belief. Amongst the static of tape recordings, his notebooks documented communication from names as varied as Galileo, Hitler and Goethe with all messages short and cryptic in style, but enough to propel

²⁸ Robin Durie "introduction" in Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*. Second edition. (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999) p. vii- xxi. See also, Isaac Newton, "The Principia" in *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Andrew Janiak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 40-93

²⁹ Morey Bernstein, *The Search for Bridey Murphy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1956) pp.7-10, 210 – 225

³⁰ Joe Banks, *Art & Illusion for Sound* (London: Strange Attractor, 2012)

³¹ Friedrich Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased* (Stockholm: Firework Edition, 2004 [1967])

Raudive to record a huge amount between 1968-70.³² The compilation of these experiments eventually resulted in the publication of Raudive's book *Breakthrough* in 1971.³³

An interpretation of EVP by the artist Joe Banks in 2012 came from a more skeptical standpoint that provided the first critical examination of EVP as a form of Rorschach Audio, an aural equivalent to the infamous Rorschach inkblot test, in which the viewer interprets different elements dependent upon various emotional triggers.³⁴ The culmination of Bank's research offered a new theory of EVP based on psychoacoustics, the scientific study of sound perception, that discussed how experiences of EVP recordings can be rationalized with an informed understanding of how auditory illusions function. This also provided a platform for Banks to cite the importance of EVP to the development of sound art, placing it on a par with the effect that the discovery of optical illusions had on the advancement of the visual arts.³⁵ The conflation of these ideas and fields of contextual reference became initiators in the development of my own work *Simultaneity*, an audio piece that focused on the performative voice of American medium Sylvia Browne and UK medium Doris Stokes.

Having studied Sally Morgan as a resonance of female mediumship in contemporary society, I was interested to see how internationally women were using mediumship to gain positions of celebrity. The selection of Sylvia Browne and Doris Stokes derived from their equal fame through television appearances and readings, Browne most famously so for her regular slot on the Montel Williams Show, which ran throughout the nineties into the early two thousands. Similarly, Doris Stokes appeared semi regularly on The Don Lane Show in Australia and was the first medium to sell out at the London Palladium.³⁶ Finally, both mediums claimed clairaudient abilities and used the skill to provide readings but with very different approaches to performance of voice.

³² Toby Oakes "Recording the Paranormal: the Raudive Tapes" *Playback: The Bulletin of the National Sound Archives*, Winter (2002) p.6

³³ Konstantin Raudive, *Breakthrough* (New York: Taplinger, 1971)

³⁴ John E. Exner, *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System. Basic Foundations and Principles of Interpretation Volume 1* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2002)

³⁵ Joe Banks, "Rorschach Audio: Ghost Voices and Perpetual Creativity" *Leonardo Music Journal*, Volume 11, (2001) pp. 77-83

³⁶ Doris Stokes, *Voices: A Doris Stokes Collection*, edited by Linda Dearsley. Re-print edition (London: Time Warner, 2003). See also, Sylvia Browne and Lindsay Harrison, *Life on the Otherside* (London: Signet Books, 2001)

The starting point for *Simultaneity* was the collection of found material and a process of deciphering useable sound clips, extracted from footage sourced on the Internet of both mediums. The majority of this footage derived from recorded television performances and a central feature that emerged in the particular practice of Sylvia Browne was an emphasis on extravagant claims and predictions. Browne would regularly speak about re-incarnation in a manner delivered so dryly that the appropriate emotional response was left stunted, *Simultaneity* opens with Browne's statement "you've had thirty-seven past lives, and your last life was in Jerusalem...about a hundred years ago...and you were a Rabbi". Without the context of the person for whom the prediction was made these wild statements become open possibilities for any viewer of the work, the role of prediction is translated into the act of cold reading, throwing out generic statements in order that someone might get hooked.³⁷ Browne's declarations further activate the falsified scenario of both the original reading and its newly found form as a work of art with statements such as "This sounds like a soap opera". As well as reflections on the contemporary use of mediumship to aid crime cases, many of which Browne has been called upon to solve. The heavy nature of the edit results in a reworked script in which, Sylvia and Doris have an internalized dialogue with themselves, evocative of talking to oneself in the vein of true ventriloquism. The result is a rambling of half predictions, collapsed through missing audience interaction, exposing the traits of performance and forcing a reflective space for the contemplation of the function of mediumship in contemporary society and women's role within it.

The specific tone of Browne's voice added an entirely different slant in that it's deep and gravelly quality, when disembodied from image seemingly transgressed gender. In opposition to the warmth employed by Stokes' mothering tone, Browne's bullish manner is emphasized, making the delivery of her statements about solving murders all the more vivid. Stokes has a self-deprecation that wilts in the flame of Browne's confidence and the two in opposition highlight the many faces of mediumship. The choice of title, *Simultaneity* evokes both the simultaneity of voice and time experienced in mediumistic channeling this was reflected in the decision to visualize the edited audio through an oscilloscopic reader. I

³⁷ Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman, *Magic in Theory* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010) and Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

wanted the performative inflections in pitch to be animated in a way that echoed the gestural bodily movements of the mediums on stage.

The channeling of a direct voice, which utilizes the body of the medium as a marionette, calls to mind the work *Ventriloqua* by artist Aura Satz. *Ventriloqua* was originally performed during the final months of Aura Satz's pregnancy and in collaboration with musician Anna Piva it used a Theremin to play the electromagnetic waves of Satz's pregnant belly in a literal translation of belly speaking. Belly Speaking is a direct translation of Ventriloquism, from the Latin *venter* meaning belly and *loqui* meaning speak. Throughout the work Satz's body was transformed into a vessel, not only for giving birth but also for otherworldly music, becoming a mediumistic instrument, a mouthpiece through which the disembodied voice appeared re-embodied.³⁸ The embodiment of voice is a thread that permeates Satz's practice, in her work *Vocal Flame* she created a Rubens Tube to explore various embodiments of voice, in particular the ventriloquized female voice in film and popular culture. Satz's decision to focus on the female body and voice and its ventriloquism, reinstates the pertinence of using artistic practice to address the problematic issue of denoting 'woman as vessel'. The loss of voice that occurs during the act of mediumship, in which the body literally becomes a conduit, could be interpreted as a metaphorical reflection on the history of female suppression. In becoming a channel for other voices there is both a disappearance of the medium occurring simultaneously with the appearance of a new embodied voice. Satz describes the work *Vocal Flame* as an exposure of "the malleability, violence and porosity of vocal manipulation" and this could equally be related to the malleable texture of the silenced female body.³⁹

The particular issue of the female body within the context of mediumship as laid out in this thesis manifested as a substantial driver in the development of my practice. The treatment of the female body within the coding of the séance presented a wealth of inspiration for practical experimentation. But, what became a particular focus was the stripping and checking of the body when female mediums were debunked. Having worked with

³⁸ Aura Satz, "Ventriloqua", accessed September 7, 2015, <http://www.iamanagram.com/intrasonic.php>

³⁹ Aura Satz, "Vocal Flame", accessed September 7, 2015 http://www.iamanagram.com/vocal_flame.php

appropriated footage and sound for a substantial body of work, I shifted focus onto the use of found narrative for inspiration. The development of the installation *Apport* drew on the historical account of German medium Anna Rothe, more famously known as Berlin's flower medium or the German Eusapia; the name 'German Eusapia' referenced the infamous spirit medium Eusapia Palladino and was a complement to the popularity of Anna Rothe in Germany.⁴⁰ As an 'apport' medium Rothe's act was to supernaturally produce objects during séances, including items as varied as religious statues, amulets and gold dust; but her most famous spectacle was the pulling of flowers from thin air. During a séance in March 1902 Rothe began as usual to materialize flowers, first a single bloom of hyacinth followed by a single bloom of narcissus, but she was violently interrupted by police who, holding her by both wrists, subjected her to a strip search that revealed one hundred and fifty seven flowers stuffed inside her petticoats, along with an array of oranges and lemons. Rothe was arrested for fraud and faced a year in prison before trial.⁴¹

The discovery of such an array of material immediately sparked thoughts of the aromas that must have been exuded from the oranges and lemons against the heat of Rothe's body, particularly as séances were places often noted to be very warm. Thomas Glendenning Hamilton was explicit in his design for a séance room fitted with an electric fan, he states, "[the room should be] provided with an electric fan which will rapidly drive the air into the room producing abundant circulation essential to prevent the vitiation of air when the room is occupied by several persons for an extended period of experiment".⁴² The choice of flowers that Rothe produced prior to her arrest were also strangely appropriate to her fate; it is commonly believed that the giving of a single bloom of narcissus can signal misfortune.⁴³

The visual spectacle of Rothe's strip search and the discovery of such abundant floral and fruit material, with its symbolic connotations of female delicacy and sexuality inspired the

⁴⁰ Hereward Carrington, *Eusapia Palladino and Her Phenomena*, Re-print edition (Bibliolife LLC, 2014 [1909]) as well as Corinna Treital, "The Crimes of Anna Rothe" in *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Maryland: John Hopkins university Press, 2004) p. 165- 191

⁴¹ Corinna Treital, "The Crimes of Anna Rothe", p.165

⁴² Thomas Glendenning Hamilton "Photography of Teleplasm" Hamilton Family writings and lectures, Box 2, Folder 2. Collection No: MSS 14, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

⁴³ Daphne & Cloe, *Language and Meaning of Flowers* (France: Edizioni R.E.I, 2015) p.115

design of *Apport* as a theatrical spectacle. In its final presentation the work took the form of a six-foot tall cascade of fresh flowers and citrus fruits, tumbling from a cotton petticoat.

(Fig. 1 - 4) The petticoat acted as a ghostly trace of Rothe's body, diminished by the sensual outpouring of natural forms. The foliage, tightly packed and rich in colour, was interspersed with fruits cut and exposed to start the process of rotting. The installation of the work as a theatrically lit stage set evolved through a reflection on the specific talent of Rothe as an *apport* medium. The production of flowers and gold dust from thin air, felt more akin to magical feats of misdirection than bodily channeling and so the work acted as a material residue of Rothe's performance. The initial attraction to Rothe's narrative had been sparked by its evocation of scent and this became an experimental feature in the work through the use of the synthetic fragrances for lemon and neroli orange, chosen for their bittersweet scent. Once installed, the unnatural scents permeated the gallery space in a cloying atmosphere that embodied anyone within a few feet of the work. This scent had a visceral affect in its permeation of the body of the viewer, each one becoming a conduit through the inhalation of its perfume. This embodiment turned to visceral disgust when juxtaposed with the slowly degrading fresh material.

The mismatch of synthetic fragrance of fresh oranges and lemons and the sight of moulding fruit also underpinned the sense of theatrical staging mirroring the inauthentic fraudulence of Rothe's mediumship. Visually and conceptually *Apport* played on the notion of imperceptible change, incrementally shifting its meaning as the material substances of the work transformed and degraded.⁴⁴ The natural break of material over the course of the exhibition also enhanced the metaphorical loss of virtue, both sexually and socially, experienced by Anna Rothe, the rotting oranges reminiscent of Claudio's public shaming of Hero as a "Rotten Orange" in Shakespeare's, *Much Ado About Nothing* for accusations of loss of her virginity.⁴⁵

The translation of Rothe's narrative into the installation *Apport* as well as the heavy focus on the importance of voice in *Simultaneity* set up several nodes of interconnected

⁴⁴ Aneka French, "Grace Williams: Escamotage", accessed 22 September 2015, <https://anekafrench.wordpress.com/2014/07/22/grace-williams-escamotage-exhibition-review/>

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992) Act IV, Scene 1, 30.

interest that initiated a broader thematic development in my practice. What became apparent through reflecting on the body of work I had created so far, was a recognition that all of my work in some way spoke of disembodiment. The framework for my practice looked at the importance of the female body as a central concept but it existed only as a ghostly echo through the ephemeral mediums of film and audio. What interested me about this reflection was the possibility of pushing the boundaries of a disembodied representation of woman. Through re-establishing my focus to incorporate the broader scenarios in which the female body has magically vanished and re-appeared, the exoskeletons in which women have been manipulated or moulded could be used as a tool for subversion.

ii. Disembodied Representation: Domesticity, Disappearance & Disembodiment

The development of this section of my practice established through a return to Lindsay Seers artwork *Optograms*, in which she created a series of photographs using her mouth as an aperture. In order to create these images Seers had to first of all hide herself. The need for total darkness in developing an image required a black out sack to be placed over her head and upper body; she physically had to 'disappear' herself in order to take a photograph with her body. It was the comment that Seer's made on this experience that became pertinent to the next stages of practical development in my work, she stated "When I emerged from my black sack in city squares, passers-by would stare through me; they had not seen me, they had not registered me as part of their world, so to them I did not exist".⁴⁶ The covering of the body with fabric as an act of disappearance opened up a wide visual history in which the female body has been vanished. It started a process of visually mapping the scenarios in which the female body had been physically or metaphorically vanished through the use of material. More immediately, it returned me to the context of ectoplasm and the use of silk and cheesecloth as constituent feature of the gagged silenced and bound female body but this rapidly expanded into the wider use of fabric for curtaining the medium's cabinet in the mode of the séance.

⁴⁶ Lindsay Seers quoted in Pavel Büchler, "A True Story" in *Human Camera*, p. 25

The artist Shannon Taggart's series *The Medium's Cabinet* explicitly evidenced the proliferation of draped fabric in the space of mediumship, through a photographic study of contemporary medium cabinets within one of the world's leading spiritualist communities, The Lily Dale Assembly in New York.⁴⁷ The swathes of material that create a small cavity in which the mediumistic body is positioned has advanced little since its early origins, despite new materials and modern tent-like forms, the excessive use of fabric to cloak a space and a body remains virtually consistent with domestic Victorian interiors. A point echoed by Marina Warner who comments, "There is nothing more startlingly incongruous than the photographs of heavily furnished and furbelowed domestic interiors, in which everything and everyone is draped, swirled, tied and bundled".⁴⁸ Disappearances within these spaces seem natural, the fold of the fabric envelops and conceals, evocative of Deleuze's *The Fold*, "if to perceive means to unfold, then I am forever perceiving within the folds", drapery is multifaceted in its potential for exposure and revelation but equally curtaining and obscuring.⁴⁹ The use of fabric to conceal the body took on a specific resonance within the context of female disappearance. Through researching its permutations in visual history it became apparent that the spectacle of vanishing had gained its distinctly female trappings in the early 1800s. The mode in which the female body has disappeared encompasses wider implications of domestication and violent disembodiment that resonate today. The context of vanishing in the practice of mediumship and Magick (occult magic) provided women with an opportunity to escape the clutches of domestication offering the promise of money and independence.⁵⁰ But contemporary Performance Magic has remained a site for displays of violence upon the female body, unchanged since the early origins of vanishing.⁵¹ My interest in developing the strands of female disappearance led to the discovery of the first design for an illusion that implicated a female assistant in an act of vanishing, Buatier de Kolta's disappearing lady. The

⁴⁷ Christine Wicker, *Lily Dale: The Town that Talks to the Dead*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2006)

⁴⁸ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, p. 295

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, (London: Continuum, 2006) p. 107. See also, Alice Galvin "The Matter with de Clérambault: On the Baroque Obscene" *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2009, pp. 56-67

⁵⁰ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004)

⁵¹ Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial: Magician's Assistants and Performance Labor" pp.85-106

context of this illusion relied on an intricate weaving of the social anxieties over a surplus of women in society at the time of its fruition, which led to its overwhelming popularity.

The initiation of Kolta's trick was guided by a series of events that began in 1803 marked by Robert Malthus' publishing of *An Essay on Population*. In this paper Malthus endeavoured to illustrate that a population's identity was shaped by the relationship between the social body and a contemplation of its waste. Waste in this instance was not just abject bodily fluid and food detritus, but excess procreation, more specifically within the abject poor; those members of society who were unable to work or provide for themselves or any dependants.⁵² He strongly believed that the problem of over population could be vastly reduced by greater contemplation on the waste individuals autonomously produced. Malthus idealised the removal of the abject poor from the social body through death, seeing it as a pathway to solving the problem of too many bodies and valorising the health and situation of the remaining populous. He argued that since the extinction of the plague and dysentery, mortality rates had sharply decreased leaving behind the problem of too many bodies, he states, "While these and some other disorders became almost evanescent, consumption, palsy, apoplexy, gout, lunacy, and the smallpox, became more mortal. The widening of these drains was necessary to carry off the population which still remain redundant."⁵³ Malthus's enforcement that certain sectors of the population, such as the abject poor, were redundant and therefore disposable, led to a fundamental dilemma in that he had also been explicit about the fact that the population required the visibility of its own waste in order to understand the problem at hand and the hypothetical removal of bodies would render its necessity neutral. Surplus bodies suddenly transgressed their everyday status to become a spectacle in Victorian Britain and this inspired an overwhelming desire for a magical disappearance.

The problem of over population in the 1800s also succeeded in emphasizing the role of desire in society. Malthus was particularly vocal on the point of increasing birth rates in England and this led him to highlight the lack of ability to control sexual desire within the working classes which he described as a 'rampant desire' particularly prominent in the female

⁵² Karen Beckman. *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, (London: Duke University Press, 2003) p. 23

⁵³ Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Eds. Donald Winch. Re-print (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1803])pp. 239-40

sex; a characteristic that echoes the historical validation of the disposable nature of the female body in the witch-hunting craze of the early modern period.⁵⁴ This line of thought led Malthus to project the image of the virtuous woman who abstained from all carnal activities prior to marriage and even denounced marriage as a modern female necessity. He advocated women who remained unmarried and worked, arguing that their contribution to society was much greater, he states, “She has really and truly contributed more to the happiness of the rest of the society arising from the pleasures of marriage, than if she had entered into this union herself, and had besides portioned twenty maidens with a hundred pounds each”.⁵⁵ Women who remained unmarried and worked towards careers were in Malthus’s opinion not only reducing the excess waste of the population but also financially aiding greater causes in society through a distribution of their wealth. The impact of Malthus’ report astonishingly appeared to decrease the number of marriages that took place over the next decade, but this led to an entirely unconsidered surge in the number of ‘virtuous women’ and a noticeable abundance of unmarried women appeared in society. This led to another point of crisis over population - what to do with a surplus of independent women of means.

The trepidation caused by a society full of unmarried independent women manifested itself in an article by W. R Greg, entitled, *Why are Women Redundant?* Published in 1869 it provided a solution to the surplus women crisis in the form of a mass emigration to the colonies.⁵⁶ Greg’s paper stated,

We must redress the balance. We must restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and in the new ones, which was disturbed by an emigration of men, and the disturbance of which has wrought so much mischief in both lands.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus & the Devil: witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe*, (London: Routledge, 1995)

⁵⁵ Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, p. 272

⁵⁶ W. R. Greg, *Why are Women Redundant?* (London: N Trübner & Co, 1869)

W.R Greg’s article was successfully countered by the feminist author and member of the Langham Place Circle Jessie Boucherett, who argued that the problem of surplus women was in fact a male construct that had very little to do with physical statistics; instead she believed that it stemmed from a traditional male view of women as essentially surplus in all respects see *How to provide for Superfluous Women* by Jessie Boucherett reprinted within Josephine Butler, *Women’s work and Women’s Culture: A Series of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 27

⁵⁷ W. R. Greg, *Why are Women Redundant?* (London: N Trübner & Co, 1869) p. 15

The plan to export women to the colonies expressed a deep-seated desire to enact a vanishing that had no return and no violence, Britain needed its women to disappear but it wanted it to happen magically and with little inconvenience to any party. The major stumbling block for Greg came from his utter failure to acknowledge the physical mass of the female population needing transportation all at one time. The implementation of his plan, would have taken almost a decade to complete and this was without taking into account any further additions to the female population that would naturally have occurred in that time period. Greg was not wholly ignorant of the dilemmas created by displacing so many British women to the colonies; the palpable fear was the effect active exposure of gentrified British women to the otherness of the colonies might have in the future and although a disappearance into the colonies provided a viable option, it was definitely without its positives. The overwhelming desire within Britain was for a form of magical disappearance and as Karen Beckman describes, "Britain wanted its surplus women to disappear into the space of the colonies, but it longed for a disappearance that would not have to deal with either the materiality of the body or the violence inherent to disappearance. In short, it wanted magic"⁵⁸ But, the violence that only magical vanishing can escape took on a very different reading following the events of the Indian Rebellion in 1857 and in particular the events of the Cawnpore massacre.⁵⁹ This singular and tragic moment in history fundamentally marked a shift in the accoutrements of performance Magic and in particular the scenario of magical female vanishing.

The trappings of early stage illusions, including Bautier de Kolta's vanishing lady, traditionally referenced eastern clothes and textures, as a reference to the now much contested birthplace of Magic.⁶⁰ The first magic feats performed throughout Britain were by Fakirs and British magicians actively mimicked eastern cultures through props and settings that spoke of Magic's oriental origins. This included racially offensive acts such as 'blacking up' in the stage shows of P.T Selbit who performed wearing gold earrings and donning the

⁵⁸ Karen Beckman. *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, p. 29-35

⁵⁹ Andrew Ward, *Our Bones Are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacres and the Indian Mutiny of 1857* (London: John Murray, 2004)

⁶⁰ Henry Ridgley Evans, "Introduction" in Albert A Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography* (Dover Publications Inc. 1991) pp. 1-26.

name under Joad Heteb in an attempt to appear Egyptian.⁶¹ The staging of magic in this manner remained highly popular until the occurrence of the Indian rebellion's Cawnpore massacre in 1857, which forced a drastic change to the face of Magic giving way to the birth of the gentlemanly, white British magician.

The Indian rebellion to recapture Delhi from the English produced one particular event that resulted in an eruption of anger and fear within the British male population. The massacre at Cawnpore occurred on July 15 and resulted in the brutal slaughtering of two hundred European women and children imprisoned in Cawnpore's bibighar - a building that had once held the Indian mistresses of white European men.⁶² It is widely acknowledged that the cause of the Indian rebellion was due to the introduction of the Lee-Enfield bullet cartridge, which was covered in animal fat and had to be bitten open in order to release gunpowder. The use of pig and cow fats, highly offensive to those practicing the Hindu and Muslim religion caused an increasing anger amongst soldiers. This sparked three regiments on May 10, 1857 to kill their officers and begin a rebellion against the English to recapture Delhi. There is also some contention over the use of terminology around the Indian 'rebellion' or 'massacre'. Britain throughout all coverage referred to it as a massacre and the Indian authorities maintained its status as a rebellion, despite this the violence of the event, the disappearance of so many women and the abject material traces it left, blood, hair, limbs, enraged the male European populous who had for so long created their power and stance as the gentlemanly protector and defender of women.⁶³ The thought that European white males could also become as superfluous, through the witnessing of female bodies mutilated in the event at Cawnpore, led to an anxiety that manifested in the almost immediate redesign of one of the most popular stage illusions at the time, *The Vanishing Lady*.

Following the events at Cawnpore, the styling and setting of magic acts took a radical turn away from eastern references and instead cemented the magician as a uniquely British enterprise. The re-appropriation of the magician into the figure of a British gentleman took on

⁶¹ Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial: Magician's Assistants and Performance Labor", p.95

⁶² Renu Saran "Bibighar Massacre" in *Freedom Struggle of 1857*, Kindle Edition, no page numbers

⁶³ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, p. 31-39

a unique resonance for Buatier de Kolta's *The Vanishing Lady*.⁶⁴ The mystical robes and orientalist settings were left behind and illusion acts moved to the domestic space of the parlor as well as the theatres of Europe. The move to within the domestic space of the household parlor takes on enhanced meaning when thinking about vanishing female bodies, it could in some respects be seen as a site already haunted by the disappearance of the female body, once married many women would be confined to within the space of such household rooms evoking a notion of double disappearance.

Buatier de Kolta's illusion to vanishing a lady took Europe by storm in 1886 and helped to establish the art of vanishing as an exclusively female affair. At the request of magicians Maskelyne and Cooke the trick was performed within the non-orientalist setting of the drawing room and heavily informed by the current problems of the unmarried female surplus, the victim of the disappearance was a young 'unmarried' woman, of well built stature called Mademoiselle Patrice. The emphasis on the build and weight of Mademoiselle Patrice was most certainly an acknowledgement of the power of the vanishing lady act to shift huge surplus weight without effort, perhaps even a reference to the impossible plans of W R Greg. Her excessive corporeality appeared as of no consequence to the male illusionist who could conjure her and vanish her at any given moment regardless of her weight.⁶⁵ Once placed onto a chair, under which a sheet of newspaper would be positioned, the female sitter would be covered with an oriental red silken shawl, the only remaining emblem of the orientalist origins of magic, that when dramatically pulled away would reveal the empty chair. The room would then be astonished to hear Mademoiselle Patrice call out from the audience "here!"⁶⁶

As a constructed illusion de Kolta's trick does more than just vanish a lady, it functions as a screen to the anxiety of Britain following the Indian Rebellion and demonstrates this through a variety of symbols. Mademoiselle Patrice can be read as a figure representative of the female surplus, highlighting the corporeal nature of disappearance

⁶⁴ Although the majority of magicians immediately switched their stage persona there were a selected few who continued to perform in 'oriental drag' including P.T Selbit who performed as Egyptian magician 'Joad Heteb' until 1910 and William Ellsworth Robinson as 'Chung Ling Soo' until 1918. See, Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial", p. 85

⁶⁵ Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial", p. 95

⁶⁶ Charles Bertram, *Isn't It Wonderful? A History of Magic & Mystery* (London: Swan, Sonnenschein, 1896) pp. 125-27

through descriptions of her generous proportions and unmarried status. Her disappearance through a sheet of newspaper is a unique emblem of Buatier de Kolta's design, the paper itself was made from the newly imported material India rubber from the colonies, making the disappearance of Mademoiselle Patrice through the newspaper a metaphorical vanishing into the colonial spaces of India, with the additional wit of not 'even making a dent in the news of the day'.⁶⁷ The final reference is the disappearance without return of the red silken scarf originally used to cover the body of mademoiselle Patrice, which vanishes forever as the last reference of the oriental trappings of magic, the "superior" British magician evidenced his gentlemanly status by "carefully separating the spectacular female body, from the less visible traces of British colonized space, traces of which disappear along unnoticed with the lady but never come back".⁶⁸ The Vanishing Lady acted as both a screen to the political anxieties of the day as well as working as a form of therapy, restoring power and authority to the re-born British conjuror.

An interesting aside to the reading of Buatier de Kolta's trick by Karen Beckman outlined above, is a development formulated in a recent discussion by the magician Scott Penrose, also head curator for *The Magic Circle*. When attempting to re-build de Kolta's chair from original designs and drawings, Penrose discovered that none of the outlines were correct and any version of the chair built following Kolta's instructions would in fact prevent the female sitter from disappearing through the concealed trap door; she would instead be imprisoned in her position. In particular this was caused by a small piece of wire that ran across the front of the assistant's knees, possibly an asrah form designed to keep a bodily shape under the silken shawl. Perhaps this detail was a clever diversion by de Kolta to protect the secrets of his design but it once again re-enforces through practical means the impossibility of the magical disappearance of the female body, echoing the problems of earlier plans by W.R. Greg.

Taking this newly framed context for the vanishing lady illusion, much can be said of differing sites of the vanishing woman. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the profusion of illusionists performing the Vanishing Lady act eventually led to disinterested audiences but

⁶⁷ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, p. 55

⁶⁸ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* p.59

its slow disappearance from the stage established a new site for the vanishing woman in film. When Georges Méliès created his silent short film called *The Vanishing Lady* in 1896, he recreated in detail Buatier de Kolta's magical illusion but instead of simply disappearing and reappearing a lady – in this case Jehanne d'Alcy, also Méliès wife - he added a stage in which the vanished female body first returns as a charred skeleton. Méliès coined this a *substitution trick*.⁶⁹ The violence of this new addition is reminiscent of the origins of the illusions popularity, but it also acts as a reminder of the materiality of disappearance. Since the political status of the female body as a sign for surplus had somewhat subsided, it is significant that the victim of vanishing illusions remained predominantly female. The politics of the female body in illusion shifts toward a discussion of the gender relationship between the conjuror and assistant, which so often revolves around 'a male magician performing acts of wonder upon a female subject'.⁷⁰

Méliès' film belongs to an era of cinema that is often referred to as pre-narrative, built around spectacle and action they have no progressive narrative; they belong to what Tom Gunning explains is the cinema of attractions.⁷¹ *The Vanishing Lady*, as one such pre-narrative film in the cinema of attractions, sets up the female body as a spectacle and highlights the relationship between the conjuror and his female assistant: she is a decorative object that can be manipulated masterfully by the male conjuror.⁷² For Lucy Fischer Méliès plays an important role in determining the image of women in cinema and although his fascination for vanishing is tied to theatrical magic, the relationship between conjuror and assistant is something that requires critique, as Fischer states,

The act of the male magician conjuring women is simply a demonstration of his power over the female sex. Woman has no existence independent of the male magician; he can make her

⁶⁹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, "A Trip to the Movies: George Méliès, Filmmaker and Magician (1861-1938) in Matthew Solomon, *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination* (New York: State University Press) p. 26

⁷⁰ Lucy Fischer, "The Lady Vanishes: Women, Magic and the Movies" *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979) p.30

⁷¹ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions", *Wide Angle*, vol.8 no.3/4 (Fall 1986). Re-printed in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990) p. 56-62

⁷² For an in depth discussion of the female body as spectacle within pre-narrative cinema see Constance Balides, "Scenarios of exposure in the practice of everyday life: women in the cinema of attractions" *Screen*, 34: 1 (Spring, 1993) pp. 19-37

appear when he wants her and disappear when (to paraphrase de Beauvoir), he wishes no longer "to contend" with her. Woman is thus a function of male will.⁷³

The conjuring and disappearing of female bodies is a point that Fischer goes on to extend into a discussion that views male magicians as envious of the female ability to reproduce.⁷⁴ The magician's role of disappearing and conjuring at will, all manner of objects including the female body, lacks only one wondrous feat, the ability to give life; this argument is demonstrated by using the example of one of the most basic of magic tricks, pulling rabbits out of a hat. However it can not be claimed that all vanishing on film is uniquely female, in many pre narrative films disappearances of all kinds, male, female and objects occur in fast succession and this is taken up by Linda Williams as a critique of Fischer's line of thought,

Fischer is quite right to stress the significance of magic which exerts power over women's bodies, de-corporealising and reducing them to the status of a decorative object. But it is simply not accurate to privilege the disappearance of women in Méliès films, any more than it would be to privilege her magical appearance.⁷⁵

Williams instead views Méliès's films as a kind of simulation machine, through which the continual reproduction of identical female bodies enhances the idea of the body being mastered and infinitely reproducible. The broad context of magical illusion, disappearance and sites for vanishing established through the discovery of the context for Bautier de Kolta's Vanishing lady also prompted a return to a series of images that I had been aware of in the nineteenth century called Hidden Mothers. The unique collection of photographs denoted *The Hidden Mothers* are undoubtedly some of the most visually descriptive depictions of a woman's status within the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ The haunting figures buried under heavily patterned carpets, behind pieces of furniture and drapes provide a bizarre simultaneous moment of concealing and revealing as well as Jacques Derrida's concept of "an erasure that allows what obliterates to be read".⁷⁷ It is widely acknowledged that the draping of female

⁷³ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions", p .31-2

⁷⁴ Lucy Fischer, "The Lady Vanishes: Women, Magic and the Movies", p. 35

⁷⁵ Linda Williams, "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions" *Cinétracts*, 12 (Winter 1981) p. 30-31

⁷⁶ Massimiliano Gioni, "Mothers of Invention" in Linda Fregni Nagler, *The Hidden Mother* (London: MACK, 2013) p.2-3

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p.6

bodies within Victorian portraits was a practicality to keep children still for the long exposure times of traditional photography, enabling a portrait to be taken solely of the infant.⁷⁸ But it simultaneously carried within it the disappearance of the female body under fabric, a unique resonance of concealing and revealing in the same instance. It was the particular oddity of women disguised beneath heavily patterned carpets within the Hidden Mother genre juxtaposed with the use of the oriental scarf to cover the body of de Kolta's vanishing lady, as well as an echo of Mary Marshall of the T G Hamilton séances being hidden beneath a decorative supernal handkerchief of ectoplasm, that led to the development of the photographic series *Escamotage*.

Escamotage - meaning slight of hand, trickery, conjuring and vanishing draws on the context of heavily patterned fabric as a tool for female disappearance by using a Persian rug as a motif for magical vanishing whilst also referencing the myth of the magic carpet and its history within magical illusion. The Persian rug in particular has been used as a tool for misdirection, in Harry Houdini's famous trick walking through a wall, it was the carpet placed beneath the wall, which made the trick work by disguising a large trench in the floor. The carpet would be pulled taught leaving the audience unsuspecting and in the few seconds Houdini had to get to the other side, he would sag the carpet and use the trench, appearing in record time, much to the delight of the audience.⁷⁹ The carpet also has a particular resonance with the domestic, its prevalence within the hidden mother genre was undoubtedly due to its common appearance in the home as an everyday furnishing; whilst the heavy patterning was preferred for its ability to hide dirt, it also acted as a sort of camouflage to the body; flattening the three dimensions of form into an unreadable mingle of foreground and background.

Escamotage is a series of five black and white photographs, which take to task the disappearance and in turn obvious appearance of the female body, vanished under a Persian rug. (Fig. 5 - 12) The images are a mix of positions created by using the body – my own body – as a support as well as positions in which the stiffness of the rug holds its own weight. Neither method is made obvious in the image; the viewer is left to question if a body is present,

⁷⁸ Linda Fregni Nagler, *The Hidden Mother* (London: MACK, 2013)

⁷⁹ A recent dramatization of the life of Harry Houdini gave great insight into the workings of this illusion; see *Houdini* [DVD] Director Uli Edel. Lionsgate, 2014

reflecting the experience that occurs in both the hidden mother photographs and the witnessing of a magical illusion. The unsettling generated by not knowing if a person is present fills the images with the potential for animation; although taken as static photographs there is an unmistakable atmosphere that at any moment one could move or collapse. The layering of pattern on pattern, the clashing of camouflages, generates a confusion of the eye, heightening this nuance. The potential for movement in each image led to the shifting of the series from photographic prints to slide projection, the addition of light adding ephemerality to the prevailing notion of disappearance. This was enhanced by the projection of the image directly onto a black wall adding a further nuance of the liminal; the images projected are unframed bleeding into physical space. In its making, *Escamotage* has moved through numerous two and three-dimensional variations, from 'real' object/person, to image, to object and to projection in a process which has altered both the context and content of the work. That the entire gallery wall is painted black rather than displaying a white or grey framed space further underscores the illusory quality of the projected photograph. Without a clearly defined projection frame, the image is fuzzy along its edges, gently bleeding into the structure on which it is displayed. It gives the impression of vibrating softly against the wall and the figure beneath the rug seems to move very subtly. The ghostly effect is heightened the more time one spends with the work, as it alters beneath one's eyes and possibilities are made manifest.⁸⁰ (Fig. 12)

The transference of the original digital photographs onto plastic slides provided an unexpected but important addition to the work. Having done a few tests with the slides it became apparent that the inks used to transfer images were not colourfast and prolonged exposure to light altered the colour composition of the black sending it through a changing spectrum of green, purple and finally the deepest hue of red before finally degrading entirely; an unexpected material vanishing. Through this unexpected natural process of evolution the images take on a life of their own presenting a double vanishing. The processes required to show the work in a perfect state, light and heat, are by the same hand destroying the image, the essence of *Escamotage* is that nothing is truly hidden, instead there is an exposure both

⁸⁰ Anneka French, "Grace A Williams: The Appearance of a Vanishing Woman" *Photomonitor*, accessed 25 September 2015, <http://www.photomonitor.co.uk/2015/07/grace-a-williams-the-appearance-of-a-vanishing-woman/>

of the photograph physically – its breakdown through an exposure to light – and politically, the female body under a Persian rug, whose design is so closely associated with the Middle East, takes on a very contemporary resonance of female vanishing.⁸¹ This is particularly referenced by the inclusion of a contemporary hidden mother - a figure wearing a burqa - in Linda Fregni Nagler's collection and installation *The Hidden Mother* at the Venice Biennale in 2013 .

The notion of giving expression to a staged action whilst simultaneously highlighting the theatricality of its staging speaks directly to the practice of mediumship. Unlike traditional theatre the split between audience and performer is not in place, it does not follow the standard rule of the audience having no voice. Instead mediumship provides an equal platform in which all participants are active in the performance and aware of the theatrical environment established. The particular idea of theatricality within mediumship and the manner in which it sets up a particular atmosphere, led to an brief return to the event of seeing Sally Morgan perform live and the broader construction of atmosphere within stage mediumship.

Following several experiences of seeing mediums live in UK auditoriums and theatres it became apparent that a large part of the staging and atmosphere of mediumship relied on the play of popular culture. The resonances of language taken to have an alternative meaning suitable to the context provide a lighthearted and often comical insight into the world of constructing mediumship. I began exploring this through documenting the music that was played during the time prior to seeing mediums and the work *Warm up* acts as a document of this experience. The idea of a medium using 'warm up' music for a show to ply audiences with the subliminal messages presented for me a comical standpoint on the building of a field of fascination or a particular atmosphere within mediumship. The literalness of the music selected on the basis of title or lyrical content suggested the possibility of presenting a

⁸¹ The Persian rug was further utilized as a metaphor for contemporary Islamic conflict by Rudolf Stingel and his installation at Palazzo Grassi for the Venice Biennale, 2013 in which he covered the entirety of the interior with a repeat pattern of oriental carpet, "To cover the floors and walls with a patterned carpet would annihilate the existing architecture and create a space in which gravity and scale were abolished. The relentless onslaught of carpeted rooms would induce the viewer in a sort of trance. Once in a while a window would promise relief, but what one sees are only more patterns outside." See Rudolf Stingel in dialogue with collaborators and supporters of his work in "Shit, How Are You Going to Do This One?" *Flash Art*, Issue 291 (July-September 2013), accessed on 25 September 2015, <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/shit-how-are-you-going-to-do-this-one/> see also, David Ebony, "Rudolf Stingel's Magic Carpet Ride", *Art in America*, July 2nd 2013, accessed 25 September 2015, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/rudolf-stingels-magic-carpet-ride/>

simplistic documentation of the event in which they were played. Stating the title, artist and year of three songs that collaboratively made the musical interlude prior to Morgan's entrance onto the stage. The songs include Norman Greenbaum's 1974, *Spirit in the Sky*, The Police's 1983 hit *Every Breath You Take* and finally the 1988 song *Eternal Flame* by the Bangles. The piece works as an empirical reference to the staging of mediumship and is flanked by the date and seat number in which the information was recorded, in a one colour silk screen print.

The selection of font and the increasing size of the text visually implicate a feeling of crescendo toward the impending arrival of the medium and the choice of colour, a deep purple alludes to its association with magic, ritual ceremonies of death and mourning, as well as the brand colours of Morgan's company (Fig. 13-14).⁸² The use of silk-screen printing as a method of production was an attempt to nuance the multiple reproductions of standard phrases in Morgan's cold reading and the loss of meaning through repetition - an echo of the touring nature of the show. *Warm up* is intended to be a comical and blatant translation of the staging that goes into mediumship, exposing its theatricality and the issue of willingness to believe.

The development of the concept of a field of fascination within this chapter has so far avoided the idea of willingness and suspended disbelief, which owes its relationship to faith, returning discussions to the issues of belief in mediumship, which is not the intention. But it does allow for the discussion of bad faith outlined by Jean Paul Sartre as the performance of a deception in which the deceiver and the deceived are one and the same, "The ideal description of the liar would be a cynical consciousness, affirming truth within himself, denying it in his words and denying that negation as such".⁸³ Bad faith is the active deception of oneself by choosing to believe a lie whilst also knowing the truth, "I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully".⁸⁴ In the case of mediums, bad faith can be taken in two ways, first: the knowing deception of the audience and their willing acceptance

⁸² Eva Heller, Eva Heller, *Psychologie de la couleur: effets et symboliques*, Translated by Laurence Richard (France: Editions Pyramyd, 2009)

⁸³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E Barnes with and introduction by Mary Warnock (London: Routledge, 1995) p. 48

⁸⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 49

due to individual negation of the fact that mediumship yields no provable results, and second: the medium themselves through a process of bad faith performs psychic ability as part of an internal deception that they really can speak to the dead. Both strands evoke the central feature of suspending disbelief in mediumship, as Sartre elaborates bad faith has its foot in the door of structured falsehood and falsehood further throws up the issue of belief; Sartre reinforces, "The true problem of bad faith is it stems evidently from the fact that bad faith is *faith*...and the essential problem of bad faith is a problem of belief".⁸⁵ The uncertainty of belief requires a leap; a stepping into the unknown with little hope or understanding of what will happen and this is exactly when mediumship can thrive.⁸⁶

Willing something to be real also has a strong foothold in magic but as Peter Lamont elaborates this has little to do with the suspension of disbelief, instead it is entirely focused on a strengthened belief, he argues that you must "suspend disbelief willingly or otherwise the magic disappears".⁸⁷ Instead the power of magic is cited within the strong belief that something can not happen but does, the work of mediumship and magic therefore share a disjuncture in the suspension of disbelief; mediumship actively requires it in order to function and magic disinherits it in its stance to remain magic. The ability of magic to perform extraordinary feats upon the female body, such as Bautier de Kolta's vanishing lady act and the broader context of the male magician conjuring power over his female assistant lead toward the development of a body of work that examined the vanishing of the female body to fulfill the prowess of the magician in stage magic. The staging of disappearance as a simulation opened up the parallel development of performance magic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with Michel Foucault's concept of docile bodies.⁸⁸ As Francesca Coppa discusses, many illusions can be seen to demonstrate the Foucauldian notion of a

⁸⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.67

⁸⁶ Pertinent to the discussion of a leap into the unknown on the grounds of faith is Kierkegaard's use of the allegory of Abraham tested see, Søren Kierkegaard, "Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?" in *Fear and Trembling*, Edited and Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983) pp. 54-67

⁸⁷ Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 45

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies", in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Second Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) pp. 135-169

docile body “subjected, used, transformed, and improved”.⁸⁹ Whilst the dexterity of the magician demonstrated the thoroughly trained body, the female assistant in illusions demonstrates an indestructible one. The title of illusions such as P.T Selbit’s *Destroying a Girl, Growing a Girl, Crushing a Girl, Stretching a Girl*, all part of the broader remit of Selbit’s ‘girl based’ illusions once again evokes the violence inherent within the staging magical female disappearance.⁹⁰ Foucault’s reflections on the eighteenth century took on a particular nuance for the performance of magic with his statement, “the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it”.⁹¹ The re-arrangement of the female body in magical illusion through acts of sawing, slicing, stretching and crushing provides a unique reflection on Foucault’s determination and it further elaborates the changing scene of illusions in the early 1920s.

The first illusion to dismember the female body was P. T Selbit’s *Sawing Through a Woman*. Created in 1920 its popularity is much aligned with the gathering success of women’s suffrage. As Jim Steinmeyer comments “The very act of victimizing a lady in 1921 was to victimize the newly enfranchised lady”.⁹² Selbit even went as far as mocking Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, the famous suffragettes, by offering them each a job to be “a permanent sawing block” for twenty pounds a week.⁹³ The dismembering of the female body through violent magical acts in the 1920s took on a further nuance in that it reflected the emancipation of the female body from heavy and modest clothing. The birth of the Flapper with exposed legs and arms echoed the new exposure of female body parts, cut up and fetishized in tricks such as Selbit’s & Goldin’s sawing through a woman, this fetishizing of the female body was greatly enhanced by the addition of cutting open the woman’s stocking who was enclosed in the wooden crate, exposing her foot and asking her to wiggle her toes as

⁸⁹ Francesca Coppa, “The Body Immaterial: Magician’s Assistants and Performance Labor”, p.91

⁹⁰ The titles of P.T Selbit’s “Girl-based illusions” see Francesca Coppa, “The Body Immaterial: Magician’s Assistants and Performance Labor” in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck Eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p.95

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies” p.138

⁹² Jim Steinmeyer, “Above and Beneath the Saw” in *Art and Artifice and Other Essays on Illusion, Concerning the Inventors, Traditions, Evolution and Rediscovery of Stage Magic* (Burbank: Hahne, 1998) p. 86

⁹³ Francesca Coppa, “The Body Immaterial: Magician’s Assistants and Performance Labor”, p.88

proof it was not a fake.⁹⁴ The evolution of sawing through a woman took shape in Robert Harbin's *Zig Zag*, which also became a major performance piece within my own artistic practice.

Robert Harbin's *Zig Zag* box provides a problematisation of the passivity of the female assistant in standard magical illusions, in that the assistant takes on all of the active labour. The trick's success is purely down to the dexterity of the woman performing within the box, contorting her entire body but remaining calm in appearance and smiling at her audience. Passivity is a common and enforced feature of the magician's assistant; through being hypnotized or put to sleep the female body is presented as unknowing, it's made clear that the magician's assistant contains no knowledge of the trick being enacted on her and is excused of any inherent deception as a result. This also means that the female assistant can never be credited; she remains silent leaving all the glory for the magician. This provides a unique parallel with women practicing mediumship; in the T.G.H séances the mediums Mary Marshall and Elizabeth M Poole were regularly described as uneducated and illiterate, with Hamilton stating:

Let us turn from the personnel of the group to the mediums with whom the greatest success has been had. They are two Scotch women, kindly, practical women, whose lot has not fallen along the way of education in the restricted sense of the term, and whom it is impossible to imagine as capable of the involved deception that would be necessary to "take in" a group of the type mentioned. Moreover, money, that root of deception, does not enter into the picture at all, the mediums receive nothing for their services, while the "sitters" are, of course, out of pocket considerably as a result of their investigations.⁹⁵

The true secret to the functioning of many illusions, in which the female body is distorted, vanished or dismembered is a reliance on the skill and labour of the female assistant, as well as a reliance on the audience never suspecting that the woman is in control of the trick.⁹⁶ It was on this basis that I developed the performance of *Zig Zag* whilst delivering the paper *Vanishing in Plain Sight* in collaboration with artist David Cheeseman. The issue of the

⁹⁴ Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial: Magician's Assistants and Performance Labor", p. 93

⁹⁵ Leslie Garden, "Seeing the Unseen – Remarkable evidence of Mysterious Phenomena Caught by Cameras of Psychical Research Society" *The Western Home Monthly*, (August, 1931) in *Publications about TGH re: His work*, Box 2, Folder 5, T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

⁹⁶ Francesca Coppa, "The Body Immaterial: Magician's Assistants and Performance Labor", p. 93-94

silencing of the female body within illusions and its continued relevancy within the field of contemporary magic, led to the conception of a performance between myself and David Cheeseman that devised a performance of the *Zig Zag* illusion that positioned myself as the assistant. Reflecting on the double-edged performance of the female famulus the irony of the work was to perform the trick whilst delivering a critique of women's role within performance magic, all from within the box and whilst separated into three pieces. A traditional *Zig Zag* box was hired from the magician Scot Penrose as a kind of fetish object - itself already imbued with magical ability and countless successful outings - and rehearsals ensued. (Fig. 15 - 16) The contortion of the body necessary to successfully complete the *Zig Zag* illusion presented a particularly difficult task whilst speaking but the labor intensiveness of giving a metaphorical voice to the silenced female bodies, silenced in this very box, provided a unique form of motivation.

The opening of the performance was a discussion led by David- the magician in this scenario - on the alterations to the physical space of vanishing, which have drastically changed over time. In Victorian England, for example, an audience would be far more impressed by the disappearance of a body in a larger space, compared to the more contemporary marvel of a body disappearing into the smallest space conceivably possible.⁹⁷ Throughout this discussion I remained seated on stage, in full view of the audience. The choice of clothing was also important for the trick, referencing the glamorous and fetishized body of the traditional magician's famulus I wore a highly sequined and tightly fitted silver dress - tightly fitted in order to convince the audience that nothing was being hidden but also to aid the deception of the trick, a very tight contortion. In the closing moments of David's paper there is a momentary intervention of music: the Peggy Lee song *Is that all there is?* The level of theatricality brought about by the addition of music initiated the start of the illusion and the guiding of the famulus - me - into the box. Once positioned I am locked inside and two blades one on the upper torso and one on the lower are inserted; then David gradually

⁹⁷ Mike Caveney, Jim Steinmeyer and Ricky Jay, *Magic 1400s-1950s*, Noel Daniel Eds. (Germany: Taschen, 2013)

slides the middle third across from its natural position to extreme left, leaving me in three parts and the audience in awe of the trick.⁹⁸

Following the completion of the illusion there is an immediate role reversal, David is immediately transformed into the famulus, holding up a laptop and changing slides in order that I can present from within the box. In doing so there is an enforced turning away from the audience, dismissing what is for the magician the ultimate and only focus. The completion of the work was an illustrated presentation, a synopsis of the wider argument laid out here, that critiqued the excessive violence used against the female body within both historical and contemporary performative magic – in the midst of having that violence enacted on my own body.⁹⁹ A further reflection on the piece is the collaboration between David and myself in the format of student/supervisor and more importantly a collaborative act within magic.¹⁰⁰ As Penn and Teller comment the core issue of partnership within magic is “a willingness to give the other person enough space, mutual respect, and a division of labor”.¹⁰¹ Unknowingly the work became a secondary metaphor for the process of research on a wider scale.

The female dismemberment demonstrated in the performance of the *Zig Zag* girl is also echoed in the photographic practice of Clare Strand, in particular her work *Girl in Two Halves*, 2008 part of a wider series entitled *Conjurations*; the image resonates with the privileging of young female bodies as conduits of prowess within the supernatural.¹⁰² The image presents a black and white photograph of a young girl magically dismembered between two cardboard boxes, highlighting the canon of trick photography as magic’s natural home, Strand states “I examine photography as a medium in itself, investigating its origins,

⁹⁸ The full performance can be viewed online as part of documentation for the conference *Twice Upon a Time: Magic, Alchemy & the Transubstantiation of the Senses*, Birmingham City University: “David Cheeseman & Grace Williams: Vanishing in Plain Sight”, accessed 23 September 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFQ_fRmWVs

⁹⁹ Robert Harbin’s version of the *Zig Zag* Girl, as performed, is a relatively light hearted illusion depicting violence upon the female body but it was made far more grotesque by the South American illusionist Richiardi who used a buzz saw and graphically highlighted the inherent violence, see Eugene Burger and Robert E. Neale, *Magic and Meaning* (Seattle: Hermetic Press, 1995) pp. 90-93

¹⁰⁰ Francesca Coppa, “The Body Immaterial: Magician’s Assistants and Performance Labor”, p. 99

¹⁰¹ Jamy Ian Swiss, “Pen and Teller Exposed: An Exclusive interview with Jamy Ian Swiss”, *Genii* 8.7 (May, 1995) p. 502

¹⁰² This echoes Susan Hiller’s use of Hollywood depictions of young females in *Psi Girls*. Supra ‘Contemporary Resonances: Susan Hiller’ Chapter 2, pp. 61-66

uses – and limitations”.¹⁰³ Photography for Strand is an imperfect medium; it is the oddities in an image, which create the wonder necessary for the inventiveness of her subject matter, “Sometimes, what ought to spoil a picture is what makes it so interesting: being off-centre, say, or cropped weirdly”.¹⁰⁴

The process behind Strand’s work is often cited as subject-led, the camera merely acting as a tool to forensically document aspects of the topic with which she is engaged at any one time. Her interest in the relationship between young female bodies and the paranormal is described as developing from her own experience as a child, “When I was in my early teens I experimented to try and move and levitate objects- just encase I could, but nothing happened”.¹⁰⁵ Instead Strand became fascinated with images of young women demonstrating paranormal abilities, citing the photographs taken as part of the famous Enfield haunting as a strong reference within her early work.¹⁰⁶

The prevalence of black and white within Strand’s photographic oeuvre can be interpreted as a stripping back; a method of providing a certain clarity to her images, a utilitarian approach to the fantasy of magic. Strand sees the relationship between subject matter and photography as an important process of pushing the limitations of what photography can be considered to be.¹⁰⁷ The documentation of magical illusions has a unique home in trick photography and using this as an inspiration the development of the series *Cabinet* arose in parallel with exploring the changing spaces within which the female body has vanished.

The ever-changing spaces of vanishing manifested in the development of the photographic series *Cabinet, 2014*. (Fig. 17 - 18) Set within a domestic space, the series of two black and white images took reference from the space of the parlor as a site for female

¹⁰³ Karin Andreasson, “Clare Strand's best shot – the levitating woman”, *The Guardian*, 18 June 2014, accessed 26 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/18/clare-strand-my-best-shot-photography>

¹⁰⁴ Karin Andreasson, “Clare Strand's best shot – the levitating woman”

¹⁰⁵ Clare Strand and Chris Mullen, “Interview” in Ute Eskildsen, Maik Schlüter and Clare Strand, *Clare Strand*. Photoworks Monograph (Göttingen: Steidl & Partners, 2009) p. 94

¹⁰⁶ For a full overview of the Enfield Haunting and the poltergeist activity described by Margaret and Janet Hodgson, aged 13 and 11 respectively, see the recent dramatization *The Enfield Haunting* [DVD] Entertainment One, 2015. Strand further elaborates that the 1932 book *Wild Talents* was also of great inspiration, see Charles Fort, *Wild Talents* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing platform, 2013)

¹⁰⁷ Clare Strand and Chris Mullen, “Interview”, p. 103

vanishing as well as the female body as furniture of the home. The context of illusion is also rife, influenced by the rich visual history of the female body disappearing under or within an object, whether fabric, an illusion box or a medium's cabinet. It was this particular reference to domestication as a labour intensive and monetarily free endeavor automatically made female that led to the production of the series *Cabinet*.¹⁰⁸

Developing the concept of the domestic space as both a site for female disappearance but also labour intensiveness, the first image in the photographic series *Cabinet* played on the surreal dismemberment of the female body within vanishing cabinets, by displacing the obvious traits of the magic illusion box - often brightly colored and abstract - with a piece of heavy domestic wooden furniture. The legs of a body are exposed in a harsh edit that is not intended to fool. Instead the brutality of the cut references the visceral reality of physical exhaustiveness inflicted on the female form for the successful performance of acts of disappearance; as well as its entrapment within the context of the home. In this odd juxtaposition the body and furniture become one in a queering of the home as a gendered female space. The symmetry of the image provokes a feeling of calm that further imbues the violence of the cut with passivity evocative of the magician's famulus. This serenity is juxtaposed with a palpable sense of claustrophobia in the second work, which exposes a tightly gripped hand emerging from underneath the cabinet in a sense of desperation, a trick gone wrong or the burying of female identity as an angel of the house.¹⁰⁹ The notion of the female body becoming one with the domestic space is echoed in the photographic series by artist Eva Stenram called '*Drape, 2011*' in which the female body is merged with the domestic environment through the use of drapery. The series began with Stenram collecting negatives of vintage pin-ups as well as soft pornography to experiment with how the digital manipulation of a drape or curtain already present within the image, could be extended to disguise elements of the body. Following on from her series *pornography/forest_pics, 2004* in which

¹⁰⁸ The concept of housework as a domain for the free labour of women led to a series of publications by Boston born Melusina Fay Pierce who coined the term 'cooperative housekeeping' in which husbands would pay their wives to keep house through the use of collective kitchens and laundry rooms, providing a social aspect from women to get them out of the confines of the home and to earn monetary independence see, Dolores Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution: History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods and Cities* (USA: MIT Press, 1996)

¹⁰⁹ The term Angel of the House developed in the Victorian era to describe the passivity of the model wife, see, Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* Reprint edition 1854 (New York: Scholars Choice, 2015)

Stenram collected hard core pornographic images that were set within forests and digitally edited out the bodies, leaving behind scars on the landscape, *Drape* erases only sections of the female body leaving more of a clue for the viewer as to the original scenario of the photograph manipulated, as Stenram states, “the viewer's imagination is gently teased and called into action”.¹¹⁰

In discussions of how the work came to fruition and in particular the heavily referenced use of the domestic space, Stenram mentions having the work of Louise Bourgeois in mind, specifically the series *La Femme Maison*, in which the female body is merged with a house. *Femme maison* – simply meaning house woman/housewife – was translated by Bourgeois into a series of small paintings depicting a woman with a house concealing her head. This concealment of the head obscures the figure from being aware that the rest of her body is exposed and a feeling of utter vulnerability pierces the viewer, as Will Gompertz analogizes “She thinks she is safe and secure in her domestic prison, because that is all she can see around her. She has no idea that she is flashing her genitals to all and sundry, more vulnerable than ever”.¹¹¹ Stenram specifically quoted Bourgeois talking about *Femme Maison* saying, “[she] does not know that she is half naked, and she does not know that she is trying to hide. That is to say, she is totally self-defeating because she shows herself at the very moment that she thinks she is hiding”.¹¹² Not knowing that one is trying to hide also brings to light the notion of hiding in plain sight, just as the Hidden Mother images of the Victorian era before, Stenram’s images do little to conceal the body, instead they make it more sexually potent and fetishized by drawing attention only to selective parts – just as Goldin’s version of *Sawing through a Woman* had led to an increased audience of fetishists.¹¹³ On the issue of absence and presence in her work and more specifically within

¹¹⁰ Eva Stenram interviewed by Alexander Strecker, “Drapes//Parts” *Lens Culture*, accessed 24 September 2015, <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/eva-stenram-drapes-parts>

¹¹¹ Will Gompertz, “My life in art: The day Bourgeois moved me to tears” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 8 October 2008, accessed 24 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/oct/07/louise.bourgeois>

¹¹² Louise Bourgeois as quoted by Eva Stenram in “Drapes//Parts” *Lens Culture*, accessed 24 September 2015, <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/eva-stenram-drapes-parts>

¹¹³ Francesca Coppa, “The Body Immaterial: Magician’s Assistants and Performance Labor”, p. 93. The concept of vanishing in plain sight is taken as a reference from Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, see Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter* (HarperPerennial Classics, 2013)

the practice of photography Stenram repudiates that all photographic images function purely on an indexical level. Due to the nature of her work appropriating found images Stenram instead favors the possibility of the multiplicity of moments a photograph can contain through manipulation, she states “all absences reveal something else; absences enhance our looking and trigger our imagination at the same time.” The use of disembodied women within Stenram’s work also reflects her thoughts on the body as a changeable entity,

I tend to just keep a fragment of these women, hiding, cropping and obscuring the full view of the female body. This disembodiment perhaps links into a recognition of the body as a constructed, fleeting, changeable thing. It's also in bits. There is no need to show the body complete. I use bits of the body to experiment with specific pictorial or conceptual tactics. In *Drape* the viewer gets a chance to imagine the rest of woman.¹¹⁴

The imagining of the female body and discussions of it as a site for continual change, able to be broken up and moved around, returns to the notion of the indestructible female and the role of an audience in filling in the gaps.¹¹⁵ Through the deflection, or in magic terms misdirection, of the eye in Stenram’s images toward the background in which a figure is set, the staging used to create a fantasy, sexual or otherwise, is highlighted as an important but often overlooked motif.¹¹⁶

The use of found images and digital manipulation in Stenram’s work is in direct contrast to the stylized staged photographic works of Annett Reimer in which the body and the domestic again become entangled. *The Unhomely stage, 2008* is a five work series by artist Annett Reimer that depicts the female body slowly disappearing within the domestic space and merging with pieces of furniture. Reimer’s practice is focused on the female body and domesticity within the genre of self-portraiture and her naked figure is regularly translated into an object alongside furniture within domestic spaces. The surreal element to Reimer’s work is born from the cold manner in which they are staged providing a palpable sense of how unhomely the domestic space can often be for the female body. The images, a series of

¹¹⁴ Eva Stenram interviewed by Alexander Strecker, “Drapes//Parts” *Lens Culture*

¹¹⁵ The indestructible female body was further elaborated in an illusion by P. T Selbit called *The Indestructible Girl* in which the female assistant was dressed as a battlefield nurse and seen as ‘indestructible’ due to her surviving WWI, see Eric C. Lewis and Peter Warlock, *P. T. Selbit: Magical Innovator*. (Pasadena, CA: Magical Publications, 1989) p. 143

¹¹⁶ Eva Stenram, “Drape”, accessed 24 September 2015, <http://www.evastenram.co.uk/pages/mumdraped.htm>

five, depict the slow disappearance of the artist's body within furnishings of the home. The appearance of limbs behind a sofa gradually unfolds to show a body under a carpet before it is eventually consumed and vanished by the domestic objects that surrounded it; leaving only shoes on show. The series re-engages with the earlier discussed issue of the female body vanishing under a Persian rug.¹¹⁷ The body is depicted wrapped with feet exposed before disappearing from the frame altogether, giving a macabre resonance of the common trait of murder victims being concealed within carpets. It could be read that female identity in Reimer's work is metaphorically murdered by domestication. Unlike Stenram's series *Drape* Reimer's images do not conjure the same sexual potency, there is a coldness and formality to her images that derives from the symmetry and staging of each composition, everything appears in its place, the furniture and the female body as object in an uncanny intertwining. The issue of staging within the work of Reimer and Stenram echoed the play on theatricality that had developed through my own work *Escamotage*. The 'maker of the illusion in *Escamotage* is the projector and owing to this it is purposely on view with no attempt to conceal its function, I was conscious of the re-staging of the hidden mothers trope and wanted to explore a way of literally breaking the contemplation of the work so that it became theatrical, as though a prop. *Escamotage* is an illusion made and deliberately broken: a photographic suspension of disbelief built up and undercut by the technologies used to create it.¹¹⁸ To show the mechanics of how something works can also add to its potential to affect and this is something that became central to the decisions made around the installation of the collective exhibition of my body of work, also entitled *Escamotage*.

Staging Fascination: *Escamotage*

The development of a solo show of major artworks produced as part of my research provided an important opportunity to critically reflect on emergent themes in my practice. In addition, it facilitated the gathering together of autonomously made artworks into a dialogue with one another and offered a space to examine how the newly developed concept of a 'field of

¹¹⁷ Supra. Chapter 3, pp.107-109

¹¹⁸ Aneka French, "Grace A Williams: The Appearance of a Vanishing Woman" *Photomonitor*

fascination' resonated with my own work. The resultant show titled *Escamotage* highlighted two main thematic strands: *exposure* and *disembodied female representation*.

The theme of *exposure* as a thread that connected several of my works became apparent in the process of curating *Escamotage* and as a term it seemed to function on several pertinent levels. Firstly it resonated with the content of the artworks selected many of which exposed lesser known narratives, histories or practices. Secondly it pointed to the uncovering of falsehoods through the presentation of objects and appropriated material in alternative spaces to shift meaning. Thirdly it delineated the purposeful display of technology to expose 'how things worked'. All of the artworks I had selected to include in *Escamotage* had a relationship to illusion whether in a major or minor way, but what the acknowledgment of *exposure* as a connecting theme highlighted was that all addressed aspects of illusion from the position of theatrical staging and not a desire to deceive or trick in the tradition of magic. This specific recognition was particularly evident in the installation of the photographic series *Escamotage*. The decision not to conceal the slide projector as the technological device responsible for the incremental dissolving of the image enabled viewers to closely inspect the 'illusion maker' forcing the projector into the position of a theatrical prop. Correspondingly, the inclusion of the Robert Harbin designed *Zig Zag* illusion box acted as an open invitation to viewers to figure out how the trick might be done; an opportunity normally restricted in the history of illusion to maintain trade secrets. The process of reflection that highlighted the concept of *exposure* subsequently initiated a process of thinking about *Escamotage* as an equivalent to 'corpsing', this being the theatrical slang term given to actors who break character by laughing whilst on stage. To me this seemed to echo with the staging and breaking of multiple illusions occurring in my own work and it ignited an interest in the tradition of epic theatre.

Epic theatre established a radical rethinking of the customary understanding of the dramatic and it removed what Walter Benjamin described as the abyss of the orchestra pit. The removal of the invisible barrier between audience and actor positioned the theatre stage as a new public platform and exposed the deceptions at play, Benjamin states, "straightforward recognition of reality is often impeded by a presentation which shows how to master it...the artist who is realist...exposes all the veils and deceptions that obscure reality

and intervenes in his public's real actions".¹¹⁹ For Benjamin, the new exhibition space of the theatre destroyed the magical line between viewer and the viewed exposing and acknowledging theatricality. To me this seemed a perfect compliment to what I wanted to achieve with *Escamotage*, I wanted the exhibition to be evocative of illusion whilst simultaneously acknowledging its false staging and theatrically. Bertolt Brecht stated that the actor's role within epic theatre was to depict events whilst simultaneously exposing him or herself as an actor. He continued that the two states should always work side by side and the difference between them should never disappear. For Brecht the sole task of epic theatre was to deliver expression to action whilst also exposing the very effects that generate the staging.¹²⁰ This was crucial to the development of my thinking in curating *Escamotage* to purposefully expose the effects that generate the illusion.

The revelation of thinking about exposure, illusion and theatricality as key concepts in the development of curating my work led to a focus on staging as a central feature in the design and installation of *Escamotage*. It became important to me that the gallery space in which the works were exhibited did not simply follow a conventional format of the white cube, instead I wanted to echo the drama of theatrical staging by making use of darkness and artificial light. The decision to black out the exhibition space was an intentional reference to the context of Occultism, illusion and Magic all three of which survive on lighting, staging and atmosphere for success.¹²¹ The exhibition space became evocative of 'the darkened room' a continuous motif of the spectacular events of the séance. The use of low-level lighting became integral to building a sense of atmosphere for the exhibition and for me it resonated with the history of performance, conjuring and the manifesting of the unseen as reliant on the seductiveness of the dark. Spotlighting became a prominent feature of the exhibition space and I used them as a way to focus artworks and objects (Fig. 19- 20). *Apport* in particular took on an authority through the intensity given over to its lighting scheme. The shadows cast on the adjacent walls became integral to the work transporting the viewer to another point of focus.

¹¹⁹ Bertolt Brecht "journal entry August 4th, 1940" in Sarah Bryant-Bertail *Space and Time in Epic Theater: The Brechtian Legacy* (New York: Camden House, 2000) p. 1

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin. *Understanding Brecht*. Translated by Anna Bostock with an Introduction by Stanley Mitchell (London: Verso, 1998) p.11

¹²¹ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002) pp. 215-258

The second major theme that emerged from looking at my work collectively for *Escamotage* was a form of *disembodied female representation*. It became clear that whilst my artworks individually dealt with issues around the female body none actually represented the body itself, instead every work was connected through disembodiment. The exoskeletons of female disappearance were symbolically evoked through *Apport* with its residue of the fraudulent and shamed female body;¹²² *Escamotage* with its Persian carpet as an exoskeleton for the vanished female body;¹²³ *Simultaneity* with its disembodied female voices;¹²⁴ and *Zig Zag* as an object whose pure function was to dismember the female body.¹²⁵ Collectively these works produced an exhibition evocative of a form of disappearance and although the female body was at the center of every work in terms of research, visually this had emerged in an entirely different form. (Fig. 21 – 24)

The initial intention of producing *Escamotage* as an exhibition had been to explore how a field of fascination functioned in relationship to my own work but this instead developed into a revelatory clarification of themes emerging from my practice. The process of curating my work gave me time and space to reflect on how my own fascination with archival material, as well as methods of appropriation and editing had manifested in a series of artworks that produced a visual language of disembodied female representation; an important and creatively energizing discovery for my ongoing practice. Furthermore, it enabled me to push my ideas about how the categories of clairvoyance could be used as curatorial devices. I developed a mapping of *Escamotage* which denoted each section as a category of *The Clairs*. *Apport* with its potent synthetic fragrance resonated with clairallience ‘clear-scent’, *Simultaneity* with its performative voice echoed with clairaudience ‘clear-hearing’ and *Escamotage* nuanced clairvoyance ‘clear-seeing’. The particular use of scent within the work *Apport* also nuanced the physical relationship to bodily channeling through the inhalation of a fragrance. Scent physically inhabits the body and I thought this was an interesting metaphor for the spirit animating the medium’s body in the scenario of the séance. Visitors to

¹²² Supra. Chapter 3, pp.95-96

¹²³ Supra. Chapter 3, pp.107-109

¹²⁴ Supra. Chapter 3, pp. 92-94

¹²⁵ Supra, Chapter 3, pp. 132-134, 110-111

Escamotage could not help but be overwhelmed by the fragrance in the space and they therefore enacted a form of unintentional channeling.

The staging of *Escamotage* produced one additional connection in that none of the works exhibited had a clear sense of time, *Warm up* was the only artwork in which a specific reference to a physical time and place was made, all other works resided in a liminal space. The sense of timelessness that this produced evoked for me an interesting echo of the debates over the simultaneity of time evidenced through channeling the past in the present through a medium's body. In conclusion, *Escamotage* sought to explore how fascination established itself in my own artistic practice but what it achieved was the recognition and clarification of the themes of *exposure* and *disembodied female representation* in my work.

This chapter sought to develop the concept of 'a field of fascination' and negotiate how it functioned in relation to my own artistic practice. It began with a process of refining the definition of 'fascination' as a term that has a direct connection to curiosity and abjection informed by Andrew Benjamin's authorship and discussed how this has manifested in my own method of appropriating archival and found material. Moving forward it contextually documented the modes of female vanishing within the history of magic and the domestic space pertinent to the production of my own artworks and offered critical reflection on the developing works including the photographic series *Escamotage*, *Cabinet and the performative work Zig Zag*. Finally it documents the process of developing the exhibition *Escamotage*, the precise function of which was to explore the interconnected themes in my body of work resulting in the acknowledgement of a kind of disembodied female representation. A concept which to quote Judith Butler's use of Plato's 'phantasmic economy', deprives the female body of any particular morphe, Butler states, "for as the receptacle, the feminine is a permanent and, hence, non-living, shapeless non-thing which cannot be named." It is only through figural functions such as "nurse, mother, womb, [that] the feminine is synecdochally collapsed into a set of figural functions. In this sense, Plato's discourse on materiality (if we can take the discourse on the hypodoché to be that), is one which does not permit the notion of the female body as a human form."¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 53

Conclusion

In order to conclude it is first of all necessary to outline the motivations from which this research project began and how each has manifested in the weave of this thesis. The original aims of the investigation as outlined in the introduction sought to examine the position of the contemporary female psychic as a channeling conduit, in light of the challenges to the concept of *woman as 'vessel'*. Interrogating how the ownership of psychic practice by women established a double-edged power dynamic providing a path to rethink what it means to view *woman as 'vessel'*. Secondly, it aimed to interrogate atmosphere and its role in setting up a field of fascination within the practice of mediumship through a practical exploration of the logic of the senses around comfort, familiarity, prediction and expectation. Finally it set out to explore the wider question of how a field of fascination could manifest in the work of contemporary art through a practical experimentation of how a contemporary artwork can create an immersive dwelling space able to generate a compulsion to look.

The personal fascination with mediumship and magic that was totally removed from belief which guided this thesis sat in relationship to a noticeable increase in contemporary female art practitioners interacting with aspects of the otherworldly, magic and illusion, which further indicated the continuation of the privileging of women within the field of the supernatural. The nature of artistic practice enabled the thinking through of these wide but interconnected themes through the recognition of Rachel Jones and Rebecca Fortnum's concept of 'not knowing' and Isabelle Stenger's underpinning of the importance of remaining open to wonder. As an advocate for subjects which sit outside of accepted forms of knowledge production, Stenger's is consistent in her argument for the ongoing contemplation of irrational fields such as mediumship from which she believes a lot can be learned and this became key to my thinking.¹ Although her writing elaborates on the particulars of science as a messy practice, it fundamentally raises the issue of how predominant baseline knowledges and collective thinking are in contemporary society, inevitably casting out anything seemingly irrational. This highlights the particular contribution of the discussion of the female body as a vessel in the context of new materialist feminism. Despite Elizabeth Grosz's call for any

¹ Isabelle Stengers "Wondering about Materialism" in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Australia: re-press, 2011)

approach that acknowledges the materiality of the female body as a central concept to better understand 'woman' there has never previously been a discussion of the role of female mediumship in which the female body clearly has a central position. The exploitation of the stereotype of the female body as a conduit in the act of channeling directly facilitated a societal empowerment of women and so its importance in the discussion of building the identity of woman is greatly underdeveloped. Through an overview of Karen Barad's agential realism in relation to Susan Hekman's attempt at a social ontology of the feminine subject, the 'mangle' or entanglement of references that has so far established a contemporary, albeit uncertain, answer to the question of 'woman' is now injected with the nuance of supernaturalism that cannot be ignored in the history of women's oppression. This is fundamental to new materialist feminism in which the ontology of the body is central and the consideration of the treatment of women's bodies within the various real life scenarios of mediumship and magic is a new area for development.² This provides a unique platform for the continuation of critical discussions about the position of the female body in contemporary society and leaves open the question of how contemporary practices that sit outside of rational thinking still imply traditional gender binaries.

The development of the context of channeling within the field of fine art in chapter two built upon the recognition of female practitioners who historically worked under the guise of spiritualism to forge independent artistic careers. The recognition of Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton as possible precursors to abstraction in painting practice echoes the use of mediumship as a tool for empowerment within the context of artistic production. The recognition of their work in recent years also sparked a connection to the re-examining of the periphery of the occult in Susan Hiller's work, as a space in which women continue to have an odd privileging. The particular contribution of this chapter is the establishing of a relationship between the nuances of 'channeling' and the broader concept of 'not knowing', which has manifested in recent discussions of artistic methodology led by Rachel Jones and Rebecca Fortnum. On this basis, I argue that the position of 'not knowing' has a commonality with the language of 'channeling' through the sensory categories of *'The Clairs'*, a collection of terms borrowed from the practice of mediumship which express a clarity of the body's senses

² Susan Hekman, *The Feminine Subject* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014) p. 155

including sight, touch, taste, hearing and scent. Developing this into a framework described as a clairvoyance of contemporary art practice, I additionally highlight the problematic negativity of the term 'not knowing' in lay understanding and introduce claircognizance 'clear knowing' as a better placed definition for the description of experimentation and play in artistic practice.

Through the negotiation of the transition from channeling to 'not knowing' to claircognizance 'clear knowing' as a more productive framework for the articulation of artistic methods, the unique concept of a *field of fascination* specific to the work of art emerged. The coining of the term a *field of fascination* facilitated a discussion of how practical methods in my own artistic practice such as working with archival and found material, appropriation and editing could result in an equivalent atmosphere of fascination for the audience of my work. I wanted to explore how the curiosity I had for material culture, particularly objects, images and narratives that pertained to the history of women in the field of the supernatural could assemble a similar experience of fascination in the viewing of my work. Through the breaking down of the term fascination into its constituent parts of abjection and curiosity in dialogue with the authorship of Andrew Benjamin, the assembling of an atmosphere of fascination became an initial application in the development of the curated exhibition *Escamotage*, 2014.

The precise purpose of the exhibition *Escamotage* was to explore how collectively the body of work that I had created responded to the concept of a *field of fascination* but in practice this shifted toward a critical reflection on the key themes that emerged from my work when placed in dialogue with one another. The process of curating *Escamotage* led to an acknowledgement of the importance of theatrical staging and its techniques to create an atmosphere that would induce curiosity. Practically this emerged through the use of controlled lighting and a metaphoric echoing of the darkened room of the séance through blackout. The acknowledgment of staging as a central component to the curation of *Escamotage* also raised the issue of *exposure* as a key feature of my work and this resulted in a clarification of one of my initial objectives. The final aim outlined in my thesis proposal which articulated the *field of fascination* as an immersive dwelling space able to generate a compulsion to look, shifted toward a practical investigation of techniques that specifically dealt with the generation of atmosphere through staging. Finally, *Escamotage*

also highlighted a visually articulated form of disembodied representation of woman within my practice, which holds particular value for the exploration of the politics of the female body within the under researched field of performance magic.

The body of work presented as part of this thesis is a contribution to understanding how the concept of claircognizance 'clear knowing' instead of 'not knowing' could function as an articulation of artistic practice and how the development of the *field of fascination* provides an articulation of the curiosity inherent in the methods of artistic production that builds upon Tom Holert's artistic 'interest'. These are by no means finished results instead they are seeds of possibility for future practice. The resultant propulsion of this thesis is to continue to work through the frameworks of new materialist feminist understandings of the body with an acknowledged sensitivity toward the concept of 'woman as vessel' as a formulation of the female body that is sensitized in a unique way and this further anticipates the possibility of a new type of disembodied female representation, in which the exposure of the female body and its mistreatment in certain scenarios is possible through the total eclipse of the body itself, building on the themes developed in the exhibition *Escamotage*.

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Video Works

Spectral Spectatorship, 2012 Duration: 9 minutes 15 seconds

Simultaneity, 2013 Duration: 5 minutes

V is for Val, 2014 Duration: 30 seconds

All video works are viewable as part of a showreel: <https://youtu.be/YCwWi8EiBRE>

CHAPTER ONE

Woman as Vessel

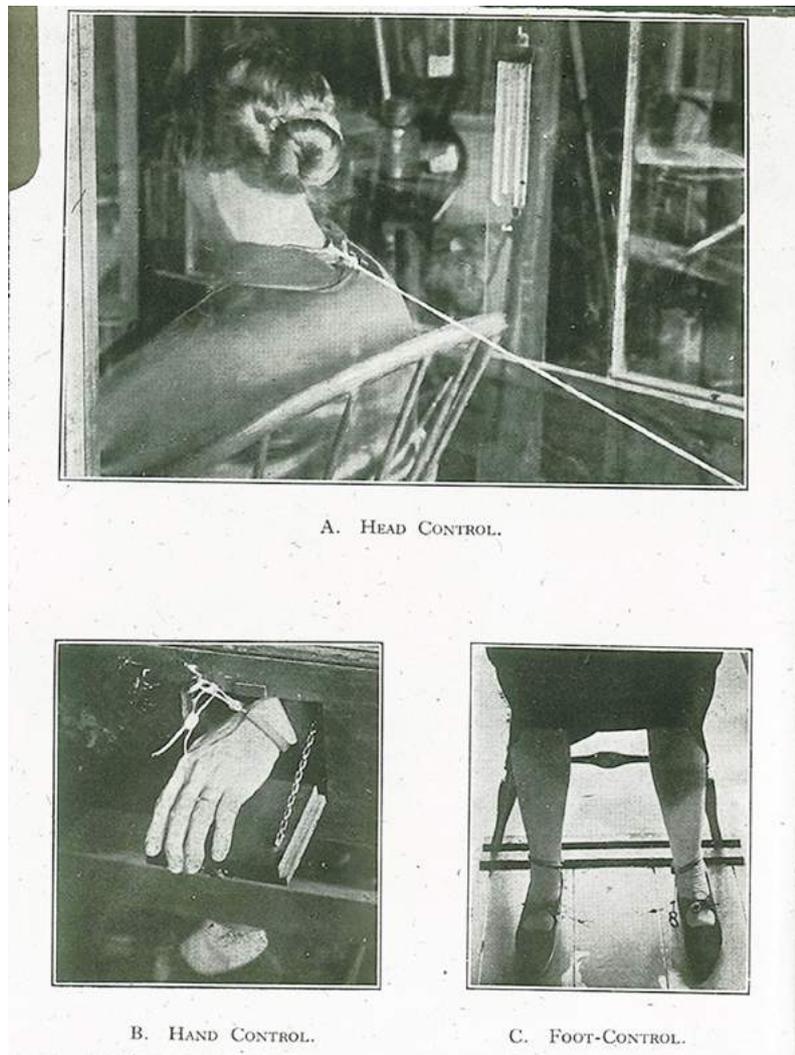


Fig. 1

A glass lantern slide depicting the head, hand, and foot controls used in the mediumship of 'Margery' Mina Crandon during séances with Dr. Crandon. Approx. 83 x 83cm. Courtesy of the T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

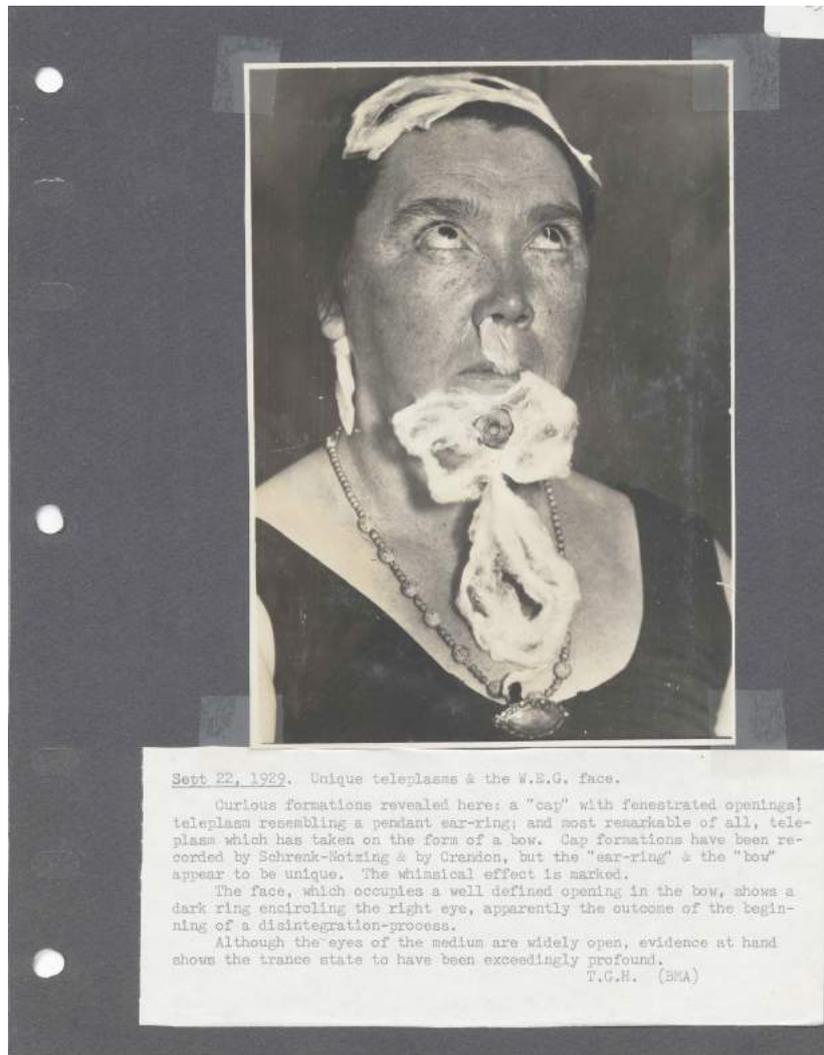


Fig. 2

Mary Marshall, staring upwards with a unique Teleplasmic mass attached to her face and neck that contains the face of W.E. Gladstone during a séance at the home of Dr. Thomas Glendenning Hamilton on September 22, 1929. Photographic print with notation. Approx. 21 x 30cm. Courtesy of the T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

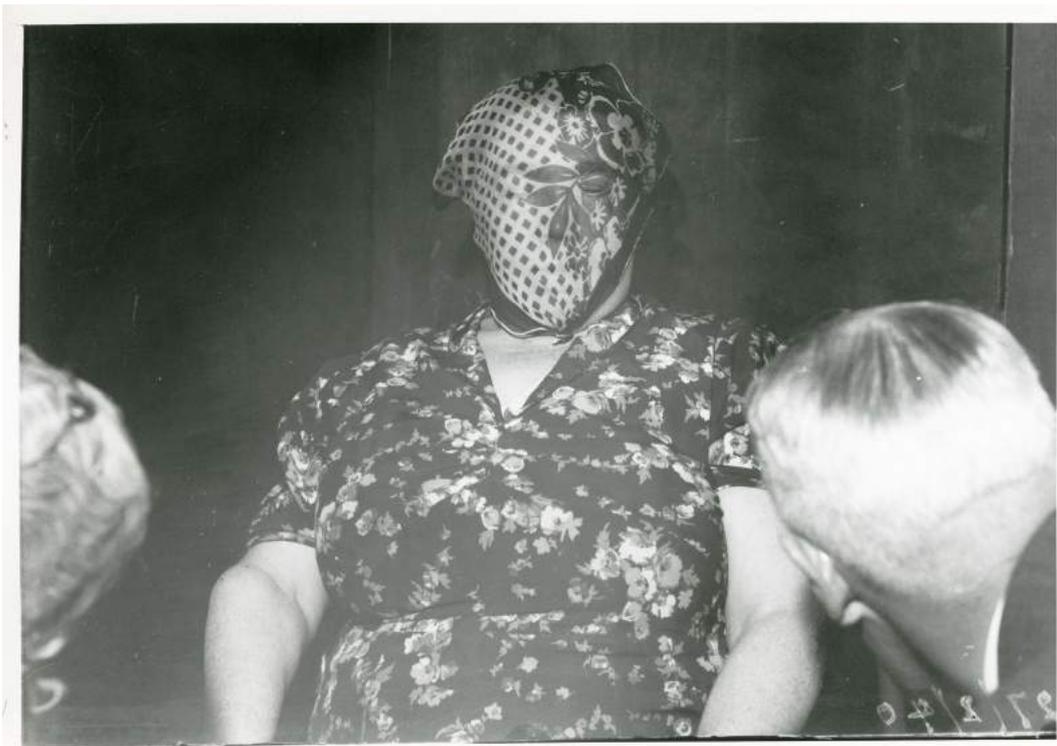


Fig. 3

Medium Mary Marshall producing a 'Supernormal Handkerchief', February 23, 1940. Photographic print. Approx. 20 x 15cm. Courtesy of the T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

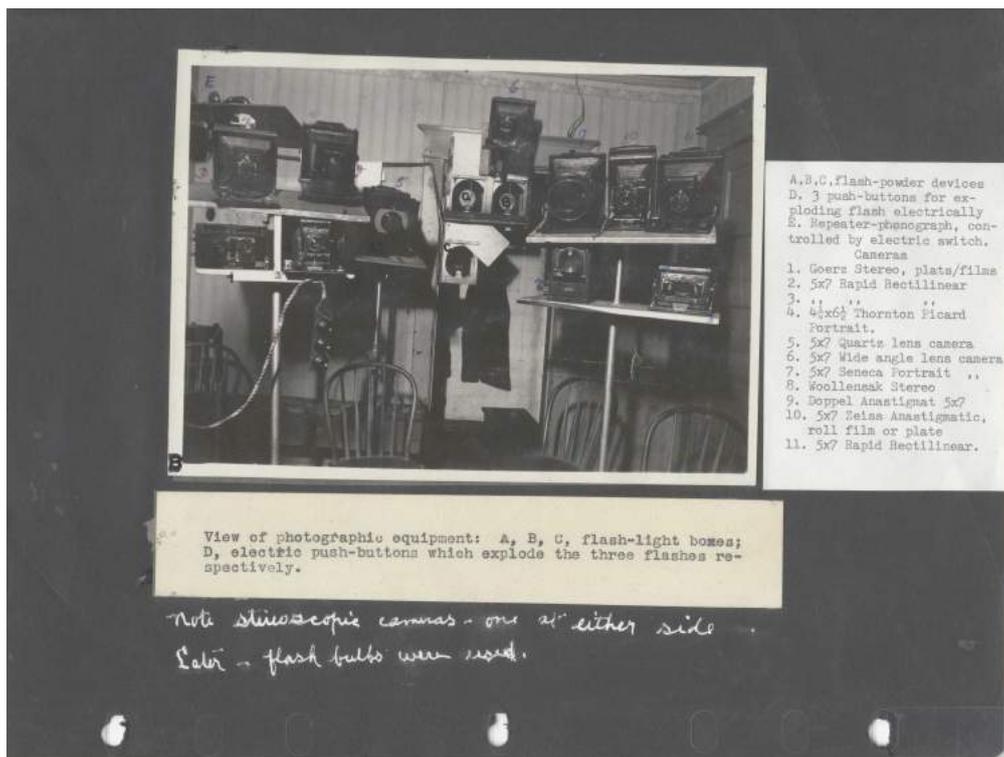


Fig. 4

A page from an annotated photo album featuring a photograph of the camera equipment used during séances at the home of Dr. Thomas Glendenning Hamilton. Handwritten Notes by Lillian May Hamilton, L.M.H, Dr Hamilton's wife. Circa. 1920s. Approx. 10 x 15cm. Courtesy of the T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.



Fig. 5

Alexander Gehring
Medium in Trance, Messages from the Dark Room series, C-print, 50cm x 54cm, 2011

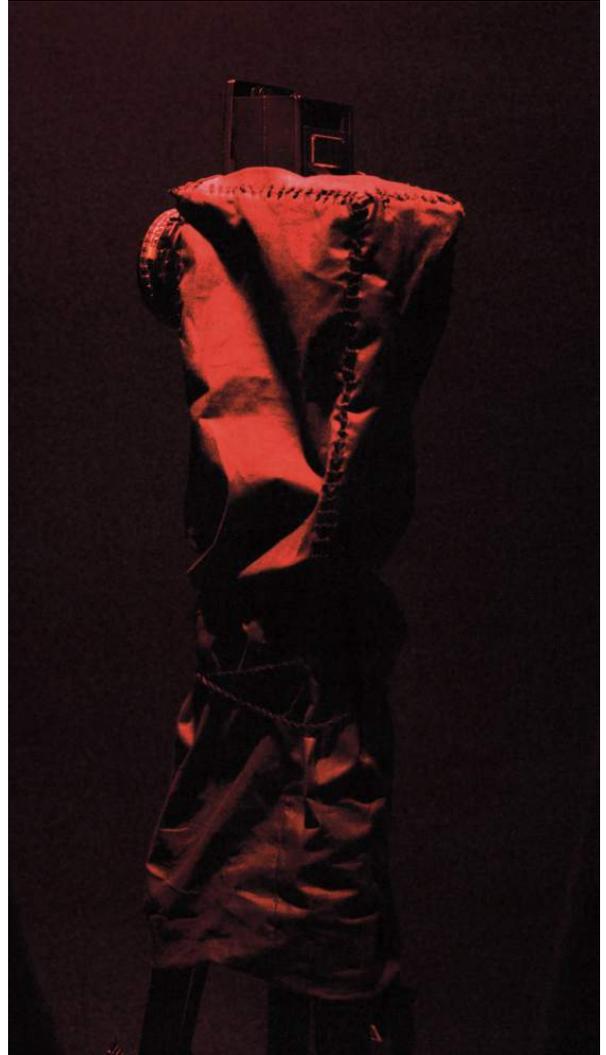
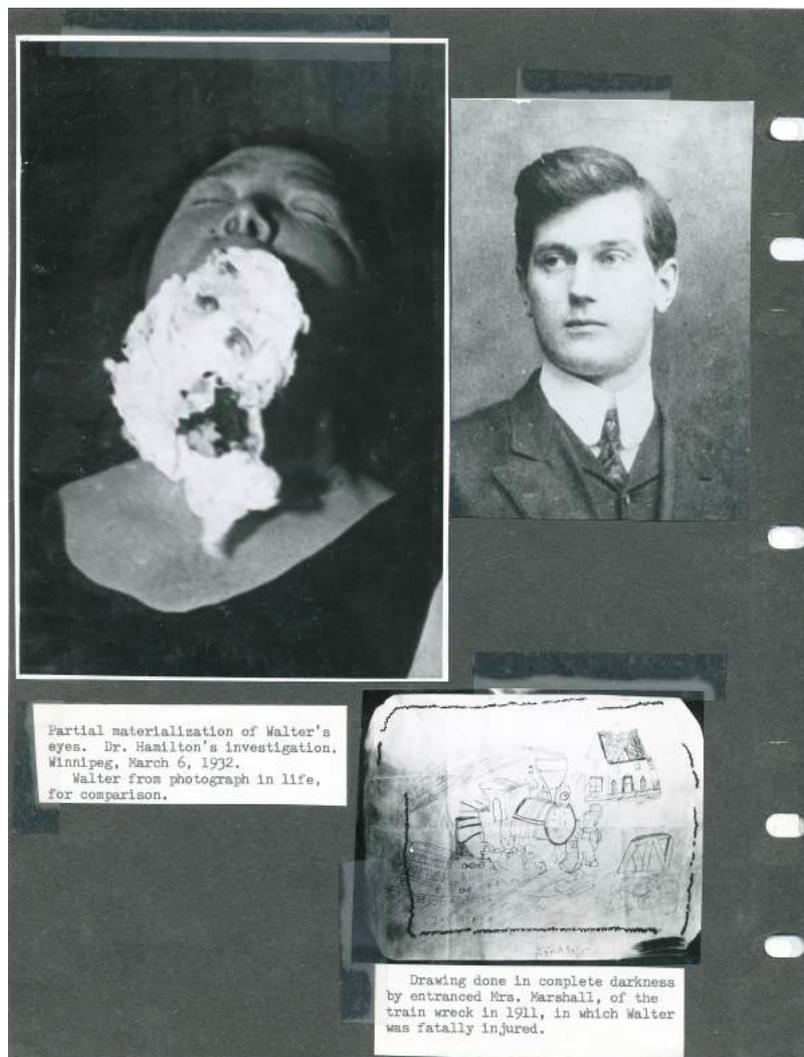


Fig. 6

Alexander Gehring

Control of the Medium, Messages from the Dark Room series, C-print, 50cm x 54cm, 2011



Partial materialization of Walter's eyes. Dr. Hamilton's investigation. Winnipeg, March 6, 1932. Walter from photograph in life, for comparison.

Drawing done in complete darkness by entranced Mrs. Marshall, of the train wreck in 1911, in which Walter was fatally injured.

Fig. 7

Mary Marshall with spirit guide 'Walter's' eyes depicted in manifestation. Approx. 83 x 83cm. Courtesy of the T.G Hamilton Family Fonds, Archives & Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

CHAPTER TWO

On 'Not Knowing': Art and the Spirit



Fig. 1

Hilma af Klint, *The Swan, No. 1, Group IX/SUW*, Oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm, 1914–5



Fig. 2

Hilma af Klint, *The Swan, No. 1*, Oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm, 1914–5. Installation view: *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 16 February - 26 May 2013



Fig. 3

Hilma af Klint, *The Dove, No. 3, Group IX/UV*, Oil on canvas, 155.5 × 115.5 cm, 1915



Fig. 4

Hilma af Klint, *The Dove, No. 3*, Oil on canvas, 155.5 × 115.5 cm, 1915. Installation view: *The Keeper*, New Museum, New York, 20 July - 2 October 2016

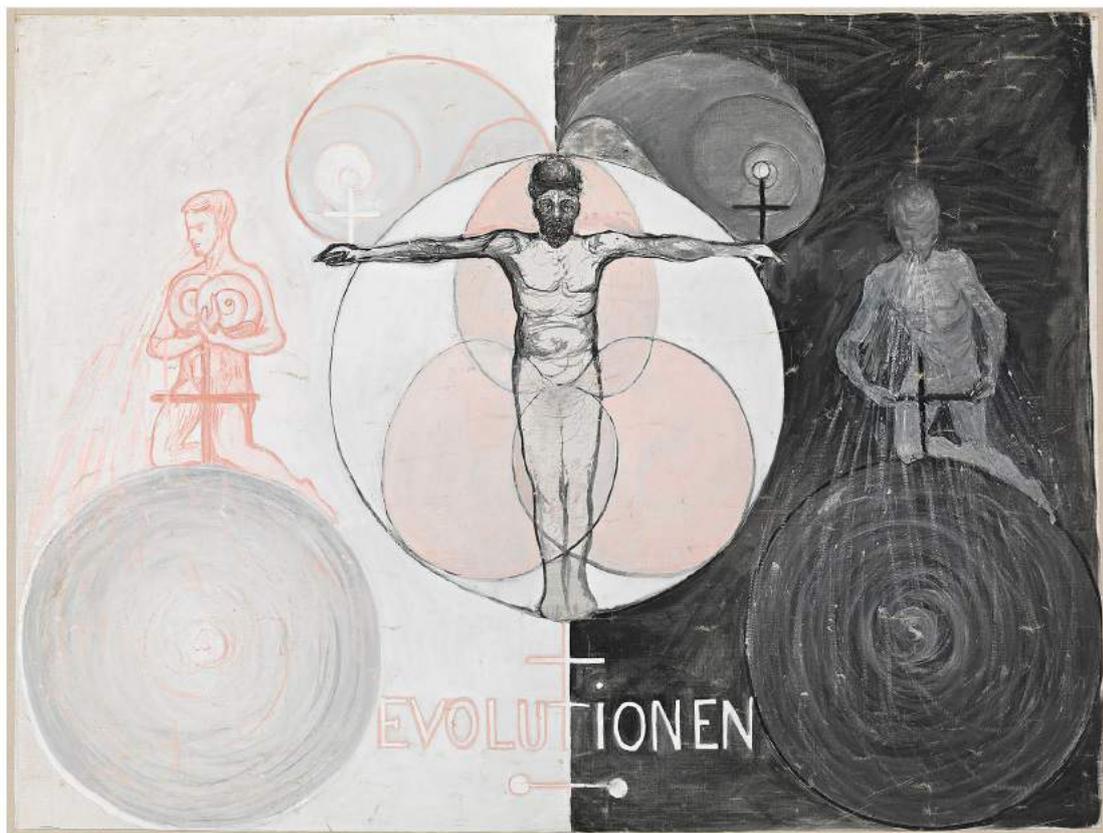


Fig. 5

Hilma af Klint, *Evolution, Group VI, No. 1*. Oil on canvas, 102.5 × 134.5 cm, 1908



Fig. 6

Hilma af Klint, *Evolution*, Oil on canvas, 102.5 × 134.5 cm, 1908. Installation view: *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 16 February - 26 May 2013



Fig. 7

Georgiana Houghton, *The Portrait of Lord Jesus Christ*, 8th December 1862, 21 x 30 cm



Fig. 8

Georgiana Houghton, *The Portrait of Lord Jesus Christ, 8th December 1862*, 21 x 30 cm. Installation view: *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, The Courtauld Gallery, 16 June – 11 September 2016

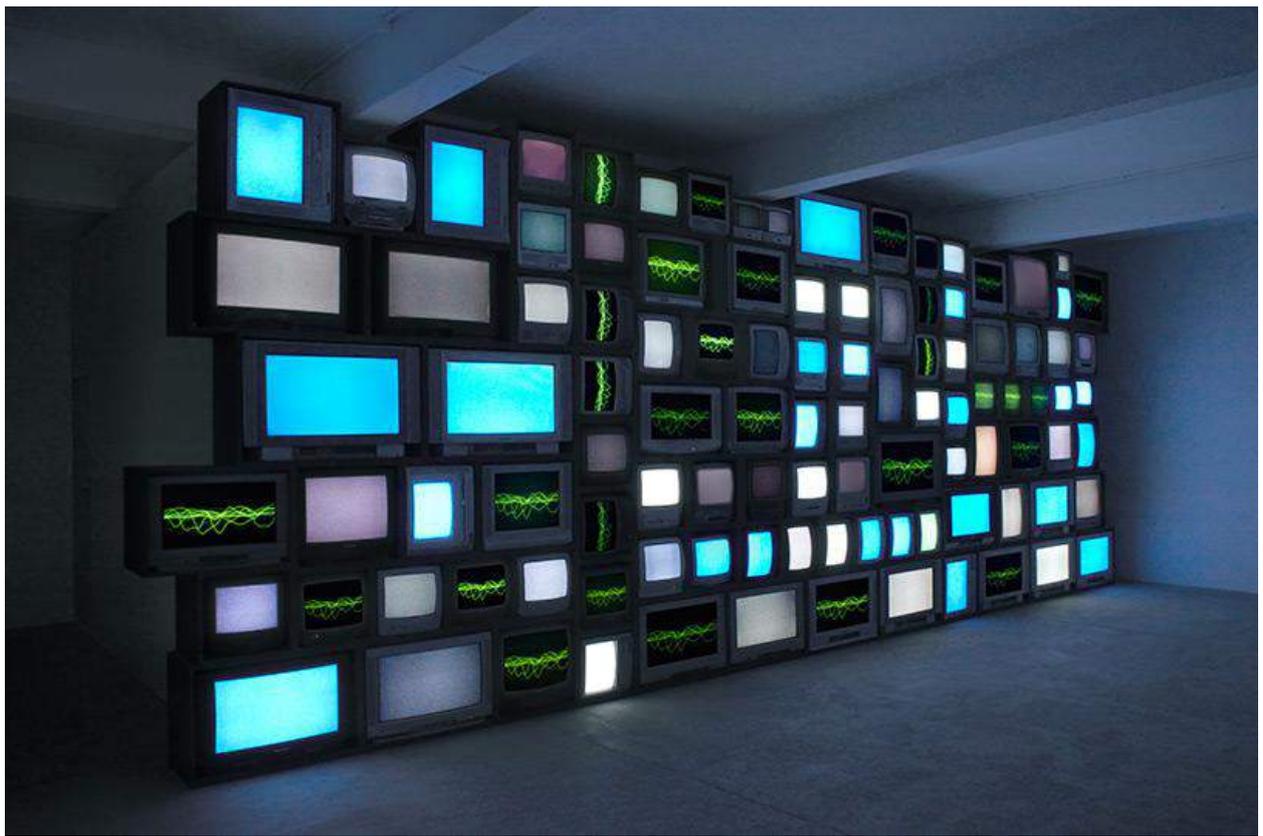


Fig. 9

Susan Hiller, *Channels*, multi-channel video installation, 106 television sets, 9 media players, 7 DVD players, signal splitters. Installation view Matt's Gallery, London, 13 February - 14 April 2013



Fig. 10

Susan Hiller, *Witness*, audio-sculpture, 350 loudspeakers, 10 cd players, amplifiers, wiring, lights. Dimensions variable, approx. 700 x 900 cm, 2000



Fig. 11

Susan Hiller, *Psi Girls*, video installation, 5 synchronised programmes, 5 projections, colour with stereo sound, real-time audio processing, duration 20 minutes, dimensions variable, 1999

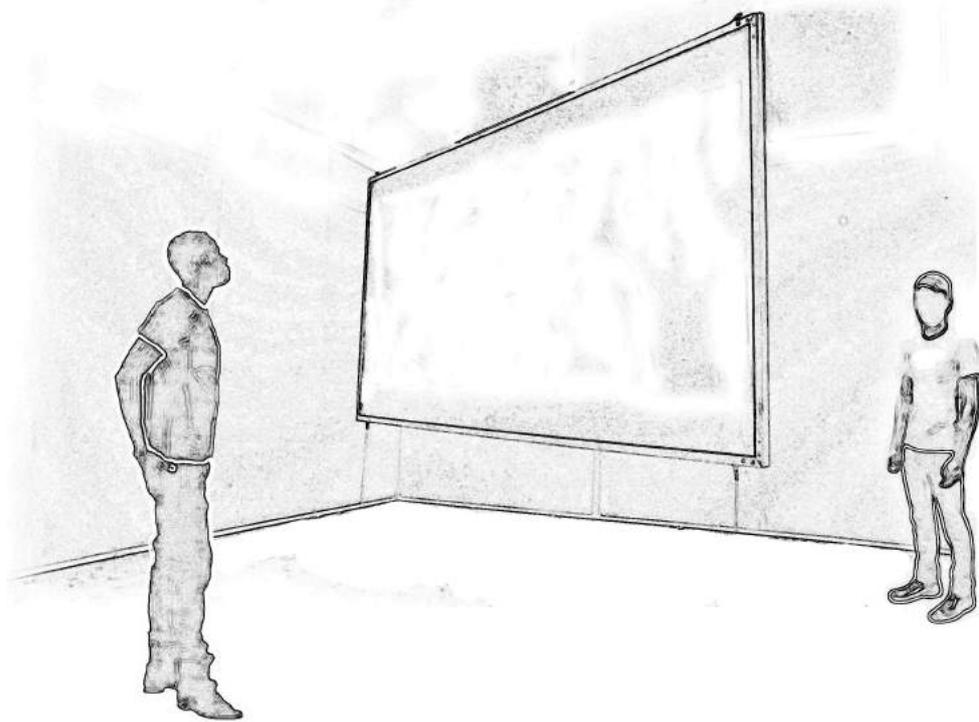


Fig. 12

Concept sketch illustrating scale for Grace A Williams, *Spectral Spectatorship*, digital drawing, 22 x 17cm, 2012



Fig. 13

Grace A Williams, *Spectral Spectatorship*, video installation, two synchronised projections, suspended screen, 152 x 275 cm. Installation view: Birmingham School of Art, 2012



Fig. 14

Detail from Grace A Williams, *Spectral Spectatorship*, video installation, two synchronised projections, suspended screen, 152 x 275 cm, 2012

CHAPTER THREE

*Assembling a Field of Fascination in
Contemporary Art*



Fig. 1

Concept sketch for Grace A Williams, *Apport*, digital drawing, 23 x 28cm, 2014



Fig. 2

Grace A Williams, *Apport*, fresh flowers and mixed media, dimensions variable approx. 183 x 150 x 150 cm. Installation view Birmingham School of Art, 2014



Fig. 3

Detail from Grace A Williams, *Apport*, fresh flowers and mixed media, dimensions variable, approx. 183 x 150 x 150 cm, Installation view Birmingham School of Art, 2014



Fig. 4

Detail showing rotting material from Grace A Williams, *Apport*, fresh flowers and mixed media, dimensions variable approx.183 x 150 x 150 cm, Installation view Birmingham School of Art, 2014



Fig. 5

Grace A Williams, Escamotage I, C-Type, 200 x 133cm, 2014



Fig. 6

Grace A Williams, Escamotage II, C-Type, 200 x 128cm, 2014

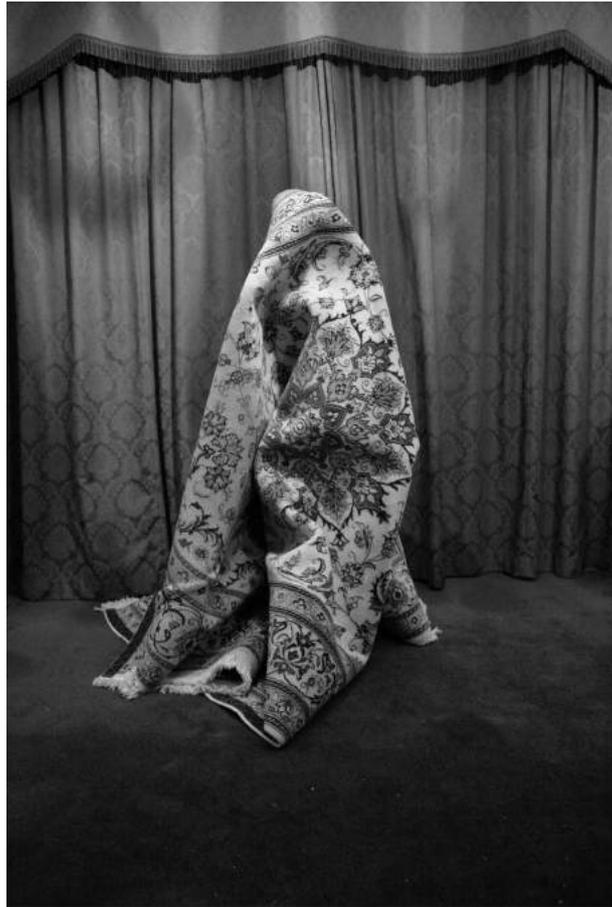


Fig. 7

Grace A Williams, Escamotage III, C-Type, 200 x 150cm, 2014



Fig. 8

Grace A Williams, Escamotage IV, C-Type, 200 x 217cm, 2014



Fig. 9

Grace A Williams, Escamotage V, C-Type, 200 x 195cm, C-Type, 2014



Fig. 10

Concept sketch for Grace A Williams, Escamotage installation, digital drawing, 20 x 20cm, 2014



Fig. 11

Concept sketch for Grace A Williams, *Escamotage* installation, digital drawing, 20 x 19cm, 2014

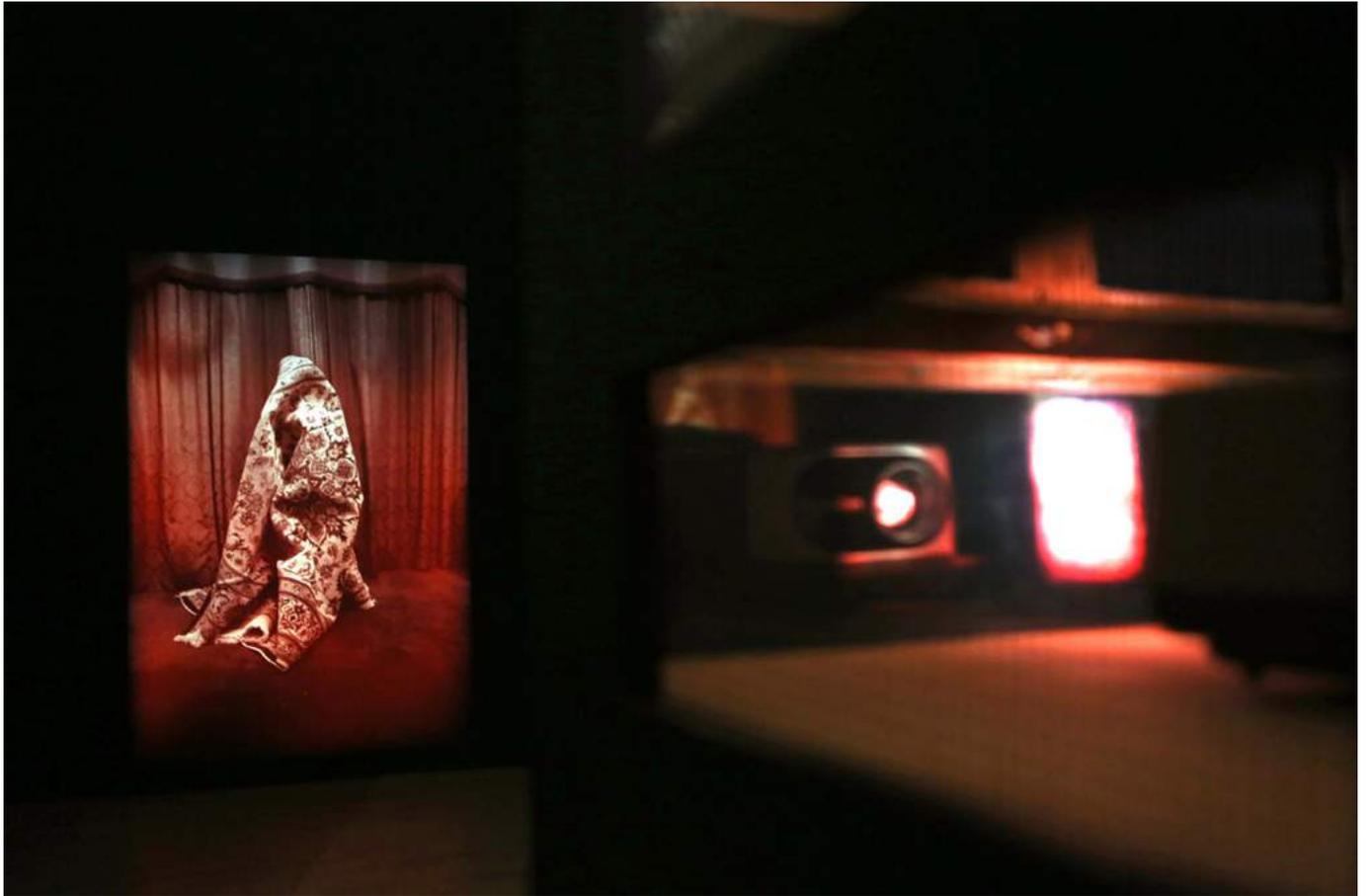


Fig. 12

Grace A Williams, *Escamotage*, 200 x 150cm, Installation View, BM&AG, 2015

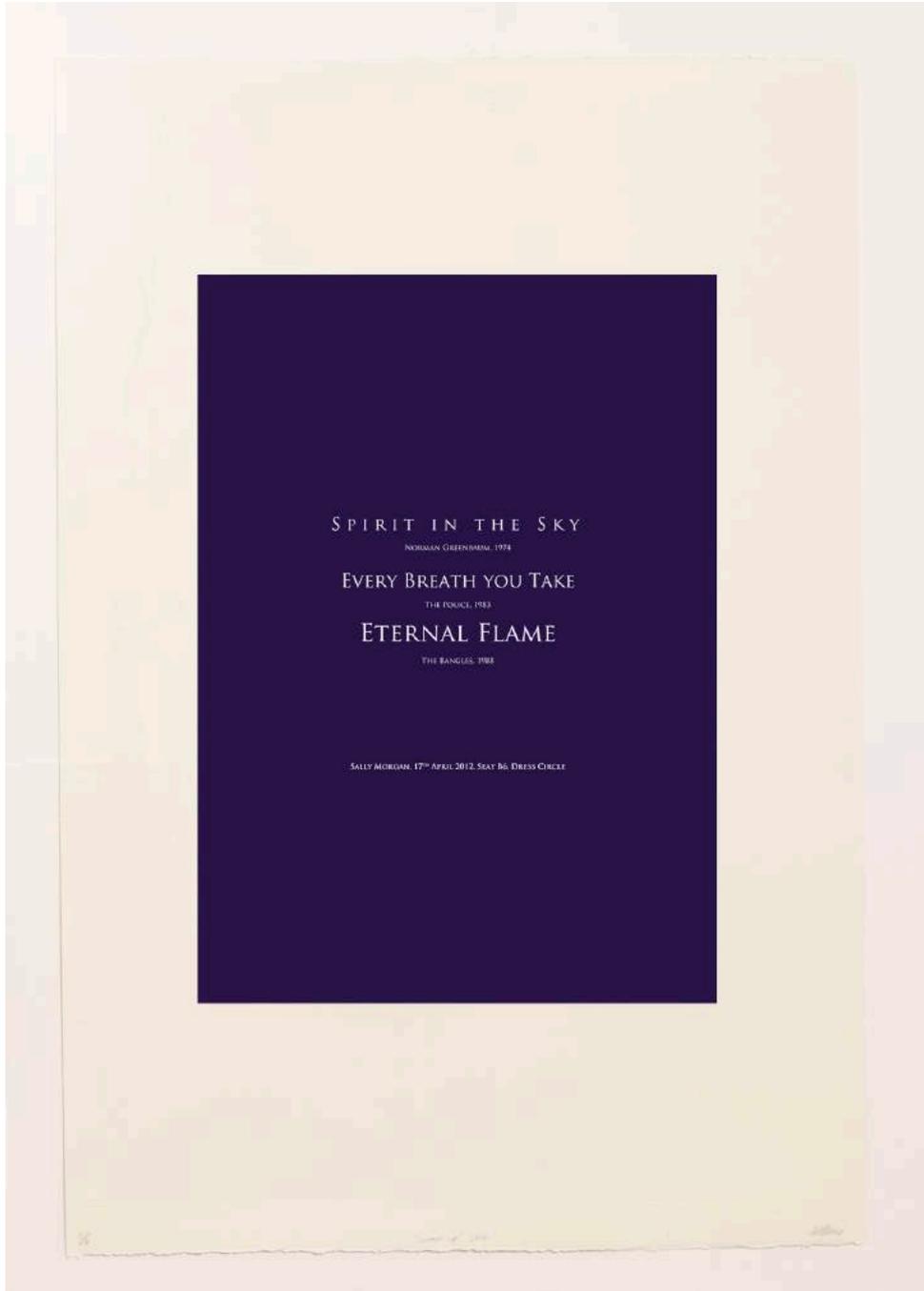


Fig. 13

Grace A Williams, *Warm Up*, Screen print on Fabriano, approx. 85 x 60cm, 2014



Fig. 14

Concept sketch illustrating scale for Grace A Williams, *Warm Up*, digital drawing, 23 x 21cm, 2014



Fig. 15

Grace A Williams, *Zig Zag*, original Robert Harbin Zig Zag illusion box hired from magician and president of The Magic Circle Scott Penrose, approx. 230 x 80 x 80cm. Installed as part of *Escamotage* at ARTicle Gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014

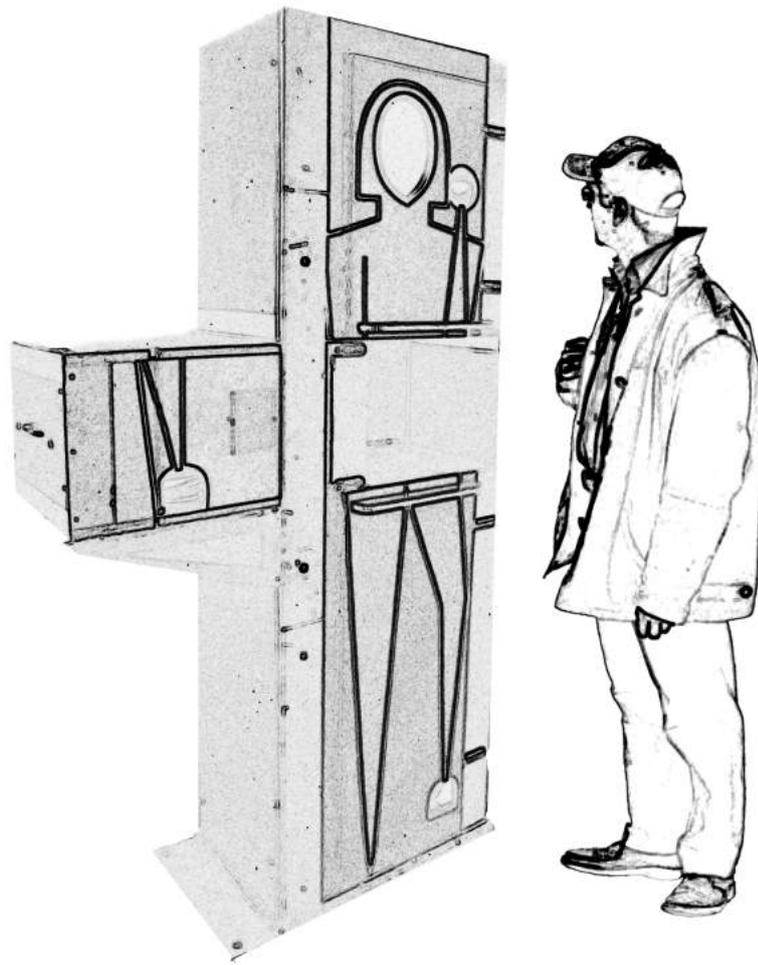


Fig. 16

Concept sketch illustrating scale for *Zig-Zag*, digital drawing, 21 x 20cm, 2014



Fig. 17

Grace A Williams, *Cabinet*, C-Type, 80 x 120cm, 2014



Fig. 18

Grace A Williams, *Cabinet, C-Type*, 80 x 110cm, 2014

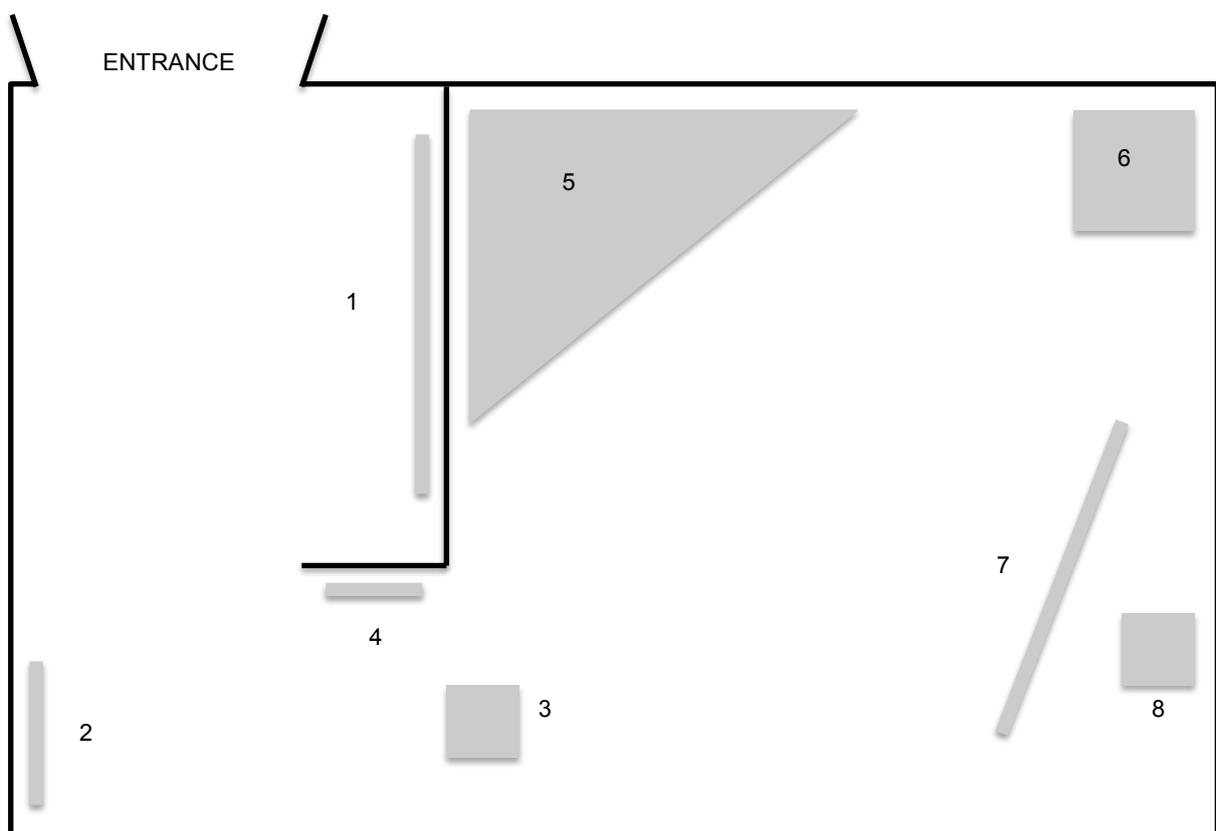


Fig. 19

Map illustrating the layout of Escamotage, ARTicle Gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014

1. Exhibition information displayed on a wall text transfer
2. Escamotage, 200 x 150cm, Installation
3. Slide projector for Escamotage
4. Warm Up, Screen print on Fabriano, 85 x 60cm
5. Apport, installation, fresh flowers and mixed media, approx. 183 x 150 x 150 cm
6. Zig-Zag, original Robert Harbin Zig Zag illusion box, approx. 230 x 80 x 80cm
7. Simultaneity, projection onto a suspended screen, approx. 115 x 150 x 4cm
8. Digital projector & audio unit for Simultaneity

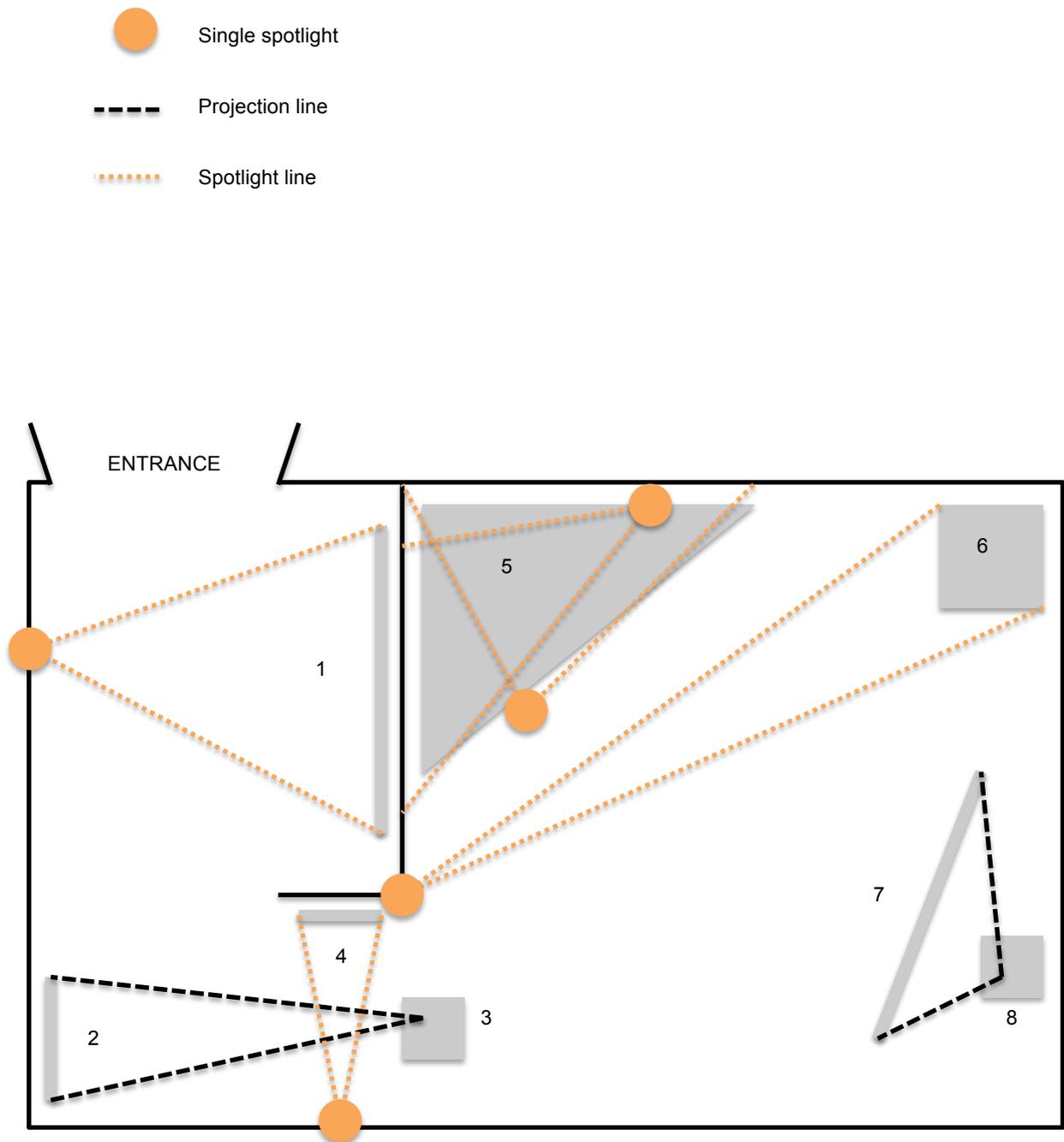


Fig. 20

Map illustrating the projection and spotlight lines of Escamotage, ARTicle Gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014

1. Exhibition information displayed on a wall text transfer
2. Escamotage, 200 x 150cm, Installation
3. Slide projector for Escamotage
4. Warm Up, Screen print on Fabriano, 85 x 60cm
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7. Simultaneity, projection onto a suspended screen, approx. 115 x 150 x 4cm
8. Digital projector & audio unit for Simultaneity



Fig. 21

Grace A Williams, *Escamotage* [exhibition], installation view ARTicle gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014



Fig. 22

Grace A Williams, *Escamotage* [exhibition], installation view ARTicle gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014

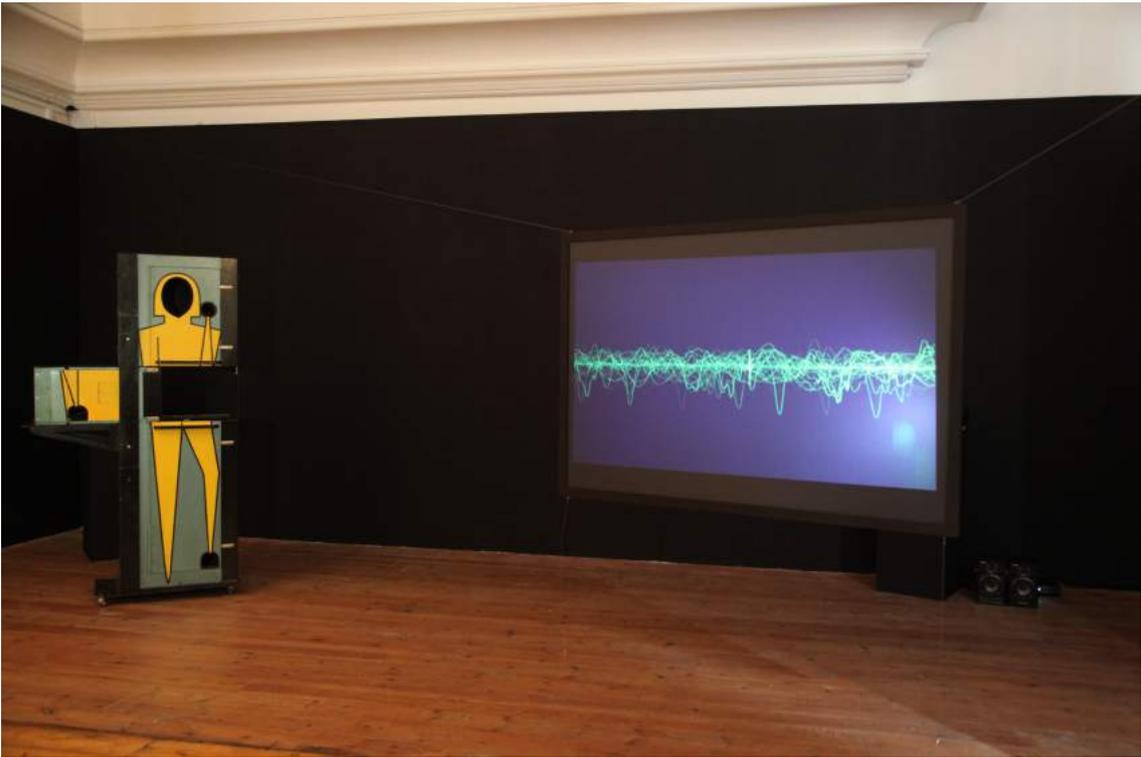


Fig. 23

Grace A Williams, *Escamotage* [exhibition], installation view ARTicle gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014



Fig. 24

Grace A Williams, *Escamotage* [exhibition], installation view ARTicle gallery, Birmingham School of Art, 2014

Glossary

Abjection	Building on Julia Kristeva's definition in her 1980s text <i>Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection</i> , which developed a specific relationship between abjection and desire. Abjection within this thesis defines a powerful attraction of the eye and an unsettling in which curiosity thrives.
Anthroposophy	A spiritual philosophy started by Rudolf Steiner in the early twentieth century (circa. 1912), which promoted belief in a concrete spiritual world that could be accessed through conscious personal reflection.
Channeling	The act of embodying spirits for the purpose of communication with the dead. The body is physically taken over by a spirit to interpret and deliver messages. Psychic mediums are commonly referred to as channelers.
Clairience	A term which derives from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'alience' meaning 'scent'. Clairience or 'clear scent' is the ability to obtain information psychically through the sensory capacity of smell. Those who claim to be clairalient pick up the characteristics of spirits through scents ordinarily undetectable to the human nose.
Clairaudience	The ability to psychically perceive sound. The term translates to mean 'clear hearing' deriving from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'audience' meaning 'hearing'. Those who experience clairaudience claim to hear sounds from the spirit world including voices and music inaudible to the normal human ear.
Clairgustance	The ability to psychically taste a substance without touching it. The term derives from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'gustance' meaning 'taste'. Those who experience clairgustance claim to taste the essence of a spirit.
Clairtangency	The ability to receive knowledge of a physical object's history through touch. The term derives from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'tangency' meaning 'touch'.
Clairvoyance	The ability of having 'clear vision' which facilitates the visual perception of spirits. This is often defined as "inner sight" as clairvoyant vision does not necessarily utilize the human eye. Derives from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'voyance' meaning 'vision'.
Claircognizance	Deriving from 'clair' meaning 'clear' and 'cognizance' meaning 'knowing', 'clear knowing' defines the ability to acquire knowledge psychically and it is often described as 'intrinsic knowledge'. Within this thesis claircognizance is developed as a term that replaces Rachel Jones and Rebecca Fortnum's articulation of 'not knowing' as a natural part of artistic methodology, providing a more positive terminology for artistic practice as a form of 'clear knowing' instead of 'not knowing'.
Conduit	A person or object that enables a connection to the spirit realm for the purposes of communication.
Curiosity	A strong desire or compulsion to have knowledge of an object, person or space. Within this thesis curiosity is developed as a key part of defining 'fascination' building on the authorship of Andrew Benjamin.

Disembodied Female Representation	The representation of the female body through proxy materials where the actual body is never evidenced. This also includes the representation of ephemeral aspects of the female body such as the voice.
Ectoplasm	A substance that exudes from any orifice of the body of a medium during séance. Often described as 'viscous' the substance creates 'manifestations' spirits in physical form. Ectoplasm is documented as more commonly produced by female mediums and is also interchangeable with the term 'Teleplasm'.
Exposure	Revealing something that is damaging or should be kept secret. In particular the uncovering of falsehoods and the breaking of illusions.
Fascination	A temporary abandonment of oneself due to the power of an object, person or entity to bewitch the senses. Both curiosity and abjection are component parts in formulating fascination.
Introspection	A term developed by Rudolf Steiner for use within his spiritual philosophy 'Anthroposophy' it denotes the examination of one's own mental and emotional processes.
Magic	Performance or stage illusion.
Magick	An archaic spelling of 'magic' that signifies occult or black magic instead of performance magic.
Materialisation	The appearance of a disembodied spirit in physical form. The production of ectoplasm is regularly described as a 'materialisation' owing to its alleged characteristic of being made from biological matter.
Materiality	The quality of being composed of matter. This is used more specifically within this thesis to denote the physical matter of the female body.
Mediumship	An umbrella term that describes the mediation of communication between the dead and the living.
Not knowing	A descriptor developed by Rachel Jones to define the moment during creative production when ideas and experiments are unresolved but continue to progress in an active and highly productive manner. Despite its negative commonplace use Jones specifically describes 'not knowing' in creative practice as a wholly positive term.
Occult	An umbrella term that encompasses mystical, supernatural, or magical phenomena and its practices.
Psychic	A person who has a special mental abilities that facilitate the accumulation of knowledge in a manner inexplicable by natural laws. For example, knowing future events before they happen or reading another's mind.
Psychic moment	An intense period of fascination that applies to encountering the work of art.
Physical mediumship	A specific type of mediumship in which spirit phenomena takes a physical form. For example the materialisation of ectoplasm is an act of physical mediumship because the spirit forms an entity made of biological matter. Other physical phenomena can include smells, hot or cold drafts, levitation, raps or knocks etc.

Sabbath	A large gathering of individuals who practice witchcraft to carry out rites. Historically referred to as the Witches' Sabbath or 'Sabbat'.
Séance	A gathering of individuals with a medium or mediums for the purpose of communicating with spirits.
Spiritualism	A system of belief based on supposed communication with the spirits of the dead through the use of mediums.
Theosophy	A religious philosophy made famous by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott's 'Theosophical Society' in 1875. Theosophy claimed to be the search for 'truth' through the development of intuition and spiritual enlightenment.
Vessel	A term used to denote the female body as a carrier, whether through childbirth or as the conveyer of messages from the dead.
Wonder	A desire to know something and to feel curious. Specifically used within this thesis to denote openness toward topics deemed 'irrational' specifically informed by the work of Isabelle Stengers.
Mysticism	An umbrella term used to denote belief in the spiritual and the occult.
Fetish	A term used to describe an inanimate object inhabited by a spirit and worshipped for supposed magical powers.