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**EPIDERMAL AESTHETICS:
SKIN AND THE FEMININE IN CHILEAN AND
ARGENTINE ART (1973- PRESENT)**

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University College London

I, Sophie Halart, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Halart', with a stylized flourish extending to the left.

Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines the motif of skin in both its material and symbolic manifestations in contemporary Latin American art. More specifically, it seeks to trace the presence of an “epidermal aesthetics” in a selection of works by artists active in Chile and Argentina over a period ranging from 1973 to the present. Taking 1973 as its starting point, my temporal frame coincides with the military coup staged by the Chilean armed forces and their implementation of a dictatorial regime that would last until 1989. Meanwhile, a violent military Junta also ruled over Argentina between 1976 and 1983. My contention is that, in their (re-)activation of a patriarchal and hetero-normative discourse, these regimes affirmed their power by resorting to a virile rhetoric that built itself on and against the bodies of women. By claiming a right to define the feminine and by associating it with the image of the Nation (*Patria*), the Chilean and Argentine Juntas effectively turned the skins of thousands of women into screens upon which they could project their propagandistic discourses. In this thesis, I examine the stakes of this particularly stringent form of political repression for female embodiment. Far from taking women as mere victims of state violence though, I argue that artists also found in the motif of the skin an appropriate *topos* to articulate practices of resistance which, by extension, led to a redeployment of the artistic field as one inhabited by “epidermal aesthetics”. If skin can constitute a carceral wall locking women inside themselves and a screen for the projection of idealised images of femininity, it also constitutes an interface to reinitiate contact with the other. Moreover, as the ground activating the sense of touch, skin is anathema to the visual hegemony imposed by the military governments’ policies of surveillance, repression and disappearance.

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The completion of this thesis marks the end of a long and arduous endeavour that has seen me go through a number of significant life changes. I started my PhD as a part-time student in my late twenties, living in London, combining a fast-paced job in the contemporary art world with tranquil reading days at the British Library and inspiring seminars and reading groups organised by the History of Art department at UCL. As I handed this thesis, I had become a Chile-based mother of a bi-cultural child. In the interim of these years, I moved country, learnt a new language, got married, became pregnant and lived through the seismic – to me at least! - experiences of birth giving and early child-rearing in a foreign country and culture. While these different moments do constitute the so-called “expected” path for a woman of any age, they have significantly shaped my approach to my own research topic, feeding it with personal resonances, guiding my readings, and allowing me to make unexpected connections between theory and personal life. For this reason among many others, my first expression of gratitude goes out to my husband Alfonso Donoso and our son Gaspard who have enriched my life and my thoughts in ways I did not think possible. As a young woman immersed in feminist theory, I have always valued and, at times fiercely, fought to protect my time and my independence, both intellectual and physical. However, with Alfonso and Gaspard by my side, I have also learnt about the re-territorializing qualities of love, not as an appropriative gesture but, as Suely Rolnik puts it, as the possibility of a “new smoothness” and the invention of “new constellations of universe” (Rolnik 2008, 417). This new constellation has made us into a family, fraying our own path, weaving out of the patchwork of our different experiences, different backgrounds, different languages, a collective skin, both self-contained and strongly set upon remaining open to the experiences offered by the world.

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**PART I: OUTSIDE IN
THE SKIN OF THINGS
WITNESSING, MAPPING, STITCHING IN CHILEAN
ART**

INTRODUCTION

EPIDERMAL AESTHETICS: SKIN AND THE FEMININE IN THE SOUTHERN CONE

“To deny, cut, tear, transgress in order to progress. To enwrap, unfold, unfurl, unroll, curl up, interleave, in order to exist and coexist. To give, indefinitely, to our human finitude, a form that is never definitive.” (Anzieu, *Beckett* in Segal 2009, 289).

1) *CUERO VIVO*

Cuero Vivo [*Live Skin*] (2009) (Figure 0.1) is a seven-minutes long take of a dark expanse of water. Filming what resembles a pond from a very close angle, the video keeps out of the frame any contextual information, leaving the spectator to search for meaning in the almost imperceptible alterations of the liquid surface. To this absence of frame, of foliage or any other kind of informative *hors-champs* to ground the eye, the video adds a disorientating soundtrack. While it first appears to reproduce nature’s noises (the wind in the grass, the lapping of a wave...) as perceived from the shore, the distortion and amplification of these sounds could just as well recall the muffled noises one detects when immersed under water. Playing at undoing familiar visual referents and confusing the beholder’s sensory apparatus, *Cuero Vivo* creates an impression of complete disorientation in which the surface of the film and that of the water merge and take on an unexpected density that wraps itself around the spectator’s body, threatening the very boundaries of her physical integrity. As when surrounded by pitch darkness, the beholder’s senses slowly adapt to this new configuration though and gradually learn to detect on the surface of the screen, a sluggish ebb and flow, sporadic raindrops, or the alternate frowning and smoothening motions of the wind caressing the water. And as one grows accustomed to watching from so close, the water takes on a precarious life of its own, recalling the slow

breathing and shivering movements of a skin (albeit a perhaps not quite human one) as it reacts to diverse triggers. The surfacing bubble of oxygen becomes a mole, the wave turns into a wrinkle, and the crippling blindness initially felt transforms itself into a vividly tactile exploration of the liquid surface.

The video is the work of Chilean contemporary artist Carolina Saquel and its title refers to an indigenous Mapuche legend about a monstrous creature made out of animal hides lurking in the lakes of southern Chile and Argentina. Targeting animals and humans who ventured too close to the shore, the monster, it is said, would hypnotise its victim before dragging it away to the bottom of the pond, smothering it and sucking out all of its bodily fluids. This depiction of the *Cuero Vivo* – a monster made of skins and turning its prey into emptied vessels by squeezing all life out of them – is reminiscent of the first alienating impression provoked by Saquel's work itself: that of a moving surface mesmerizing the spectator with an overflow of confusing stimuli, tightening its grip around her senses and colonizing the safe distance traditionally maintained between work and beholder. In the video however, the menace of the *Cuero Vivo* also becomes an empowering experience. For it is this very breakdown of reassuring boundaries that brings the spectator back to her own existence as an embodied, if precarious, envelope: both a containing and constraining support to the self and an interface upon which one's encounters with the outside come to play out, confront and inscribe themselves. Moreover, if, in the autochthonous legend, the *Cuero Vivo*'s prey was promised an ineluctably lethal end, no such sorry outcome awaits Saquel's audience. Rather, the initial discomfort felt when faced with the overwhelming presence of the water slowly fades away once the eye grows accustomed to deciphering texture and movement on the liquid surface. Planes fall back into place, the spectator has saved her skin and is let free to reincorporate her autonomous bodily standing. Past the initial shock of the encounter with the "monster" however, it is a different experience of watching that comes into play. By learning to read the surface of the water as an epidermis endowed with life, the eye does not necessarily regain the distance abolished that would allow it to scrutinise, identify and categorise the movements slowly unfolding on the screen. As if defeated in its conquering ambitions, the eye assumes a different, more passive demeanour, learning to palpate the combined skin of screen and water, and letting itself, in turn, be stroked by it.

By exploring skin as both a motif (a textured envelope) and a bodily experience (a containing, at times coercive, always transformative one), Saquel's work epitomises what I will define in this thesis as an "epidermal aesthetics", a term whose implications will become clearer as I proceed to present some of the characteristics of skin as both a physiological and poetic notion in this introduction. Taking *Cuero Vivo* as our point of entry though, this presence of the skin as an expressive surface may already be decipherable in two important aspects of the work, namely, its focus on surfaces (of the water, the screen but also the surface of the viewer's own body) and its interest in activating an aesthetic experience that confuses the visual and introduces a more tactile approach to the work.

This thesis examines the motif of skin in both its material and symbolic manifestations in contemporary Latin American art. More specifically, it seeks to trace the presence of such "epidermal aesthetics" in a selection of works by artists active in Chile and Argentina over a period ranging from 1973 to the present. Taking 1973 as its starting point, my temporal frame coincides with the military coup staged by the armed forces in Chile, bringing Augusto Pinochet to power and putting a bloody end to the left-wing government of Salvador Allende. The military regime in Chile would last until 1989. Meanwhile, a violent military Junta would also rule over Argentina between 1976 and 1984. My contention in this thesis is that, in their (re-)activation of a patriarchal and hetero-normative discourse, these regimes affirmed their power by resorting to a virile rhetoric that built itself on and against the bodies of women. By claiming a right to define the feminine and by associating it with the image of a Nation (*Patria*) that had to be saved and cleansed from the corruption of subversive elements, the Chilean and Argentine Juntas effectively turned the skins of thousands of women into screens upon which they could project their propagandistic discourses. In this thesis, I examine the stakes of this particularly stringent form of political repression for female embodiment. Far from taking women as mere victims of state violence though, I argue that artists also found in the motif of the skin an appropriate topos to articulate their resistance to the deterministic ambitions of the Juntas which, by extension, led to a redeployment of the artistic field as one inhabited by an "epidermal aesthetics". If skin can constitute a carceral wall locking women inside themselves and a screen upon which idealised images of femininity were projected, it also constitutes a surface allowing for a contact with the other to be initiated and maintained, a gesture seeking to deflate the fragmenting ambitions of

the military governments. Even more so, as the ground activating the sense of touch, skin is anathema to the visual hegemony imposed by the military governments and their policies of surveillance, repression and disappearance.

At the opposite end of my temporal spectrum, I have chosen to include works from the twenty-first century. This decision was motivated by two main reasons. First, as I will argue, while more than twenty years have passed since the demise of the military dictatorships, their views and deeds continue to haunt the Chilean and Argentine political landscapes and still constitute a rich – if painful – terrain of investigation for artistic practice. Skin allows for the identification of an unresolved trauma located in the body, both individual and collective. At the same time, its liminal positionality and cauterizing properties mobilise gestures that seek to go beyond the semantic aporia that trauma studies might constitute. This structural polymorphism, its manifestation as what Didier Houzel calls “a non-directional” envelope (Connor 2004, 37) also constitutes an attack on linear readings of History. Rather, the works appealing to this epidermal aesthetics continuously feed off and influence each other in a loop that does not necessarily respect a strict chronological evolution. As such, while the organisation of my chapters does, to an extent, reflect a temporal evolution, examining the stylistic and iconographic changes triggered by the countries’ slow return to democratic regimes for instance, my ambition to examine older works in the light of more recent ones also seeks to avoid adopting an excessively linear approach.

2) SKIN

In his seminal book *Le Moi-Peau*, the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu remarks on the ways in which skin represents “an almost inexhaustible subject of research, care and discourse” (in Segal 2008, 44). A vital – and the largest – of our organs, skin is crucial to the adequate running of our bodies, with functions ranging from physical, chemical and thermal protection to stimuli reception and communication. Research carried out in the fields of natural sciences reflects skin’s multifarious role in “our biology, our sensory experiences, our information gathering, and our relationships with others” (Jablonski 2006, 1). For Ashley Montagu, the centrality of the human derma in the construction of our identities as sentient bodies goes back to the very beginning of intra-uterine life when, at nine weeks, the ectoderm weaves a covering envelope for the foetus. As it also permits the development of the nervous

system and of sense organs, the ectoderm explains, from a very early developmental stage, the close inter-relation existing between the skin and our perceptual apparatus, leading Montagu to venture that “the nervous system is [...] a buried part of the skin, or alternatively the skin may be regarded as an exposed portion of the nervous system” (1986, 5).

Mirroring these crucial physiological functions, skin also comes loaded with the heavy symbolic charge of ambassador to the self, as world myths and religions put in evidence: from the Ancient satyr Marsyas who was flayed alive for having dared to challenge Apollo’s musical skills, to the martyr of the *écorché* St Bartholomew in the Christian tradition or the Aztec deity of Xipe-Totec (Our Lord the Flayed One), god of harvests and seasons who was said to have ripped off his skin in order to feed mankind. As these foundational stories demonstrate, skin is what guarantees one’s existence and its removal, wilfully or imposed, corresponds to either utmost debasement or the pinnacle of self-abnegation. In either case, the shedding of the skin not only brings terrestrial death, it also comes to be equated with the loss of identity, thus reflecting the way our physical envelope stands for our whole being: that is, skin as the synecdoche of the self. This aspect of skin also seems to suggest that our view of it varies according to historical and geographical givens, a fact that has not escaped historians and sociologists interested in the cultural relevance of the surface of the body as a site of self-determination and inscription (Andrieu et al., 2008; Le Breton, 2003).

In his work on the cultural meanings of skin, Steven Connor notes that, despite the relevance of the topic in accounts pertaining to the collective imagination, early anatomical treatises actually make little case of it, treating it as little else than “a covering that keeps the body inviolate” (2004, 10), a protective, yet passive, layer to the body’s precious interiors.¹ The advent of psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century would contribute to partially change this view, suggesting a psychosomatic relation between the patient’s mind and the surface of her body. During his early training with Jean-Martin Charcot at the Parisian hospital of La Salpêtrière, the

¹ Connor also remarks on the subaltern status of skin in early writings like that of Aristotle who saw in the texture of the human derma the result of a drying out process of the inner body’s viscous substance. “The skin is formed [Aristotle] says, ‘by the drying of the flesh, like the scum upon boiled substances; it is formed not only because it is on the outside, but also because what is glutinous, being unable to evaporate, remains on the surface’” (Connor 2004, 12).

young Sigmund Freud witnessed the cases of hysteric patients with particularly expressive symptoms that would draw themselves out on the surface of their bodies.² It is quite possibly with this in mind that Freud would later write in *The Ego and the Id* that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego” (1955, 26). An accompanying footnote specified further that “the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body”, thus granting a tactile quality to the process of ego formation (Freud 1955, 26).³

While Freud himself would not develop this intuition further, Didier Anzieu would make it the core of his own psychoanalytic research on “psychic envelopes”. A vocal opponent of Lacan and his emphasis on language in the psychoanalytical cure, Anzieu wrote *The Skin-Ego*, first published in French in 1985 and translated into English in 1989, a major contribution to the study of skin as an active protagonist in the formation of the self. In both its strengths and pitfalls (particularly in regard to the gendered body, a point to which I shall return), Anzieu’s notions of Skin-Ego and psychic envelopes constitute an important starting point for my own thinking on skin in Chilean and Argentine art.

For Anzieu, the relevance of skin lies in its ability to encapsulate the tensions and, at times, contradictions that characterise the relation we maintain to our bodily selves and to others.

The skin is permeable and impermeable. It is superficial and profound. It is truthful and deceptive. It regenerates, yet is permanently drying out. [...] It provokes libidinal investments as often narcissistic as sexual. It is the seat of well-being and seduction. It supplies us as much with pain as pleasure [...] In its thinness and vulnerability, it stands for our native helplessness, greater than that of any other species, but at the same time our evolutionary adaptiveness. It separates and unites the various senses. In all these dimensions that I have incompletely listed, it

² The enigmatic cases of epidermographies registered by Charcot. See Didi-Huberman (2003a).

³ The sentence would acquire a quasi-aphoristic status in subsequent writings on the body, and particularly the gendered body. See for instance Jay Prosser’s useful explanation of the use that Butler and queer feminism make of Freud’s sentence (Prosser 2013).

has the status of an intermediary, an in-between, a transitional thing
(Anzieu [1989] 2016, 19).⁴

In the formulation of his theory, Anzieu focuses on the psychic development of the young infant for whom skin plays the role of initial support in the process of individuation, allowing for the child to evolve from the fantasy of a skin shared with her mother to the progressive interiorisation of her own existence as an autonomous self through the acknowledgement of her own bodily limits. To Anzieu, the Skin-Ego thus refers to the “a mental image used by the child’s Ego during its early phases of development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, based on its experience of the surface of the body” ([1989] 2016, 43). In Anzieu’s theory, the Skin-Ego comes to fulfil eight different functions that echo the biological role played by skin in relation to the body: maintenance (holding the psychic system together), containment (providing a coherent envelope to lodge the self), protection (from trauma), individuation (providing the self with a sense of uniqueness), intersensoriality (connecting and organising different sensations), sexualisation (standing for the skin’s erogenous parts), recharge (filtering stimuli) and inscription (marking and recording – what Anzieu calls the skin’s quality as “original parchment” ([1989] 2016, 114)).

By revealing the skin as a complex integument to negotiate between mind and body, the originality of Anzieu’s proposal also lies in its ability to do away with two forms of determinism characteristic of the psychoanalytical discipline: linguistic and biological. As Didier Houzel, a long-time commentator of Anzieu, argues, “the metaphor of the skin ego or the psychic envelope has [...] given the psyche back its corporeal weight, which structuralism had denied, without at the same time reducing it to the laws of biology.” (2000, 170).⁵ This positioning of the skin, at the crossroad

⁴ While Anzieu’s book was initially translated into English in 1989, I take the quotes from the 2016 re-edition with a new translation by Diana Segal.

⁵ It is also important to note that if Anzieu undeniably broke some ground with his theory of the Skin-Ego, he was also able to construct a very physical platform, bringing together and giving “flesh” to ideas developed by some of his peers and predecessors. In the maintenance and containment functions Anzieu ascribes to the Skin-Ego for instance, one would find resonance with Donald Winnicott’s articulation of maternal holding and handling (1953). As for the British psychoanalyst Esther Bick, she identified, as early as 1968, the central role played by the skin in constituting a containing frontier allowing the infant to identify herself as

between the biological and the psychic, takes a particularly eloquent dimension in the fifth function that Anzieu attributes to the Skin-Ego: that of intersensoriality. Intersensoriality – or consensuality – places the skin as the ground for the mingling of senses (touch but also, olfactory, auditory and gustative senses) and their organisation into what he calls a “common sense” ([1989] 2016, 168). Referring to the image of an onion, Anzieu interprets the skin as a work of layering of different stimuli where “the senses of sound, smell, taste and sight interlock with the sense of touch to form the skin of the psyche” (Lafrance 2013, 31). In its organising prerogative, the skin does not only give rise to senses, it also organises them, thus allowing the infant to “make sense” of the world around her. As Anzieu writes,

The word ‘sense’ has a double meaning. ‘Sense’ means ‘signification’, which finds its most extensive organisation in language. ‘The senses’ are the body’s organs by which the human being makes contact with its surroundings and, in the first place, with its mother. The work by which the infant creates its psychic apparatus, and by which the patient and analyst create interpretation, consists of articulating ‘sense’ with the ‘senses’ (in Segal 2009, 6).

In itself, skin then allows for the emergence of thought and, just as the skin folds upon itself, it leads to reflexivity, providing the infant with that common sense that allows her to differentiate between one and other.

If Anzieu’s “interlocking” of senses on the skin allows for the emergence of a platform from which the child can manifest her “I”, it also maintains a hierarchy of senses, placing touch at its top. As Naomi Segal develops, “[if] the intelligence of the body is the basis of both sense and consent, the question of consensuality is also to do with human relations based on the sense of touch, most particularly the mother-child couple and the relation of desire” (2009, 6). In contrast to Anzieu’s conception of senses as a structured collaboration, the philosopher Michel Serres describes the skin as a “milieu”, the cenesthetic ground upon which all senses meet to constitute

a bodily being separate from the outside world. Coining the term “second skin”, Bick associated it with a pathological over-reliance on the surface of the body as a “muscular shell” protecting the Ego from outside contacts deemed threatening. For more on the originality of Anzieu’s theory and the intellectual discussion he carried out with his peers, see Lafrance (2013) and Segal (2009).

what Serres calls “an internal sense [that] shouts, calls, announces, screams at times, the ‘I’” (1985, 126). While Serres’ insistence on skin as principal sensorium might initially place him within the phenomenological tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the author himself rejects from the outset this very filiation, arguing that phenomenology does not manage to do away with the pre-eminence of language: “[l]ots of phenomenology and no sensation – everything via language” (Serres 1995, 131), echoing the very type of criticism that Anzieu had voiced in regard to Lacanian theory. For Serres rather, skin constitutes the locus in which the self becomes conscious of itself but also becomes aware that it exists *as* skin, that the I, ultimately, is a membrane. Despite his explicit desire to distance himself from Merleau-Ponty, it is however important to note that in his writings on the five senses, Serres reproduces the same omission as the phenomenological tradition with regard to the gendered aspect of skin. In his book *The Five Senses*, Serres recalls a – possibly fictitious – episode that occurred during a time of his youth when he worked as a sailor on a ship. Serres writes that one-day, as the ship caught fire, he was left stuck in a room and forced to break free through a narrow porthole. Squeezing, pushing his body out of the inside furnace and into the cold of the storm raging outside, Serre’s story takes the quality of a second birth, a revelatory, yet painful, experience of encountering with himself. “At a precise moment, the exact moment when the divided body screams ego, I move to the outside, I can pull out the rest of my body, pick up the bits that had remained inside, the scattered and darkened pieces [of myself]” (Serres 1985, 126). The experience of birth as a fragmentary experience of the pre-uterine foetus thus gives way, in a second instance, to its reconfiguration as a unified self on the outside. As this experience takes shape, the skin affirms itself as “the quasi-punctual place where the entire body proclaims, in the spatial experience of the passage” (Serres 1985, 126). As eloquent as it may be, the description of this ontological emergence also re-positions autonomous individuality and self-containment as desirable horizons. Moreover, it also places the (implied male) subject as a contained entity striving to expel himself from a dangerous fusion with the maternal body that encloses it, an urge toward separation. In these pages, Serres’ description therefore excludes from the outset, alternative types of embodied existence, feminine ones in particular. Indeed, for women, experiences like pregnancy and childbirth go beyond the image of the skin as the backdrop for individual emergence, complementing it with the function of a bag that encloses and hosts within itself the

presence of another: the “split subjectivity” of maternal embodiment that Iris Marion Young identifies in her own criticism of phenomenology (1984, 46). In this thesis, my take on the dual experiences of pregnancy and parturiency as will be evidenced in Chapters 3 and 4 will thus seek to differ from Serres’ genderless account of the skin, “staining” it with specifically feminine experiences.

3) THE FEMININE

While the Skin-Ego became Anzieu’s best-known concept, it is important to note that for its author, it did not constitute an end in itself. Rather, the Skin-Ego constituted a temporary solution, a stepping-stone toward the formation of a mature “thinking ego” (see Segal 2009; Lafrance 2013). If the ego was indeed bodily, it was at a primary stage of its development, one that would be outlived once the psyche had gathered enough strength to end its dependence on its bodily limits for self-definition. As such, while Anzieu’s concept would certainly inspire a renewal of interest in skin, his more general examination of “psychic envelopes” might not constitute such an anti-Cartesian endeavour as it first appears. Rather, it actually seems to reinstate the old-age hierarchy of mind over body so criticised by advocates of feminist and gender studies. An articulation of the skin in regards to femininity would, therefore, appear to be in order to characterise my conceptual articulation of the two terms.

A central aim of my thesis is to try to offer a theoretical and visual framework that might account for the relevance of skin in relation to female embodiment. However, it would initially appear that even inside the field of feminism, views diverge to a great extent. While first-wave feminist accounts tend to conflate the skin with the body, situating both as the space to be reclaimed by women – the bodily incarnation of the “rooms of one’s own” identified by Virginia Woolf (Schneir 1984) – , more recent discussions have paid specific attention to the political and poetic relevance of the skin, complicating its status. Speaking from the field of post-human feminism, authors such as Donna Haraway (1991) consider skin a constrictive limit, a hurdle in the way of the self’s endless possibilities. Meanwhile, for queer studies, if the body’s limits do not need to constitute such a nuisance, they seem to lose their organic properties. Rather, skin becomes a stage for the performance of gender, a backdrop upon which internal impulses and exterior pressures meet, conflict and continuously redefine each other (Butler 1993). In *Second Skins* (1998), Jay Prosser criticises Butler’s view in his account of transsexual narratives, returning, instead to

the visceral qualities of the skin and reminding his readers that “embodiment is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself” (1998, 13). Striking a balance between getting rid of the skin, putting it on and off, or returning to its necessary viscosity, therefore appears to constitute one of the challenges awaiting advocates of female embodiment eager to explore the critical properties offered by the skin.

My aim in this work is not to reconcile any of these views and I am aware of the essentialist trap that might constitute an unproblematic pairing of the terms woman-body. As Elizabeth Grosz rightly points out, “[t]he coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women’s bodies and services” (1994, 14). Rather, as I look at the feminine from an epidermal point of view, my suggestion will be that, more than a containing envelope that comes to define and limit the female body, the skin allows for the articulation of female embodiment as thoroughly relational. In this, I adhere to Sara Ahmed and a’s idea that the skin is as much as surface as an “interface”.

‘Thinking through the skin’ is a thinking that reflects not on the body as the lost object of thought, but on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others. (Ahmed & Stacey 2001, 1).

Similarly, in *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz refers to the image of the Moebius strip as a figure that evidences the profoundly interconnected nature of our bodies with the outside world and the bodies of others. In her effort to define an “embodied subjectivity” from the point of view of feminism, Grosz explains that the Moebius strip “provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside” (Grosz 1994, xii). A non-directional interface that belongs to both the inside and the outside, skin constitutes the perfect illustration

of the Moebius strip paradigm and of its ability to resist isolating views of embodiment, especially in its gendered manifestation.⁶

Thinking about the skin as a surface of encounter with the other thus contributes to the articulation of a resistance against a fossilised view of female bodies as cut-off from public life, turned inwards toward their domestic, reproductive, gestational properties.

In my effort to carve out a space for the skin inside the artistic production of Chile and Argentina, I resort to it as both a motif and a methodology. Indeed if its iconographic presence in the works I examine here takes on multiple forms (as material support for the resurgence of forgotten histories or as territory for instance), I also refer to skin and its ability to place tactility at the core of the aesthetic experience, as an analytical tool that disrupts narratives conceiving of the body as a self-contained, self-sufficient unit (through my treatment of the skin in artistic takes on pregnant and parturient experiences for instance). The skin, I argue, raises fundamental questions regarding the interplay of surface and depth. In this, my take on the subject is both symptomatic and diagnostic. My approach to skin as a force actively partaking in the reconsideration of established views of both embodiment and artistic practice is also what explains its relevance to works dealing specifically with the question of the feminine. As I have discussed above, my examination of the feminine is principally geared toward treatments of the female body; however, the urgent questions raised by the presence of the skin in these works also bear stakes that outrun gender specificity. By situating these artistic practices in what I define as an “epidermal aesthetics”, I also point to the presence of related topics such as the attempt to account for physical forms of political violence, the undoing of the suffocating model of a Nation-body, the need to provide healing gestures in dictatorial aftermaths as well as the necessity to account for an embodied type of memory. My contention, however, is that all these questions, by constituting efforts to confront a phallogentric model of power, do adopt a feminine form of resistance.

⁶ Steven Connor also signals in his *Book of Skin* (2004) the epidermal nature of the Moebius strip (but he does not relate it to a feminine approach to embodiment. In Latin American art, an important precedent in the use of the Moebius strip as a paradigm of embodied inter-relationality may be found in the work of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. For more on touch and contact in Lygia Clark’s work, see Coëllier (2003).

For these reasons, while most of the artists whose works I examine in this thesis are women, I do not wish to restrict my analytical framework to such an exclusive criterion. For historical reasons, which I will address further below, the military dictatorships that ruled over Chile and Argentina bore particularly violent stakes for women. It is perhaps for this reason that works that attempt to account for the impeded sense of embodiment that arose during these years and its dramatisation through the motif of the skin, happen to have been principally produced by women. This is not always or necessarily the case however and the inclusion of works by male artists in my discussion is part of a deliberate effort to avoid the trap that an essentialist take on gender might represent.

4) TO SEE AND BE SEEN: EMBODIMENT AND THE POLITICS OF TERROR

One of the most intuitive aspects of Didier Anzieu's insights lies in his contextualisation of psychoanalytical theory within the cultural turmoil of the age in which it came to light. The Skin-Ego was the product of its time. As Segal writes,

In the late twentieth century, with a world running out of control, there is a need to "set limits"; the typical patient is no longer a neurotic suffering from hysteria or obsessions but a borderline case (that is, on the border between neurosis and psychosis) whose problem is a lack of limits (2009, 44).

In contemporary thought, the ambition of successfully undoing restrictive and defining limits has for a long time constituted a critical tradition, shared by feminism (the liberation of women from their domestic straight jackets) and postmodernism (the breaking down of categorizing imperatives) alike. As Segal shows in the above citation however, Anzieu was well aware of the potentially "dark" side of a body's loss of limits, leading to the constitution of a "borderline" society somewhat akin to Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of "liquid modernity" as unbound, unstructured existences (2000).

In dictatorial Chile and Argentina, while the implementation of restrictive regulations led to a hardening of bodily limits and a limitation of their ability to move around freely, at the same time, the implementation of a harsh programme of repression (through the systematic abduction, killing and disappearance of so-called "subversive" civilians) provided a morbid illustration of this loss of bodily limits

identified by Anzieu. Indeed, in 1970s and 80s Chile and Argentina, the pervading atmosphere was one of fear, censorship, surveillance and violent repression. Moreover, while each country experienced a different history of authoritarianism in the preceding decades, Nancy Carol Hollander is right to note that “[t]he metamorphosis of society toward military dictatorship, whether in countries accustomed to democratic institutions, such as Chile and Uruguay, or in ones familiar with the dynamics of military rule, like Argentina, is typically a period of confusion and disorientation” (2009, 92). The collective trauma experienced by the Chilean and Argentine people was experienced at the most intimate levels of their lives, in a movement that effectively erased the established boundary between private and public realms. Arbitrary house raids and arrests of suspected “subversives” at their houses in the middle of the night pierced through the barrier that the social Skin-Ego may have come to constitute, and sustained up to then by the relative respect of human rights. Similarly, the Condor Plan that united Junta leaders of different Latin American countries and which allowed their respective secret polices to freely cross national borders in their hunt for “terrorists” also tore a gaping hole in the image of the Nation as an invasion-proof container of national identity. As internal boundaries collapsed, external walls and zones of *non-droit* were erected in the midst of cities. In Buenos Aires and Santiago, police precincts and military schools were turned into detention centres where detainees were held and tortured while, a few miles away, their concerned relatives were assured by bureaucrats that their son, daughter, husband had fled the country or, most likely, been killed in a face-off between opposing guerrilla groups. Out of these thousands of abducted civilians, many never returned, opening the way for a liminoid space between life and death or –perhaps – standing at the very threshold between these two states, and coming back years later to haunt the painful periods of democratic transition. Moreover, as the neo-liberal economic agenda adopted by the governments in Argentina, and particularly Chile, opened its doors to foreign investments, it also hastened the advent of economic crises that threw into social precariousness entire sections of the cities: the Argentine *villas miserias* and Chilean *poblaciones*.

To this double process of excessive enclosures and openings, the populations were also subjected to an additional type of violence that came to impede the literal and symbolic functions of the skin. The presence of torture centres in cities, paired with the frequent arrests of pedestrians and their abduction on the street, and often in

the middle of the day, meant that everyone became witnesses to these abuses that took on, ironically, a very theatrical dimension. Marguerite Feitlowitz wrote about this uncanny aspect of daily life in dictatorial Argentina:

As official rhetoric worked to conquer the mental space of Argentine citizens, in shared physical space, a coercive discourse was also brought into play – one that could turn a ‘normal’ setting into a bizarre, and disorienting theatrical. (...) At the same time everything was normal – the corner printshop, the [bus] #128, the bustling avenue that pointed toward home. The Terror needed a setting that was largely undisturbed. For if the setting radically changed, how could one assimilate what was happening there? If the missing were eerily present by virtue of their absence, in what sense were those present really *here*? (Feitlowitz 1998,151)

In maintaining a sense of normality temporarily perturbed by violent interventions that broke the sense of physical self-determination tacitly voiced by modern, liberal social contracts, the military played on the hazy border between the real and the fictional, underlying the nature of their power as performative and their hegemony over both the public and private realms conceived as a stage for the shaping of national identity.

At the same time, however, the “psychology of fear” (Lira & Castillo 1992, 51) that the Juntas exercised on the population led to an inner repression of this reality. Consequently, people came to deny what they saw, becoming blind and deaf to the constant traffic of unlicensed cars or the human screams emanating from some buildings’ basements. Civilians learnt to un-see and unquestioningly believe the rhetorics of the generals who persisted in denying the existence of a systematic “forced disappearance” of political opponents.⁷ This phenomenon, described by the Argentine psychoanalyst Juan Carlos Kuzneztsoff as one of generalised “percepticide” (1986) took the form of a self-imposed rebuttal of one’s own senses as both a

⁷ Margaret Feitlowitz in her study of the Junta lexicon in Argentina notes how the discourses of the military often played with this confusion, warning their audience that “the enemy has no flag, nor uniform...not even a face. Only he knows that he is the enemy” (1998,23). Considering the fact that what or who was deemed ‘subversive’ changed arbitrarily, the population was strongly advised to rely on to the military’s caution: “the only safe words are our words” (Feitlowitz 1998, 15).

repressive and coping mechanism. The violence of this act on the psychic construction of the self runs very far. As Diana Taylor puts it, by surrendering trust in their perceptive senses to the ideology of the government in place, the Argentine and Chilean populations had not only to adhere to a unilateral version of events but also to let go of their own capacity to process events. “To see without being able to do disempowers absolutely. But seeing without the possibility of admitting that one is seeing further turns the violence on oneself. Percepticide blinds, maims, kills through the senses” (Taylor 1997,124). Moreover, percepticide brought about what Marcelo Suarez-Orozco calls a “numbing hysteria”, which also becomes a form of anaesthesia (1991, 470). Unable to rely on their own senses, people shut off their “internal sense”, leading a fragmented existence.⁸

The restriction imposed over bodies and individuals’ capacity to live their lives was felt particularly strongly by women who had to add to the constant surveillance of the authorities the intrusion of the military inside their bodies, their ways of life and their intimacy to extents that ranged from clothing regulations to restrictive sexual health and family planning policies but also included the humiliations and physical duress to which women inmates were subjected in military secret prisons.

In Chile and Argentina, the military governments blamed socialism for its politicisation of women through employment, trade unions, women’s organisation and neighbourhood kitchens, leading them astray from their principal role as fulfilling domestic and maternal chores. For the Juntas, the return to a peaceful and disciplined society passed through the re-alignment of the female body with its so-called innate destiny, an aim they set upon achieving through the implementation of a series of regulations. As clothing and outside appearance became strictly monitored, the Women Centres that had constituted important family planning outposts in working class neighbourhoods were closed.⁹ In Chile, if the 1973 military coup was “successful”, it was due, to a large extent, to the role played by the upper-middle conservative association *El Poder Feminino* [Feminine Power] in its campaigns

⁸ For more on the wounds sustained by the collective psyche during the years of the dictatorship, see Caro Hollander (2010).

⁹ For more on the symbolic role ascribed to clothes, see Montalva (2004). For an analysis of the normative codes applying to the bodies of students during the dictatorship in Argentina, see Taylor (1997). For more on changes introduced in sexual health in Chile, see Zárata (2010).

against socialism in the months prior. However, once order had been re-established, women were called to hastily retreat into their kitchens. A few days after Pinochet took office, his wife and *de facto* First Lady Lucia Hiriart called all Chilean women to embrace their “inborn responsibilities” to serve others in “self-surrender” (in Pieper Mooney 2009,135). Similarly, in Argentina, the conservative League of Housewives also publically asked women to renounce their professional ambitions, arguing that “women shouldn’t compete with men. Women were born for one thing and men for another” (in Fisher 1993, 144). Visually, these campaigns for the “re-feminisation” of women took concrete shape through the publication of official magazines such as the government-funded magazine *Amiga* [Friend] in Chile, which published cooking recipes and domestic tips to help their readers turn into perfect housewives. As one editorial of *Amiga* emphatically exclaimed: “[i]n family, woman fulfils the greatest part of her mission and becomes the spiritual rock of the Nation” (*Amiga* 1976, 43).¹⁰ This reference to the nationalistic aspect of women’s responsibilities also highlights another aspect of the symbolic roles conferred upon women by the patriarchal Juntas, namely that of standing in and for the Nation. Turning into collective moral yardsticks and petrified allegories, the contours of women’s bodies simultaneously swelled to match the cartographic outlines of their countries and irrevocably shifted from the intimate to the public realm, making any decision in terms of reproduction, child-rearing and personal emancipation a matter of collective discussion and rebuttal. The allegoric transformation of women into Nation reactivated a gender discourse grounded in *marianismo*, a cultural tendency to glorify Woman and associate her with the cult of the Catholic Virgin Mary. If, according to Evelyn Stevens, *marianismo* represents “the other face of *machismo*”, it is principally because by elevating the moral and spiritual status of women, it emphasised their self-abnegating qualities (Stevens 1994, 3). *Marianismo* is profoundly anchored within a moralistic dualism and its instrumentalisation by military governments did not only become visible in the call for women to return home, it also meant that women refusing or unable to fill this idealised cast came to fall in the Abject category of the sexualised, amoral, barren, politicised and thus inherently dangerous female specimen that societies had to get rid off. In detention centres like the infamous Villa Grimaldi in Santiago or the ESMA in Buenos Aires,

¹⁰ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations taken from Spanish publications are mine.

women inmates were subjected to corrective rape, torture and a “re-education” programme that taught them to re-align with the natural predisposition of their sex.¹¹ As torture sessions took place under an icon of the Virgin Mary, women prisoners were constantly faced with the idealised and desexualised image of Womanhood the military placed as the ideal they should strive to attain. The *marianismo* of the Chilean and Argentine Juntas thus split women in two, turning the feminine into a Janus-like creature: on one side, “the lofty, disembodied *Patria* (Motherland, literally *belonging to the Father*)” and, on the other side of the coin, “the corporeal, dispensable woman” (Taylor 1997,4). Here again, the skin came to register and bear the marks of this splitting as “re-educated” women came to contain within their amnesiac bodies the full blow of this dichotomy: on one side of the coin, the smooth, polished face of the house(d-in) wife and, on the other, the disfiguring scar – as much a testament to her past as, in the military eye, the sign of her completed penance.¹²

The skin thus became a loaded symbol for artists active during the dictatorships as a complicit support to the official regulations of the patriarchal agenda of the military Juntas and a carceral wall enclosing women within a fixed gender. In the ensuing chapters, as I examine this artistic production, I attempt to draw out its exploration of the motif as a limiting and containing boundary, a rigid cast whose outlines come to replicate the limits of the domestic space. In the works of an early generation artists active during the 1970s and 80s, epidermal boundaries come to take on architectural and mineral textures locking women within them. At the same time, the psychological attribute of the skin as a vital container allowing for the formation of a unified self also undergoes radical revision in the face of a political situation where the woman who disobeys also constantly bears the threat of her disappearance – understood in both symbolic and physical terms. Thus, in other words, the body outlines melt and dissolve, taking on a vaporous quality that not only comes to signify the disappearance of the self but also the erasure of the face – the support of an individuality. Nevertheless, skin as a ground for individuation and

¹¹ Victoria Álvarez further develops on these so-called re-education programmes, describing how women prisoners were required to “wash and iron the clothes of all prisoners and guards, served at the tables of the directors, had to be docile, servile, were made to put on perfume and make-up and were also asked to dress nicely in order to ‘decorate their surroundings’” (Álvarez 2000,76).

¹² A powerful fictional account of this kind of gender and sexual violence can be found in Argentine author Luisa Valenzuela’s short story *Cambio de armas* (1982).

self-determination also comes to figure in the artistic production of these years, especially through a tactile encounter with different media that seeks to re-activate a lost sense of embodiment. Moreover, when the politics of amnesty eventually take hold, skin will come to play a major symbolic role in the progressive returns to democracy in Argentina and Chile, as artists deploy its mnemonic properties, as a surface that bears marks and scars.

My thesis is divided into two main parts, each covering a national artistic scene. My first part “Outside-In. The Skin of Things: Witnessing, Mapping, Stitching in Chilean Art” focuses on Chile and examines, from two different angles, the wounds provoked by the Juntas’ repressive measures on civilians’ sense of embodiment and territorial belonging. It is composed of two chapters, each pivoting around a specific medium: painting and photography-based works.

Chapter 1, entitled “Vision and Tactility in Roser Bru’s Painting: Accounting for Political Violence” discusses the pictorial work of the artist Roser Bru and her attempt to account for and give a voice to the collective trauma provoked by the practice of political disappearance during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. Focusing on three works in particular, it considers how, for Bru, skin stands as an ambivalent border which, on one hand, serves to reinforce a patriarchal view of the female body as innately geared towards domesticity and, on the other hand, provides through its pictorial expression, a ground for the inscription of the trauma of political disappearance taking place in the country’s dictatorial years. Skin, in Roser Bru’s work, therefore functions as both a fettering element and a crucial threshold allowing for the articulation of tactility as an alternative to the patriarchal gaze.

Chapter 2, entitled “Epidermal Cartographies: Skin as Map in Chilean Mixed Media Works” pursues my examination of Chilean art by looking at photography-based mixed-media works produced by Paz Errázuriz and Diamela Eltit, the queer duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* and the collages of Catalina Parra. In this chapter, I explore the territorializing and deterritorializing forces at play in cartographic accounts of the skin. While the rigid and militaristic readings of national territory articulated by the Pinochet government might constitute a gesture of extreme territorialisation, their co-temporal implementation of a practice of disappearance of problematic citizens also led to a monstrous form of deterritorialisation. At the same time, in their hegemonic claims over national identity, the military also carved out

zones of marginality. The artworks included in this chapter attempt to account for this lethal dynamic. The work produced by photographer Paz Errázuriz and writer Diamela Eltit brings to visibility spaces of marginality where traditional and official conceptions of love and kinship become erased and are redefined, drawing the contours of symbiotic skins moving freely between genders, ages and sexual leanings. Meanwhile, the photo-performance of *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* questions the militaristic conception of the country in both its enclosing and expansionist manifestations. Introducing the cut in the skin as the symbol of a collective wound, *Las Yeguas'* performance also reveals a desire to stain the Euro-centric, white-dominated map drawn by the country's social elite. To the libidinal power of the cut, this chapter adds what may initially look like an antithetical gesture: the cauterizing power of skin. As it explores the visual and tactile properties of skin as the ground for the registration of trauma in Catalina Parra's collage works, this section also places it as the support for the emergence of the scar as a subdued, yet indelible mark.

The second part of the thesis, entitled "Inside-Out: Vessels, Tunnels, Bags: Motherhood and Pregnancy in Argentine Art" turns to the Argentine scene and provides a survey of works ranging from the mid-1970s until the present that might provide an "inside" view of embodiment as negotiated by the skin. Composed of two chapters, it constitutes a two-part discussion on intimate experiences pertaining to the feminine, particularly motherhood, childbirth and pregnancy.

In Chapter 3 "Private Mothers, Public Matters: The Epidermal Performance of Motherhood", I examine motherhood as a platform for political dissidence, looking in particular at the weekly protests orchestrated by the civil association of *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. The dramatic performances of maternal grief performed by Las Madres have been the object of both praise and criticism and the first two parts of this chapter examine the Mothers' use of motherhood as a political platform. Via a detour through a more recent work by Nicola Costantino examining the public figure of Eva Perón as "the mother of the Nation", it questions the potential pitfalls pertaining to political recuperations of motherhood and its subsequent transformation into an empty signifier, a disembodied vessel, void of gender and sexuality. In a final section, I return to the Madres, suggesting a potentially redeeming interpretation of their performances as liminal forms of *unbirth*.

In the fourth and final chapter called “Bag, Seed, Crucible: Pregnancy as Becoming in Argentine Sculpture”, I go back further “in”, and turn to the sculptural work of three artists: Lydia Galego, Liliana Maresca and the aforementioned Nicola Costantino. I argue that in these three bodies of works, the topic of pregnancy constitutes a critical topos, questioning ideas of monumentality, temporality and artistic genius. Engaging with notions of creation vs. procreation and the crafting of a monstrous double, it also seeks to excavate how the articulation of rigid norms around pregnancy does not quite manage to conceal the threat that this utterly feminine experience continues to represent for the social order. These artists’ works give way to alternative metaphors pertaining to pregnancy. Lydia Galego, attempting to go beyond the suffocating experience of gestation as a closing-in inside one’s body crafts trans-species narratives that profoundly impact on accepted readings of temporality. Meanwhile, Liliana Maresca’s approach to the metaphor of alchemic transmutation as a usurpation of female procreative powers raises significant questions about the gendered division between creation and procreation traditionally at play in artistic practice. A third section turns to works by Nicola Costantino whose approach to maternal ambivalence and pregnancy as a form of splitting are both negotiated via the crafting of a double whose existence puts at risk certain phenomenological readings of the body.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I address the expressive force of different artistic media, examining their political and formal relevance in the face of what might be described as a conceptualist supremacy in both artist practices and historiographical accounts of recent Latin American art. If the articulation of a form of Conceptualism specific to the region succeeded in crafting strategies that allowed artists to remain politically vocal in the face of censorship and economic hardship, Conceptualism’s reluctance to integrate practices addressing corporality and embodiment, has also led to the exclusion of certain art media from the art historical canon.

5) MEDIATING LATIN AMERICAN CONCEPTUALISM

A corollary ambition of this thesis is to place my examination of “epidermal aesthetics” in the light of a discussion on media and, especially on the adoption by artists discussed here of techniques deemed obsolete. My purpose here is not to make a case for the re-activation of these media’s specificity or purity, as local expressions

of a Greenbergian Modernism would have it.¹³ Rather, as I examine the plastic languages mobilised by these artists, I aim to place them in the historical perspective of the local art scenes in which they were produced.

In Chile, the years of the dictatorship corresponded with the shaping of a neo-avant-garde scene baptised *Escena de Avanzada* [Avant-Garde Stage or Scene] by the cultural critic Nelly Richard. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, the forms of intervention mobilised by the *Avanzada* were profoundly anchored in a poststructuralist and semiotic theoretical framework. This gave prominence to art actions and performances where artists' gestures and physical presence were interpreted as the irruption of fragmentary signs coming to perturb hegemonic narratives around the Nation-Body articulated by the Pinochet government: as practices used "to expose the suppression of meaning or the positions of power in official discourse" (Richard 1986, 72). Seen in this light, Roser Bru's persistence to resort to painting to account for gender disparities, political violence and disappearance, appears anachronistic and even possibly complicit with the official discourses attacked by the *Avanzada* – a difficult position that might partly explain, as we will see, the painter's peripheral status occupied until recent years in historical accounts of Chilean art. Meanwhile, if Catalina Parra occupies a more central place in the narratives accounting for art production in the years of the dictatorship, I would argue that this might have more to do with her cultural activities than her artistic practice per se.¹⁴ Moreover, when the artist's collage works were included in discussions on the Chilean avant-garde, they tended to be interpreted through the semiotic prism of an interruption of and in language, without providing a case for the more embodied and reparatory aspects manifest in her works.¹⁵ Examining the relevance of the epidermal motif in these artists' treatment of the feminine, my thesis aims at re-materializing and re-embodying Bru and Parra's practices as artistic forms

¹³ Such a tendency did however exist during these years. See for instance the curator and art critic Jorge Glusberg's efforts to defend Argentine forms of pictorial neo-expressionism in the 1970s and 80s as local expressions of Transvanguardism. For more on this, see Usubiaga (2012).

¹⁴ Parra was the editor of the cultural review *Manuscritos* and the co-founder of the editorial project *V.I.S.U.A.L.*, both important platforms of discussions for avant-garde artists of the period.

¹⁵ This is only true to an extent though. As I will discuss in the section examining Parra's works, Nelly Richard was also one to point out the feminine and healing dimensions of the artist's stitching gestures.

that run beyond the restrictive and abstracting scope introduced by the avant-garde framework.

In Argentina, the years of the Dirty War corresponded to a veritable *apagón cultural*, or cultural blackout, with many artists fleeing the country, as I will further examine in the section of Chapter 4 dealing with Lydia Galego. When historiographic accounts of these years address the persistence of some artists' labour from inside the country, they tend to examine them as solipsistic gestures and coping mechanisms: the expressions of a traumatised and traumatic life.¹⁶ Meanwhile, with the return to democracy and, especially during the years of Carlos Menem's government, the art scenes of Buenos Aires and Rosario were dominated by the production of artworks with a decidedly kitsch aesthetic – the so-called *Arte Light* – that sought to both emulate and parody the artificial concerns for youth and beauty prevalent during these years. If the works produced by Liliana Maresca and – to an extent – Nicola Costantino have been examined in the light of *Arte Light's* camp strategies – that is, to turn mundane objects into beautiful, shiny things as a way to reveal the underlying melancholia of the post-dictatorial years – this analytical scope has tended to reduce their practices to a merely provocative dimension. Examining the works produced by Galego, Maresca and Costantino as gestures questioning the language of sculpture, I take issue with these lines of interpretation, instead reading their approach to the feminine as efforts to replace female and especially pregnant embodiment at the core of artistic production and to situate this shift upon the surface of the sculptural medium.

As Latin American art has, over the past few years, been the object of renewed international interest, this phenomenon has been mediated by the existence of two important historiographic endeavours accounting for the artistic production of the continent since the 1960s. The ideas developed in the Uruguayan artist and writer Luis Camnitzer's co-curation of the exhibition *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origins, 1950s-1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999 were further developed in his book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, first published in English in 2007. Meanwhile, the Puerto-Rican curator and writer Mari Carmen Ramírez published her essay "Blue Print Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America" in the catalogue of the exhibition *Latin American Artists*

¹⁶ See Giunta (1993) and Constantin (2006).

of the Twentieth Century that took place at the MoMA in 1992, as well as an important text entitled “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity. Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980” that appeared in the catalogue of the exhibition *Inverted Utopias. Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* that she co-curated at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2005. In these texts, the authors defended the idea of a specifically Latin American form of Conceptualism simultaneously deployed in national art scenes, especially those placed under the harsh control of military dictatorships. For Ramírez, Conceptualism constituted “the second major twentieth-century shift in the understanding and production of art” (2004, 425) and turned the artist into an “active intervener in political and ideological structures” (Ramírez 1993, 157). Similarly, Camnitzer would qualify this change as the transformation of the artist into a “preacher/provocateur” (Camnitzer et al. 2009, 24). For these authors, the aim of Conceptualism was double: while it harboured a decidedly post-colonial stance in regard to the artistic influences coming from Europe and the United States, it also deployed strategies which, at a local level, provided solutions to articulate a political critique of authoritarianism while avoiding censorship and repression. In practice, the Conceptualist forms defended by Camnitzer and Ramírez did not necessarily aim at operating a dematerialisation of art— a posture that they associated with the tautological nature of North American Conceptual art. However, if the outlines they traced around Conceptualism also included object and body-based works, the authors did insist on the ideatic nature of Conceptualism. Camnitzer would make the radicalism of this posture even more explicit when he wrote about the Latin American artist breaking “decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception”(Camnitzer et al. 1999, viii). In practical terms, painting and sculpture in particular fell out of favour, associated, at best with a kind of solipsistic obsolescence and, in the worst cases, as a form of “colonial art” (Camnitzer in Ades 1989, 285).

As they traced artistic manifestations of such a shift at both a continental and national level, Camnitzer and Ramírez included the Chilean *Avanzada* and the Argentine art scene as manifestations of the deployment of these conceptualist strategies. In the case of Chile in particular, the linguistic shift identified by Nelly Richard fared especially well with the Conceptualist framework articulated by the authors. It is certainly noteworthy that both Camnitzer and Ramírez’s exhibitions took place in the United States and that their texts were primarily written in English,

reflecting their ambition to craft a historical narrative on recent Latin American art principally geared toward a foreign audience. This effort proved an undeniable success, as Conceptualism became the principal tool to examine art from the region in numerous academic accounts produced internationally.¹⁷ I would however argue that this success also bore a negative aspect, flattening out the subtleties of each national scene and contributing to an exclusion of art practices that fell outside its scope. As the Peruvian writer and curator Miguel López has concluded, the kind of assertion produced by Conceptualism, “though somewhat provocative, traces a particularly narrow and dichotomous path of analysis, indebted to essentialist nuances that fail to establish a genuine antagonism” (2010).¹⁸ I would also add that the restrictiveness of an undifferentiated application of Conceptualist criteria to account for all Latin American art, as it conflates the ideatic aspects of art with its political valence, also fails to account for the subversive force lying in the materiality of artworks whose adoption of artistic media deemed irrelevant has relegated to peripheral positions in current art historiographical writings. “Where materiality insists, the visual language begins to stutter, mumble and whisper”, as Barb Bolt writes in Rosemary Betterton’s edited volume on women’s painting (Bolt 2004, 47). For these reasons, in the conclusion of this thesis, I will provide a critical re-assessment of the limitations of Conceptualism when addressing the embodied and gendered aspects of Chilean and Argentine works that resort to artistic media considered marginal or obsolete. By doing so, I will consider the ways in which a critical redeployment of these media might also offer a way out of the Conceptualist conundrum and its dominance over contemporary Latin American art historiography. In an overview of the range of artworks discussed throughout the thesis, I will argue that their critical re-articulation of media from an embodied point of view provides an urgent relevance to their works, an urgency often overlooked by the existing literature.

¹⁷ See Smith (2011) and Bishop (2012).

¹⁸ The art critic Gabriel Peluffo Linari says something similar when, addressing the Spanish release of Camnitzer’s book *Didáctica de la liberación*, he warns about the risk of turning Conceptualism “into a kind of super-category (a meta-style) that simplifies and homologates a variety of language operations, aesthetic formulations, and information strategies” (Peluffo Linari 2011).

CHAPTER ONE

VISION AND TACTILITY IN ROSER BRU'S PAINTINGS: ACCOUNTING FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

“Skin is a variety of our mingled senses”
(Michel Serres, *Les Cinq Sens*, 1983, 3)

1) SUSPENDING THE PICTORIAL

In June 1981, the Chilean artist Carlos Altamirano inaugurated in Santiago his performance *Tránsito Suspendido* [Suspended Traffic] (Figure 1.1). The action saw him cover the street in front of *Galería Sur*, the hosting independent venue, with a white sheet upon which images of canonical Chilean paintings taken from the archives of the country's Museum of Fine Arts were projected. Entirely dressed in black and a can of paint in hand, the artist progressed, spraying inflammatory formulas on this makeshift horizontal screen. Altamirano belongs to a generation of young practitioners whose artistic coming of age coincided with the completion of the first decade of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship.¹⁹ Forming the avant-garde movement known as *Escena de Avanzada* [Avant-Garde Stage or Scene], these artists emerged as a form of delayed reaction to the shock that the military coup had provoked in the country.²⁰ Their work, explicitly grounded in the political conscience of the time, articulated what the critic and theoretical voice of the *Avanzada* Nelly Richard defined as a “new visuality” (1981, 8): a language borrowing from semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalysis and which, through performance, happenings and

¹⁹ Osvaldo Aguiló identifies two different stages in the response of artists to the military regime. While the first years of the dictatorship – which also correspond to the harshest years of repression – are defined as a “time of silence”, characterised by censorship, the termination of academic tenures, the expulsion of students from universities as well as the exile of numerous artists, Aguiló notes that from 1977, the artists who had remained in the country adopted a different attitude, triggered by “the emergence of an alternative movement creating its own modes of organisation, visibility and diffusion through communication channels” (Aguiló 1983, 14).

²⁰ The translation of *Avanzada* as avant-garde is not literal though for, in Spanish, avant-garde is usually translated as “Vanguardia”. *Avanzada* does not contain the militaristic connotations of avant-garde. What it retains is the idea of a forward movement, thus locating itself in a linear and progress-based reading of the avant-garde – not necessarily the most salient in Latin America where the association with rupturist intentions holds more ground. I will return to this later in this work.

live actions, sought to reveal and counter the state of surveillance, control and systemic violence implemented by the military Junta. As a corollary to this agenda, their works rejected traditional forms of art making, especially painting.

In the 1960s, in the decade preceding the military coup, the Chilean movement of Informal Painting had already started to put in crisis the established limits of the frame, developing a gesture that questioned “the concept of representation, substituting it with images taken from mass media” that were cut and inserted into the canvas (Galaz in Galende 2007, 26). As painting started undoing its own aesthetic codes, painters adopted an ideological approach to the painterly medium and a deconstructive tendency that was pushed to an extreme by the next generation emerging during the Pinochet regime. According to Aguiló however, more than a linear transition structuring the passage from one avant-garde to the next, the approaches developed by the *Avanzada* constituted a generational shift whose radicality was all the more salient in that it cohabited with the on going work of the older generation. Thus, while one group of Chilean artists persisted in using an informal aesthetic best expressed in painting and in exhibiting their works in more or less official settings, an increasing number of young artists produced works “developed on the margins of institutions, searching for the theoretical means to establish an axis of cultural inscription, accompanied with the use of mixed techniques and a rejection of sub-techniques (painting, sculpture, etc.), operating instead a direct transgression of these media” (Aguiló 1983, 15).

In tune with this spirit, painting came to be seen as a language obsolete if not directly complicit in the solipsistic tastes of the military regime – whose aesthetic preferences at the time leaned toward patriotic and unproblematic and populist genres such as landscapes and historical portraits.²¹ Richard would articulate this view quite clearly when she wrote: “I fear that an art experienced as pure subjective interiority without any social corollaries, (...), that the loosening of the discursive tension able to articulate the artwork within a dynamic of social thinking, will satisfy a tendency to grant to creativity a purely ornamental function and will contribute to deactivate art as a critical tool for the transformation of social and historical conscience” (Richard 1983, 55). Derided as it were for its so-called apoliticism as well as its aesthetic grounding in notions of subjectivity and intimacy, painting thus

²¹ For more on the official tastes of the military government, see Errázuriz and Leiva (2012) and Ávalos & Quezada (2014).

became the primary target for many protagonists of the *Avanzada*, as a practice that had to be either parodied or outright rejected. While artists like Altamirano, Eugenio Dittborn – and later on, Gonzalo Díaz – produced critical readings of the history of Chilean painting, portraying it as a reactionary medium associated with the country’s oligarchy, others like the performance artist Carlos Leppe, adopted a more confrontational stance, turning against the painters of their generation and attacking them for what he perceived as their frivolity in the face of a dramatic political context.²²

In tune with this spirit, Altamirano’s performance resounds like painting’s definitive death toll, the *auto-da-fé* of an out-dated medium whose symbolic combustion on the pavement, represents the utter desacralisation of painting as a medium and its prevalence in Chilean art history. Bearing this in mind, it may come as quite a surprise that *Galería Sur* was the hosting institution to this iconoclast act of faith, a gallery founded and directed at the time by the painter Roser Bru whom Richard defined as one of the principal advocates for “the reinstatement of a transcendental and humanist painting practice” (1987, 22).²³ This apparent paradox is telling of the ambivalent status occupied by Bru in Chilean contemporary art history, particularly in the exacerbated cultural context of the dictatorship years. Bru, a Catalan-born artist whose family fled Franco’s Spain and migrated to Chile in 1939, was actively involved in the Chilean artistic scene of the 1970s and 1980s, both through her exhibitions and her involvement in *Galería Sur*. Yet, her persistence in resorting to painting as her primary medium might seem to have relegated her to a minor position in the documents and historiographic narratives reflecting on the artistic avant-garde scenes of these years.²⁴

²² Leppe once turned on the young Chilean painter Sammy Benmayor during an interview and criticised him as one of “those artists [who] didn’t understand or care about the ‘problem of dominant and dominated cultures’, dreaming only of a studio in New York or Florence” (in Macchiavello 2011, 89).

²³ The characterisation of Bru as a ‘humanist’ painter does not necessarily entail a negative reading of her work. In fact, Richard, as we will see, wrote pertinent texts about Bru’s works. Nevertheless, for being so anathematic to the avant-garde practices with whom Richard was associated, it certainly denotes a distance, if not a degree of marginalisation.

²⁴ While Bru’s work is briefly discussed in Gaspar Galaz and Iván Ivelic’s encyclopaedic survey of Chilean contemporary art *Arte Actual* (1988), in Richard’s article “Art in Chile since 1973” (1987-88) and in some of the discussions comprising Federico Galende’s *Filtraciones I* (2007), in-depth analyses of her

In this first chapter, I seek to re-examine the paintings of Roser Bru in order to shed new critical light on her artistic production. More particularly, I am interested in investigating the role played by skin in Bru's portrayal of women figures as a way to unravel the complexities of her engagement with questions of gender and female embodiment. Using skin as both an iconographic motif and a methodological tool to think about containing limits, reflective surfaces and representative ground, I argue that Bru's representation of female subjects articulates a discourse highly critical of the military government's normative views of women as well as of its systemic practice of disappearing political opponents. In turn, I examine how Bru's treatment of surfaces in her pictorial representation of women subjects draws the outlines of a female embodiment whose critical weight runs beyond the radical discourse on the body that some avant-garde critics opposed to the official scene. By exploring the tensions between her use of the pictorial medium and the themes approached in her work, I not only wish to unravel the foundations of what the Chilean critic Paula Honorato (2012) has described as the "reactive strength" of her work but also aim at revealing how, beyond the ability of her painting to devise a form of political critique very much anchored within her epoch, it also outlines a radically new approach to the aesthetic experience, as one grounded in the tactile rather than the purely optical. By dedicating this first chapter entirely to Bru's work, I place her as the incipit of my epidermal ventures, seeking to draw out of her figures some crucial questions pertaining to embodiment, gender, belonging and the critical relevance of medium that will resurface in other sections of this thesis.

2) MUJERES CLAUSURADAS: OUTFLOWS AND CARCERAL SKINS

Outflows

In 1976, in the midst of what the artist described as her "Velázquez phase", Roser Bru painted *La Desproporción*, (Figure 1.2) a large painting dominated by fleshy

production remain rare and mostly framed by a tendency to consider her as an 'academic' artist (with the notable exception of Adriana Valdés who has written extensively on the pictorial production of Bru). Roser Bru's work has been undergoing a kind of "revival" in the past few years though. In 2015, she received the Chilean Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas, the utmost state distinction an artist can aspire to here. Her work will also be included in the forthcoming exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Artists 1960-1985* to be held at the Hammer Museum of Los Angeles in 2017.

tonalities. Bru often returned to pink as a background hue which she considered the colour “of fiction” (Campaña 2008, 51) and, in this canvas, the omnipresence of carnal tonalities further emphasised by the large sweeping brushstrokes in which it is laid out on the canvas, contributes to an eerie atmosphere surrounding the female character. The painting consists of a full portrait of a woman figure whom we know to be Mariana of Austria, the young second wife of king Philip VI of Spain and whose life fascinated Bru. In fact, the composition is very reminiscent of one particular portrait of the queen produced by Velázquez in 1652-1653 (*Mariana de Austria, Reina de España*) (Figure 1.3) and from which Bru borrows the vertical stand, the characteristic hairdo as well as some elements of clothing like the petticoat floating around Mariana’s hips and the white handkerchief she holds in her left hand. Although Bru made other portraits of Mariana that focused in detail on the expressions on the queen’s face (usually connoting a dominant melancholic mood), in this particular canvas, she resorts to an almost childlike naivety in the treatment of facial traits, shifting the focus upon the subject’s body whose monumentality occupies the greater space of the canvas. The lower part of the body in particular is pictured as if seen through a magnifying glass, the large thighs almost incorporating the clothes in their width.

The atmosphere of *La desproporción* is one of diffused unease. Mariana looks cramped within the frame and her uncoordinated body parts make her look like a cut out figurine whose bottom and upper parts do not match. In the upper part of the canvas, the contours of her body appear on the edge of collapse, as if shaken by a tremor or a sob. As her torso vibrates, each pulsation replicates and multiplies the outlines of her breasts and waist to finally lose itself into the surrounding white fog of the queen’s puffy shirt. Meanwhile, the lower part of her body, which initially appears to hold down more firmly, also lacks grounding. The feet’s anchoring on the ground are left out of the picture and even the thighs, seemingly contained by a thick red line, appear somewhat dislocated, hesitating between a stiff firmness and a more supple contrapposto. These elements contribute to convey a sense of precariousness to Mariana’s body as it continuously wavers between a diffuse menace of outward dissolution and a threat of implosion triggered by the uncontrollable swelling of the body’s lower parts. In either case, Bru confronts her spectator with the vision of Mariana as an abject body having lost sense of its own limits. Dissolution and implosion are the two polar sides of a same coin that posits the impending

disappearance of the body when the skin as a containing and limiting line protecting the self's integrity starts to default and turns the body into a limitless and dissolving mass of flesh, deprived of the function of self-preservation normally fulfilled by the epidermal envelope.

Psychoanalysis, as I have briefly discussed in the Introduction, defines skin as that which, by separating the inside of the body from its surrounding outside, allows for the formation of a meaningful sense of bodily self (Bick 1986, Anzieu 2016). As the outer layer of the body, it is also a screen upon which the Ego projects itself in the early phases of its psychic development. In other words, skin stands as a model for the self to integrate notions of limit, containment and autonomy. Particularly relevant to the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu is the individuating function played by the Skin-Ego, as it gives "a sense of a continuous Self" (Anzieu 2016, 110). A flawed or insufficient Skin-Ego triggers the formation of a pierced envelope and the subsequent threat of a leakage of the Ego leads to a sense of utter dissolution. The upper part of Bru's canvas seems to express such a threat as the whitewashing effect of the painter's brush flies menacingly over the figure's outlines on the verge of losing themselves with an outside too similar, both spatially and chromatically, for comfort. Meanwhile, in the canvas' lower part, while the red outline seems to provide some initial sense of containment and closure, the inner line, as it starts from the groin and continues downward, losing itself into the fleshy tonalities of the canvas's lower section, recalls the image of a – possibly menstrual – bloodstream. If the skin indeed does exist as a border, it is a porous one leading to an emptying of the self and a representation of the queen's body as an uncontainable flux.

Bru's interest in Velázquez hails from what she saw as his ability to capture, under the full regalia of official portraiture, a sense of his sitters' intimate thoughts. "Velázquez", she wrote, "is a chronicler of his epoch but, unlike Goya, he records from a place of silence: (...) without a single word written upon the canvas, he manages to tell it all" (Bru 1998, 18).²⁵ By emphasizing the official status of the monarch, Velázquez also reveals his noble sitter's concealed existence as a brittle, empty body turned into a puppet by the fiction of royal authority. Bru's own rendition of the queen's body insists on this progressive emptying of the self's vital substance and its slow transformation into an empty vessel. Here, skin bears on but it

²⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations taken from Spanish publications are mine.

is more as a performative screen for the projection and enactment of social expectations than as an authentic scroll of self-expression.

The artist's pictorial concern with the problematic embodiment of a long-dead European queen at a time when Chile suffered one of the most repressive and abusive regimes of its contemporary history would initially seem to support the claims of the avant-garde, according to which Bru's generation of painters had definitely lost touch with social reality, and confirm their verdict of painting as an artistic medium incapable of formulating a serious political critique. Nonetheless, a closer analysis of the painting would suggest that Bru's interest in the Velazquesque motif of Mariana actually helps shed light upon the artist's experience of living as a woman at a time when physical and political impositions turned women's bodies into the reflective screens of official propaganda.

The military forces that deposed Socialist President Salvador Allende on 11th September 1973 justified the coup d'état in the country as a necessary measure to restore order and morality as Chile's core values. In the days following the coup, the military had all traces of the deposed government's leftwing culture erased from the public sphere through a large-scale cleansing operation of the visual field described by Hernán Errázuriz as an *Operación limpieza* [Clean-up Operation] (2009, 139). To Errázuriz, this symbolic cleansing "represented on one hand the disinfection of the Marxist past and, on the other hand, the implementation of a militarised notion of daily aesthetic characterised by traits such as depuration, order and the fervent restoration of patriotic symbols" (Errázuriz 2009, 141). This militarised sense of order found, as I have shown in my Introduction, a particularly eloquent expression in the Junta's views on gender that entailed a clear dichotomy between men and women. As true *chilenidad* became one of the keywords of post-coup rhetoric, this return to the unadulterated values of the country was intertwined with an idea of gender based upon a reactivation of the traditional family model of *marianismo*, inspired by the Catholic figure of the Virgin Mary. The pictures of the male Junta leaders appearing in erect demeanours, perfectly tailored moustaches and impeccable uniforms published in state-controlled newspapers like *El Mercurio* belonged to this communication campaign to picture the new leaders as the incarnation of unflinching manly discipline.

Along with this newly heightened status of masculinity came the promotion of women as morally superior, if self-abnegating figures, entirely devoted to their

husband and children. In the military mind, investing women with the spiritual and material responsibility of looking after the home corresponded not only to a desire to re-shape a traditional family structure more in tune with their own values, it also drew the outlines of a society based upon inequality and discipline in which an elite of men dominated the governance of the country's affairs. In this sense, a similar phenomenon occurred in Chile as the one described by Geoffrey Kantaris in his study of women living in dictatorial Argentina and Uruguay where the violent affirmation of a patriarchal authority embodied by the male figure of the military was "bound up with a complex of masculine power and identity within which 'woman' becomes the central yet excluded or disavowed term" (Kantaris 1995, 3). Moreover, the re-moralisation of women's bodies as it was encouraged by the militaries bore as its correlate the punishment that awaited those reluctant or unable to meet these standards of self-sacrificial domesticity: the arrest, imprisonment and, for many, the use of physical, psychological and sexual violence and torture.²⁶ Within a typically *marianist* framework, woman was split in two: quasi-sanctity on one hand and physical and spiritual debasement on the other. As the anthropologist Ximena Bunster writes, the arbitrary ease with which one could fall in one extreme or another was an integral part of the torture process imposed upon female inmates in secret detention centres: "the combination of a culturally-defined moral degradation with physical duress constitutes a demented scenario in which the inmate is submitted to a rapid metamorphosis from Madame (respectable woman and/or mother) to prostitute" (Bunster 1983, 152). Bearing this in mind, Bru's interest in the fate of Mariana in her paintings of the early dictatorial years takes on a much more contemporary bite as her depiction of the queen's deliquescent body comes to echo a similar annihilation of her own and her contemporaries' bodily selves.

Moreover, in Bru's painting, the distortion of Mariana's body from the hips downwards through a kind of zoom-in effect, as well as the exposure of the queen's genitals and the central position they occupy in the canvas, function as an inescapable reminder of her task as wife and queen: to bear an – hopefully male – heir to the Spanish throne, to guarantee through the gestational properties of her female body the continuity of patriarchal power. By giving so much prominence – thematic and spatial – to Mariana's reproductive organs, Bru draws an implicit

²⁶ For more on this, see Maravall Yáñez (2009) and Vidal (2001).

parallel with Chilean women whose functions during the dictatorial years also became increasingly limited to the responsibility of bearing – patriotic heirs – for the Nation.²⁷

Skin-prisons

As Mariana's body seems to empty itself of vital substance, her dress intervenes, fulfilling the function of outside envelope, or skin. The social determinism framing Mariana's life – destined at fourteen to an inbred union with her older uncle king Philip IV of Spain – found a profound echo in Bru's perception of the symbolic role granted to women in Chile. To her, both Mariana and her contemporaries were *mujeres clausuradas*, closed and incarcerated women in and by their own gender and whose bodies were instrumentalised for the defence of political or national interests. As Bru declares, "my concern is for closed-off women because there is no such thing as a closed-off man" (in Campaña 2008, 56). This concern is particularly salient in the care with which she reproduces the queen's clothes, and especially the petticoat as a social device that serves to both enhance the female hips – and thus, its childbearing function – while at the same time, concealing the form in a monticule of clothed armature that intervenes as a denial of her sexual identity. Bearing in mind the sexual repression to which Chilean women were subjected at the time, Mariana's petticoat thus turns into the trans-historical expression of the corseting of the female body under patriarchal rule. This negation of feminine corporeality becomes even more explicit in *Las Frustraciones de Mariana*, a canvas also painted in 1976 and in which a large X crosses the lower part of the queen's body (Figure 1.4). While the presence of the menstrual blood in *La Desproporción* might suggest the persistence of fluxes as forms of openings and signs of resistance to the official politics of control and containment, in that second painting, the female body appears simultaneously closed off and denied. Of this period of her life, Bru recalls how "it was very difficult to be oneself" (in Valdés 1997, 11). This impeded sense of embodiment and the sense of a loss of identity that derived from it required someone else's skin, the vessel of Mariana's body, to express one's ambivalent experience of being both emptied out and locked into a rigid social skin whose outlines strictly obeyed the contours drawn by the patriarchal eye.

²⁷ I am grateful to the examiners of my thesis for pointing this out during the viva examination.

This ambivalence, embodied by the skin as both a leaky container and a tight screen reflecting outer expectations comes through even more clearly in a later series of works exhibited by Bru in her 1988 exhibition *Presencias/Ausencias*. On this occasion, the artist unveiled the series of works *Kariatides*, drawing from the ancient architectural pattern of female-shaped pillars. In these series, and particularly in the canvas *Mujeres que aguantan* (1988) [Women who endure] (Figure 1.5), Bru introduces architecture in her representation of female bodies as a pictorial motif reinforcing the incarcerated aspect of these figures. The image of a weight of domestic duties placed upon the mother's head and forcing her into immobility is further reinforced in the painting by the mutilation of the subjects' arms emphasising their helplessness, their inability to resist, to fight as well as to embrace. This series of work expresses, if anything, a sense of entrapment within one's body. Moreover, in *Mujeres que aguantan*, the doubling of the female shape, one in rosy tones and the second in much bloodier hues also contributes to duplicate this sense of discomfort, pain and complete helplessness as these two women, in apparent states of advanced pregnancy, are left to passively observe the slow incarceration of their bodies by and into themselves, thus confirming the interpretation of the skin in this painting as a shield locking women within and condemning them to complete subservience and passivity. In Bru's painting, while the limits of the woman's body – her skin as a containing limit works as a protection for the self's integrity, it also straightjackets her into layers of societal expectations carried along with her maternal role. In these representations of pregnancy, the female body becomes a “transpersonal place” (Valdés 2006, 339), shared with the child, the family and, in dictatorial Chile's pro-natalist mind-set, the State.

I would further argue that it is from this point of view that one ought to interpret the architectural motif introduced by Bru in *Mujeres que aguantan*. There, the two female subjects are not so much portrayed as literally petrified into their painterly selves. For women living and working in Chile in the 1970s and 80s, the association female body/architecture took on quite a puzzling resonance, at a time when the military government came to announce in their 1974 *Declaración de Principios* [Founding Principles] that “it is in the family that woman finds the greatness of her mission and it is family that turns woman into the Nation's [*La Patria*] spiritual rock” (in Rajevic 2000, 27). From embodied woman to spiritual rock, the Junta's transformation of women into walking allegories of the Motherland

goes hand-in-hand, Bru appears to suggest, with a slow suffocation. From this point of view, the skin as vital container of the self sees its function perversely turned around. It tightens and hardens. Vital boundaries become enclosing limits and surfaces upon which the outside, male gaze projects its view of women as innately geared toward domesticity and motherhood. The skin is forced, from the outside, to become what the psychologist Ester Bick has called a “second-skin” (1968) a hardening of the outer core and its transformation into a rigid shell. However, while the pathologised skin of Bick’s account is produced by its own subject, as an excessive self-preserving mechanism, in Bru’s paintings, the woman appears walled-in from the outside, her skin turned into a public billboard that the patriarchal Junta intervenes on to promote its gendered ideology.

As accurate as this representation may be, I would like to stay with *Mujeres que aguantan* for one final remark concerning the anti-specular nature of Bru’s critical commentary. Indeed, while the figures’ lack of arms initially suggests a complete inability to communicate physically with the outside world, this gesture is countered in the painting by a hand appearing on the right side of the canvas, extending from the outside and touching – or gesturing towards – the belly of the second woman. Initially, this hand appears to occupy a deictic role, underlining the natural function of the woman, namely to breed and reproduce. However, the way it seems to rest on the woman’s belly underlines another aspect of skin that introduces a possibility of resistance and ultimate redemption for these maimed bodies. As I mentioned in the Introduction, skin does not only refer to one specific corporeal locus, it also stands as the ground for tactility. Through touching, one develops an alternative (non-verbal and non-visual) communication with the outside. Touching is, by definition, always reciprocal: one cannot touch without being touched. Touch therefore represents a particular mode of being-in-the-world, one of interconnectivity between things, a link of mutual receptors. While the women’s lack of arms keeps them from initiating the gesture, the intervening hand seems to proffer them the caress they are unable to give. This hand, I would like to suggest here, is the painter’s hand performing what Adriana Valdés calls an “operation of piety” (Valdés 1989, 8). To the physical mutilation of these women by the patriarchal gaze, Bru replicates with the application of a pictorial bandage that aims to heal the wound, a caress of her brush as an extension of her hand. “Touch”, Michel Serres writes, “ensures that what is closed has an opening” (Serres 2008, 55). By touching these women, Bru

thus attempts to reactivate their lost inter-sensoriality and allows for a return of embodiment that introduces painting as a thoroughly tactile operation rising against the vertical logic of the patriarchal gaze.

3) EDELMIRA AZOCAR: PORTRAYING THE DISAPPEARED

Co-temporary to her thematic interest in Velázquez, Roser Bru's painting undergoes a stylistic change towards a more ethereal palette of paler tones and more fluid brushstrokes. As the textured density of her previous works gives way, her figures lose ground, their contours progressively wrapped into a *sfumato* that seems to blend the bodies with their pictorial background. Figures "turn into the opposite of what they used to be: from large gaze-less bodies, they become vanishing or absent, transparent bodies" (Valdés 2006, 330). The painting *Edelmira Azocar, Animita* (1977) (Figure 1.6) belongs to such a stylistic turn, revealing an evolution from the treatment of femininity received in Bru's earlier works. While Mariana served as a motif to verbalise the abduction of female bodies by patriarchal power, this painting ought, I argue, to be read in the light of political disappearance as a method of political control in dictatorial Chile.

As the title *Edelmira Azocar, Animita* suggests, the work is a portrait of a woman named Edelmira Azocar. The notion of *animita* [literally, little soul] refers to the Chilean tradition of setting-up small shrines in places where violent deaths had occurred.²⁸ Bearing testimony to these untimely deaths, the house-shaped *animita* also took on a particular resonance during the years of the dictatorship as it turned into the visible face of arbitrary repression. In his *Cartas de Chile* (1984), the writer José Donoso described the proliferation of *animitas* during the dictatorship as the symbol of the persistence of memory in the face of imposed obedience, "small sanctuaries" that turned into a "metaphor of our forced silence" (Donoso 1985, 20).²⁹ In the canvas, the persona of Edelmira, identified through the contours of a face and the scribbled name inscribed underneath, point to this commemorative aspect. Yet,

²⁸ In local folk culture, *animitas* represent unofficial memorials set up to remember victims. In some cases though, popular devotion to these shrines reached such a degree that the victims turned into minor, not officially canonized saints whom one could turn and pray to. For more on the culture of *animita* in Chile, see Plath (2012).

²⁹ Bru herself had a specific reading of the *animitas*. A recurring motif in her work, she would describe them as "what can not get forgotten, what one has faith in" (in Vidal 1990, 248).

there exists a sharp contrast between the clear identification provided by the portrait's title and the barely decipherable style in which it is depicted. Under Bru's paintbrush, Edelmira's body and face become blurred and even the inscription of her name turns into an illegible smudge of black ink. This discrepancy is further emphasised by the formal and chromatic construction of the painting. While the background appears in sharp focus, crossed by neat oblique lines guiding the eye and clearly delimited by the application of two flat tints, a blurry haze seems to take possession of the figure of Edelmira, wrapping her into a hazy cloud of carnal tonalities devoid of contours and frustrating the spectator's vision. Paintings such as this one stand as the exact opposite to the locked-up stony women of *Mujeres que aguantan* as here, it is truly the skin as containing envelope that seems to default, introducing a representation of the subject as an unlimited substance whose physical limits are further wiped out by the large sweeping brushstrokes. Another type of anguish derives from this kind of female representation. While the *Kariatides* series triggered a sense of entrapment and claustrophobia where skin turned into a jail impeding any attempt at self-determinism and contact with the other, in *Edelmira Azocar, Animita*, the anguish rises from an absence of limits, conveying the view of skin as a porous border unable to contain the self from dissolution, an abject dislocation of the self *from the inside out* which, in physical terms equates to annihilation and death.

Reading this painting in the light of the phenomenon of political disappearance, one might start to see how Bru questions her own responsibility and ability, as an artist, to express this physical void in visual terms. In her treatment of disappeared bodies, the painter articulates a reading of skin as the ground or support for an impossible representation. As such, the painter tackles disappearance in the only way she sees suitable: through the making of an anti-portrait, a portrait *en creux*: in which the main protagonist, whose identifiable presence lingers on in the title, seems to have vanished from the pictorial plane, mysteriously and irremediably erased from the field of representation. In *Edelmira Azocar, Animita*, the subject matter fills the space of the picture by its absence just as the figures of the *desaparecidos* create a screaming void in society.

Trying to make sense of the question of disappearance in its Latin American form, Federico Galende writes that the terrible anguish that this phenomenon unleashes lies in the uncertainty that the absence of corpse triggers. *Desaparecidos*

are beings without life or death, “deprived even of death” and the consequential inability for their relatives and survivors to represent them in this very state of disappearance leads them to become “things without a face” (Galende 2001, 32). This absence of a face is what stands as the most disturbing element of Bru’s portrait, an absence further underlined by the small square framing the space where Edelmira should appear – or seems to have figured just a moment ago. I mentioned before that as skin contains the sense of self of a person, it provides contour and maintains within a shape; however, skin also plays an essential role as a surface, a platform of representation supporting the drawing of the face. As Steven Connor writes, the skin is “the body’s face, the face of its bodiliness” (2004, 29). In visual terms, suffice to think of these medieval figures of *écorchés* to see how, without skin, facial traits blur and blend, turning the face into a mere composite of incongruous elements. As a support to the face and a frame to the gaze, skin stands as the gateway towards identification but also towards recognition. As Bru attempts to express and give shape to the anguish of political disappearance, all she is left with is to merely suggest the disappearance of the face, and thus intrinsically, the erasure of the skin. Skin as containing limit and representative support enabling individuation and recognition is what defaults most cruelly in Bru’s painting where her subject’s face turns into a floating aggregate of unrecognisable features, a disembodied shadow slowly blending into its background, a faceless absence, which might come to announce the dislocation of memory itself.

Edelmira Azocar, Animita was painted in 1977. The same year, Roser Bru gave an interview to Nelly Richard to accompany the catalogue of her exhibition at Galería Cromo. Talking about her paintings, she explained:

What I am most interested in is a form of new figuration: more brutal and worrying. Something like what the English [Francis] Bacon has done – so disembodied, like the work of a butcher (...) what stirs me most is the creation of an unpredictable world suggested by reality. To re-create reality (Bru, 1977, n.p.).

In this painting, Roser Bru does indeed proceed in the manner of a Bacon, flaying her canvas like a butcher, leaving but a mere trace to signal body and face. However, in this stylistic transformation, it is not so much a new figuration as a disfiguration that the artist performs, erasing her figure from the field of visibility.

Bru's reference to Bacon is a suggestive one as it recalls what Deleuze described as Bacon's attempt to produce a new kind of abstraction (Deleuze [1987] 2003, xii). Deleuze notices how Bacon starts by "isolating the Figure" ([1987] 2003, 2) in order to set it free to undo itself through a process described as that of "the entire body trying to escape, to flow out of itself" ([1987] 2003, xii). Bacon's paintings have reached such a degree of disfiguration that the next stage would be complete disappearance of the figure into abstraction, a level that Deleuze's imagination can only surmise:

Suppose the Figure had effectively disappeared, leaving behind only a vague trace of its former presence. (...) [T]he scrambled and wiped-off zone which used to make the Figure emerge, will now stand on its own, independent of every form, appearing as a pure Force without an object: the wind of the tempest, the jet of water or vapor, the eye of the hurricane... (Deleuze [1987] 2003, 30)

This ultimate level in the destruction of the figure and its transformation into an aggregate of vaporous matter is what Bru achieves in her anti-portrait of Edelmira but, contrary to the Sublime dream of pure energy that Deleuze suggests, all that Bru has to offer is a terrifying spectacle of ultimate destruction and the destruction of spectatorship itself. The figure, as it escapes the supporting canvas leaves us with nothing to see. The stakes of such a visual phenomenon run very far indeed for, while Deleuze perceived in Bacon's destructive gesture the desire to be set free from painting's over-reliance on narrativity; in Bru, this absence of narration stands as the consequence of disappearance as a trauma of devastating strength. In this sense, Bru's disfiguring of her figure not only sounds as an admission of her inability to show the unshowable, it also suggests that the absence of figures in the Chilean phenomenon of disappearance highjacks the very possibility of storytelling in a way that threatens not only the basis of art but also, and more generally that of history as a linear and coherent summary of events interpreted in relation to one another. Willy Thayer says something similar when he suggests that the military *coup d'état* in Chile was not something that happened *in* history but *to* history, as an event whose violence "dissolve[d] transversally the status of representationality [of] modern democracy" (Thayer 2002, 54). Bearing this in mind, Roser Bru's non-portrait of a disappeared woman therefore appears as a

capitulation: the admission of painting's powerlessness in the face of the trauma of disappearance. However, in the face of this admission, Bru's paintings do not retreat into the navel-gazing leisure of traditional easel painting in which some tenants of the avant-garde would like to picture her but, on the contrary turns painting back against itself and starts carving her own medium in a macabre skinning exercise that will even affect the surface of her canvas.

In the same catalogue, Nelly Richard analyses Bru's painting as a *despintura*, a gesture of *dis-painting*:

The brush or the pencil starts to underline the image's decomposition process. They work to eliminate. Roser Bru's painting devices are placed at the service of a *dis-painting* (to erase painting until leaving only traces of it) (Richard in Bru, 1977).

Bru's portrait of Edelmira Azocar does indeed appear as a sort of self-sacrificial gesture (sacrifice of the motif, sacrifice of the texture): the disappearance of the body of painting as echoing Edelmira's very real physical disappearance. However, there is more to this for as the canvas gets stripped of its pictorial epidermis, it also seems to transform itself into a flayed skin, into the disembodied contours of Edelmira's body. In an ultimate attempt to express the horror of disappearance, Bru turns her pictorial surface into the skin of the *desaparecido* in a gesture that sacrifices both figure and surface to the Object. In a manner similar to the one she will undertake in her portrayal of a sick Kafka – *Kafka y la Enfermedad* [Kafka and the Disease] (1985). (Figure 1.7) – the canvas becomes a bleeding surface. And just as Kafka's absurd machine in *The Penal Colony* inscribes into the skin of its victims the verdict of their death sentence, so does Roser Bru's painting, both culprit and victim, write down through erasure the story of the *desaparecidos*.

The figure that disappears from Bru's work does not therefore go quietly. On the contrary, the disfiguring of the motif, as it contains at its core the violence entailed by the disappearance of a body, can only work as a bursting expression carrying along in its trail epidermal fragments of paint and canvas. Moreover, through the double process of disfiguration and despainting, Roser Bru also attacks the self-enclosure of the canvas upon itself. As the physical contours of figure and paint lose their firmness, blending formally and chromatically into the background,

so does the limit between the painting and the zone of spectatorship let go, leaving the painting itself confused as to its own material limits.

An inspection of the painting of Edelmira from the centre outwards reveals the presence of a small squared frame contained within a wider diamond shape, defined by a dark line cutting through each corner of the canvas. A frame, whether material or pictorial, is traditionally used to delineate a painting, to define and contain its space of action. The frame limits the space of the painting: it guarantees its integrity and protects the body of the work from outside shocks. In this sense, the frame plays a similar role for painting as the skin to the body: limiting, containing and protective. Looking closely at Bru's painting though, the black line of the wider frame appears to delimitate the work only partially and the painted surface (including Bru's signature itself in the lower-right corner) proliferates beyond this marked boundary (Figure 1.8). This opening of the frame leads the painting to literally leak out, pushing even its authorial mark beyond its original framing. Moreover, in this painting – as well as in many other works by Bru –, the multiplication of frames creates as many different pictorial planes encased one into another, as so many limits, boundaries and thresholds, blurring any attempt to draw a clear distinction between the inside and the outside of the work. Bearing in mind what I wrote previously regarding the erasure of contours that operates in the disappearance of the pictorial motif, we now start to see how Bru expresses the anguish of political disappearance through a double gesture made of both the sinister erasure of the female figure's contours and the opening of the painting's framing device.

The frame, as precarious epiderm to the work's fleshiness, becomes a porous membrane in a process similar to Derrida's definition of the *parergon* as that part of a painting that lingers on between two planes: "without being a part of it and yet without being absolutely extrinsic to it" (Derrida 1987, 55). Derrida intends to transform the frame into an ambiguous border, a zone both internal and external.³⁰ Similarly, as Bru turns the frame of her painting into a border made up of both insides and outsides, she also inaugurates the frame as a surface of shared contact between work and beholder and turns the aesthetic experience into a profoundly

³⁰ Victor Stoichita notes something similar when he defines the frame of 18th century painting as an object situated between the pictorial and the conceptual: "The frame is not quite image and it is no longer a simple object belonging to the surrounding area" (Stoichita 1997, 30).

mutual one. As far as Roser Bru's painting is concerned, this imbrication and opening of frames and skins to create a surface shared with the outside bears tremendous consequences in regard to the ethical position of both the artist and the spectator as *witnesses* when faced with the trauma of disappearance. Through this gesture, certainly not an innocent one, the artist erases the safe distance traditionally maintained between canvas and beholder and establishes a surface tying both together and through which she seeks, not so much to speak of or to represent the trauma of disappearance, but to experience it in its very core. Roger Luckhurst writes that "[t]rauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" (2008, 3). Through the opening of the border of the frame operated in her painting, Bru does indeed put inside and outside into a strange communication: a communication of borders weaving itself through and around the non-representation of a traumatic image – the image of a disappeared body.

To the double process of undoing entailed by disfiguring and dispainting, Bru therefore adds a third act: the deframing of her pictorial zone. And in this search for ruptures, the artist also seems to question painting's ongoing viability as a subjective form of image-making in the face of a political context whose field of vision has been so profoundly clouded and scarred by the phenomenon of disappearance. In this self-assessment of painting's ability to represent the unrepresentable, Bru also begs for a radical reconsideration of traditional modes of beholding and questions our own legitimacy, as spectators, in front of her paintings. In his analysis of Bacon, Deleuze posited the disappearance of spectatorship as the work's ultimate goal. Bru's paintings seem to articulate a similar disappearance but one which, rather than obeying an agenda of aesthetic emancipation, functions as a *fait établi*, as the consequence of the destructive politics of vision operated by the Junta. In the face of this, Bru forces us to question our role as spectators looking at her traumatic and traumatizing paintings and seems to suggest that the only acceptable position for us to adopt may in fact be the one of *witnesses*. Addressing the role of the witness, Federico Galende writes:

The witness is the man who has no look. That is, if we consider that, far from belonging to the field of vision, the look is constitutive of the space of the 'utterable', of representation and recognition (...). To look is to give back its tranquillity to language and to sacrifice the silence of things to the sound of a name. (Galende 2001 34)

Through the safe distance entailed by looking, the spectator does nothing more than reduce an unnarratable experience back to language, thus wrongly translating the experience of disappearance. On the contrary, Bru's stubborn refusal to represent what is gone makes her embrace the oxymoronic position of a non-looking onlooker, a blind witness. This posture that is articulated upon the surface of the disappeared body and the canvas of the painting as its epidermal substitute entails the telling of the story of the disappeared through a mutual experience, one that Deleuze would describe as haptic, as the best way to engage the beholder ([1987] 2003). Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey define the exercise of *thinking through the skin* as an exercise that entails reflecting "on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others" (2009, 1). Similarly, Bru articulates a practice of looking through the skin in which she physically engages her spectators, making them react almost physically to the absence of representation. From the optic to the haptic, her approach to painting as a tactile, multisensorial experience of openings of skins and frames appears to her as the only way to engage her beholders, to force them to react physically to the absence of representation. It is a moral duty that the artist is accomplishing here and she finds no other way to carry it than by touching the skin of our retina, to make us sense physically the danger of her painting as the symptom of a much wider trauma.

After the wound comes the scar and Roser Bru does not limit herself to reproducing on her canvas the full violence of disappearance, she also seeks to counter it, or rather, to move beyond it in a healing gesture. As Antonia García writes on the trauma of disappearance,

the blank created by disappearance is always about an individual and his surrounding: it is more than a body, it is an existing relation that is being broken. Disappearance attacks this very thing that sociology likes to call the 'social networks' (García 2000, 89).

The trauma of disappearance is never a private experience. By fracturing the bonds between individuals, by creating a hole inside the social textile, it is always and inherently a social wound that disappearance creates. And by opening the frame of her painting to the outside world of the beholder, it is to this dislocation of the social that Bru seeks to remediate, weaving a collective, social skin engaging artist and

spectators alike into a mutual sense of social concern. The collective skin of her painting creates a zone of inter-embodiment (Ahmed & Stacey 2001, 1) where one touches and is touched in an effort to recreate the sense of social contract so profoundly scarred by the violence of disappearance. As Bru herself puts it, “if I attempt to analyze myself, I keep going back to a constant: the strength of one in the other and the unavoidable circle that makes and unmakes us” (Bru 1977, n.p.). Touching the spectator and accepting to be touched by her through the double-edged surface of the frame, Roser Bru’s painting offers the encounter of one with the other as an alternative to the vertical hierarchy of vision and the way to consider painting as an operation related to memory: that of acknowledging the existence of the other through a shared experience of art.

4) SPECTRAL SKINS, HAUNTED PAINTING

I have thus far argued that Roser Bru’s painting offers another kind of aesthetic experience: one which, through the pictorial surface of her works forces her – and us as spectators – to acknowledge political disappearance as an inherently collective wound. Moreover, by provoking a shift that replaces the beholder with the ethically-loaded role of witness, it also undermines the traditional idea of a purely visual art, embracing instead a sensible experience of non-representation. Concluding here would however provide only a partial account of Bru’s gesture and of her exploration of the viability of painting as a relevant artistic medium in the face of political authoritarianism and patriarchy. It would moreover overlook the entire upper section of Bru’s painting, particularly the inclusion in the canvas itself of a photographic portrait of Edelmira, echoing the painted portrait located right underneath it. In paintings of this epoch, Bru often returns to this photomontage device, introducing in her painted portraits a photographic double of her subject (Figure 1.9). Although the photograph of Edelmira receives the same treatment as its pictorial counterpart, almost disappearing under layers of white paint, one would be entitled to wonder what, for a painter like Roser Bru, a photograph adds to a portrait of a disappeared person and if indeed, it adds anything at all. In what follows, I will examine the significance of this photograph of Edelmira in Bru’s painting.

Trying to make sense of Bru’s interest in photography, the Chilean writer and art critic Enrique Lihn refers to the Barthesian notion of “reality effect” (2008, 377), interpreting photography as both scribe and witness to the “has-been-there” of an

individual's life. In the case of the disappeared, this indexical interpretation is quite fitting as the photograph comes to provide a layer of truth to a now disappeared corporality. Moreover, in the face of the authority's discourses, the visual evidence of photography also opposes its stubborn persistence to the military government's refusal to acknowledge the reality of disappearance as a systemic practice in the country. This is what the critic Ronald Kay refers to when he writes that "the photographic eye appears as a critic of the physical gaze: this is where its revolutionary strength lies" (2007, 25). In this sense, the photographic portrait functions as the support for an irrefutable truth: that someone who used to be here no longer is and it is to this same power of photography that relatives of *desaparecidos* appealed when they demonstrated in the streets of Santiago, bearing large reproductions of black and white pictures. By inserting a photograph of Edelmira in her painting, Bru therefore both appeals to the proclaimed objectivity of photography in its ability to reproduce reality and appropriates a gesture clearly associated with opponents to the dictatorship, thus voicing implicitly the side of her allegiance.

It is not any photograph that Bru inserts in her canvas though and by adopting the format of the identity picture, the artist resorts to a subtly different agenda. In his survey of the use of identity pictures in the work of the Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn, Ronald Kay argues that in its very format, the ID picture bears a crucial discursive strength (2007, 33-37). The ID photograph talks about individuality but while serving as the firm evidence of someone's existence, it also flattens it to a series of normative points. Thus, if the ID picture stands for an identity, it is one already submitted to official bureaucracy and that, furthermore, already hints at one's potentially guilty dealings with the law. In the state propaganda produced during the dictatorship, photographs of idealised Pinochetist families cohabited with sombre friezes of pictures of so-called subversives that the government wanted to locate and interrogate. Presented in this way, the ID picture took the appearance of a mug shot, turning it, as Kay continues, into both the evidence and the admission of guilt for a crime not yet committed. The artist is quite aware of this pliability of photography. Moreover, while the inclusion of photographs into paintings was already a recurring practice among the 1960s Chilean group *Signos*, for them, the gesture represented a form of modernist incursion that sought to grant to photography the aura of "respectability" surrounding painting (Galaz in Galende 2007, 26). In Bru's works on

the other hand, this intermedial incursion seeks to destabilise painting itself, establishing it as a suspicious medium, easily manipulable by populist bombast.

Photography in Bru's portrait, then, does not so much provide a historical glimpse into a verified narrative. Rather, its presence obeys an emotional imperative that intervenes to invert the established order of painting vs. photography, truths vs. lies. As the artist puts it herself, "in the end, I start from the photograph that hurts and pinches, that certifies and shows what people could not be" (Bru 1982, n.p.). The photograph that hurts, or rather, what hurts in a photograph stands much closer to Barthes' definition of the *punctum* of the medium, the personal thread linking a beholder to a photograph; what touches him/her most personally. To Bru, it therefore seems that photography, more than painting –or as a complement to painting – provides the beholder with a particular type of link to the work, something underlined by Barthes as the inherently melancholic aspect of photography, which by definition, always entails an absence: the absence of the person portrayed, and an absence further emphasised by the presence of its photographic replicate. There is more to this though as for Barthes, the absence that the photograph reveals also works as a delayed presence, or rather, as a presence in the very midst of absence. As he explains, photography is a "carnal medium, a skin I share with everyone who has been photographed" (Barthes 1981, 80-81) and more particularly, a skin I share with this person who is no longer there but whose image I am looking at. Photography in Bru's painting therefore participates in this effort to undo the enframing of both bodies and works by military discipline in order to activate a sense of commitment within the beholder tied by "a sort of umbilical cord" (Barthes 1980, 80) to the disappeared subjects. Photography weaves a collective chemical skin that ties the beholder to the work. And in Roser Bru's painting, it is through this shared skin that the photographed subject comes to touch me, testifying of her previous existence but also, and most importantly, guaranteeing the continuity of her existence into the present. Through the use of this photographic device, Bru therefore guarantees that the inter-embodiment that she struggles to establish as an alternative approach to her work is also contained in the painting through the photographic presence of her subject. And if Edelmira's gaze is indeed the *punctum* of the photograph, so does the photograph play a similar role for the painting itself: an entry door for the ghost to manifest herself and to come and pinch the beholder, the scar that in its present existence signals –never stops to signal – a past wound.

This last point brings us to a final consideration regarding the portrait of the disappeared Edelmira and the role filled by skin to function as both filter and transmitter between inside and outside, between one subject and another. If the photographic insertion of a portrait in Bru's painting weaves a collective skin of reciprocity between Edelmira, Bru and the viewer, uniting them all in one temporality, couldn't it be the case then that, instead of an absence, what the painting strives to portray is the spectral re-appearance of Edelmira? This first venture into a haunted reading of the artwork would also allow in retrospect, to consider how the ghost was present all along in the painting itself: in Edelmira's disembodied presence and in the slightly out of sync double representation of her face. Edelmira's ghost seems to slowly emerge and take shape from within the whiteness of the pictorial matter, the blurriness of her lines as if they were in the process of taking shape, supported by the ectoplasmic mist produced by Roser Bru's brush.

Attempting to establish a difference between a ghost and a spirit, Steven Connor writes:

[a] ghost, as opposed to a spirit, or Spirit, is always a kind of body. In fact, *ghosts are crustacean*, for they tend to take the form of a vapour inside a shell: encased in armour, or as Mummy and Invisible Man, held together by the cerements that they themselves hold up. In both cases, it is a matter of filling out, and creating uprightness (the opposite of the flat or recumbent life in which the skin is so often implicated)" (Connor 2004, 32-33).

In disappearance, it is, as we saw, the skin as the support for the face and ground for meaning and remembrance that goes first. In her spectral presence in Roser Bru's canvas, Edelmira appears not so much as a disembodied than as a flayed corporality to which the painter's canvas and our own very eye grants representative support.

Ghosts are inherent to the phenomenon of disappearance as its very political practice in a context of state terror served to instil doubt in people's own perceptive senses and cognitive skills. If people could vanish into thin air from one day to the next, if rationality and the very basis of a civilised social contract could be broken down so radically, and if post-dictatorial governments could argue for amnesty rather than accountability, was it indeed beyond the scope of imagination to witness the return of the *desaparecidos* as ghosts? For Avery Gordon,

disappearance is a state-sponsored method for producing ghosts, whose haunting effects trace the borders of a society's unconscious. It is a form of power, or maleficent magic, that is specifically designed to break down the distinctions between visibility and invisibility, certainty and doubt, life and death that we normally use to sustain an ongoing and more or less dependable existence. (Gordon 2008, 126)

However, this was a double-edged game that the Chilean generals were playing for it was out of the very trauma of disappearance that the ghosts returned, haunting the post-dictatorial transition to democracy. Lacking a proper sepulchre and having being deprived of a parting ceremony, ghosts haunt the modern history of Latin American dictatorships, begging for justice and remembrance.

In her paintings, Bru lends the skin of her canvas to the disappeared Edelmira, allowing her to re-appear as a return of the repressed upon the so profoundly scarred field of visibility and representation. And in this morbid game of hide-and-seek, Bru makes us too, beholders, acknowledge the presence of the ghost and the fragility of the thin varnish of rationality separating us from her, from them:

the living –or surviving- “I” is phantasmagorised by its very presence in the “you” of the dead: between the I and the you, there is no discrimination of fate, only pure, raw chance: the materialisation of the ghost is the medium's phantasmagoria (Lihn 2008, 296-297).

In technical terms, Bru's transformation of her canvas as a support for spectral returns entails a certain distancing from her authorial supremacy. The Chilean art historian Ana María Risco interpreted the paintings of Eugenio Dittborn as works in which the artist, putting aside his tendency to use prepared and opaque canvas, had recourse to a “poetics of absorption - aimed at transforming the plane of the work into a porous and receptive surface to receive the fallen body” (Risco 2010, 166). In Bru, the work's porosity is not so much achieved through a technical alteration of the canvas as through a radical opening of her framing device: a gesture that, as we saw, is expressed by the presence of multiple and deficient borders within the work itself as well as by the insertion of heterodox elements like the photographic portrait. This

mix of media generates such a distancing from the artist's hand and puts in doubt the very authorial legitimacy of the work. Risco examines Dittborn's painting technique of dropping and staining as the marks of a "postpictorial" painting (Risco 2010, 232). In Bru's case, it would seem more appropriate to talk about a painting practice that acts as a form of collective enthralling and whose porosity allows the skin of the canvas to become a space of spectral returns shared by everyone.

"Disappearance is the only witness of disappearance", Willy Thayer writes (2002, 56) but in the re-appearance of the disappeared in Bru's canvas, it is all of us, in an ectoplasmic skin who become engaged, giving back to the disappeared their lost layer of recognition and visibility. By providing a dermal surface for the haunted memory of past traumas to re-surface and situate itself, Bru's paintings also fulfill a guiding, almost educational, purpose. In this sense, her works might be compared to a compass or to a map guiding participants to the pictorial experience back to themselves and each other. The cartographic element of the skin as both a territorializing and deterritorializing force, as well as a surface of topographic inscription constitutes the crux of my discussion of skin and territory in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

EPIDERMAL CARTOGRAPHIES: SKIN AS MAP IN CHILEAN MIXED MEDIA WORKS

1) SITUATING TERRITORY: ENCLOSING AND POROUS BORDERS

In December 1979, Chilean artist Elías Adasme staged a photo-performance that took the embodied nature of the cartographic map as its main topic (Figure 2.1). The four photographs that came out of this action show the artist's body exposed next to or under a large-sized map of the Chilean territory. In the first photograph, the bare-chested Adasme is portrayed hanging upside down, attached by the legs with leather straps to the entry sign of Santiago's metro station Salvador. A large paper map of Chile has also been affixed to the other arm of the pole, its size almost matching the length of the artist's body. This action is then repeated in the more intimate context of the artist's studio: one image shows the artist and the map in exactly the same position as in the first outdoor shot while, in another, Adasme stands back on his feet next to the map that hangs from a wall. The capitalized words "MAP OF CHILE" that run through the artist's chest make explicit the link between physical body and geographic territory. In one last image completing the squared grid, the fully naked Adasme is pictured standing, his back against the camera, with a map of Chile projected onto the skin of his bare body.

With this action, the young artist aimed at drawing attention to the visual similarities existing between the human body and the characteristic longitude of the Chilean territory. At the same time, by turning his body into a visual metaphor for the spatial boundaries of the Nation and his skin into a supportive screen for its topographic outlines, Adasme also sheds light on the typical function filled by the map in regards to the land it represents and codifies, as well as the epidermal resonances that this function might trigger. Like borders on a map, skin plays an important containing role and provides a surface of representation of one's physical limits upon which the Ego projects itself in a constructive process leading to the affirmation of identity. Skin draws a contour, a defining border between the self and others. In the same way, the cartographic representation of a country encloses and contains a nation in colour-coded systems, defining through bold lines its limits and relations to contiguous provinces. Maps and skin therefore enclose and define; they set an inside and an outside. Both also

function according to a metonymic logic. The map stands for the Nation just as the skin signifies the body.

Having said this, by shedding light on the map as the skin of the Nation, Adasme's photo-performance also turns it into an interface enacting the complementary functions of protection and coercion inherent to the containing process. In this, the work also reveals the highly political and normative role played by maps in anchoring national identity inside a territory, making it match the topographic contours of the country.³¹ Maps, as Carla Macchiavello's examination of Adasme's performance reveals, also operate a flattening of the country's relief, striving "to create a unified and integral vision of a territory, translating into a flat area what is an otherwise curved, three-dimensional, and disparate surface" (Macchiavello 2010, 275-276). In the specific context of the Chilean dictatorship, what the conflation of body and map also points to is the effort by the military government to turn the country into what John Harley calls "silent panopticons" (Harley 1980, 13): an active organ of power partaking in the surveillance and control imparted on its citizens. Moreover, by projecting the image of a strong Nation, the mapping of territory also constructs a mental image of nationhood as a symbolic strength able to define, determine and condition the embodied existence of its citizens – as the black inscription of the artist's chest testifies.³² Historically, this effort on the part of the military to regain control over the country's geographic narrative manifested itself through two apparently contradictory, yet complementary impulses. On one hand, as it aimed at establishing strong, invasion-proof borders, the Junta carved out an image of the territory as a closed-off organic entity, inward-looking and defined by Christian, patriarchal values whose roots went back to the time of the Colonia. At the same time as it was involved in the reformulation of this image of true *chilenidad*, the government also implemented an economic agenda that was violently turned toward the outside, privatizing national companies, opening national borders to

³¹ In their analysis of Adasme's photo-performance, Jaime Vindell, Fernanda Carvajal and Ana Longoni talk about a "cartography of pain" (in Amigo et al. 2012, 203).

³² As Macchiavello underlines, the interest of the Junta in re-defining the Chilean territory could also be seen in their re-organisation of the country into thirteen administrative provinces, each locally run by an Intendant who operated under the direct control of Santiago. Macchiavello also remarks on the historical dimension of this re-interpretation of the Land, pointing out that the reform of high school programs that was implemented in 1977 included a reshaping of the history curriculum that now started in the 16th century, thus excluding any references to the country's pre-Colombian past (Macchiavello 2010, 275).

foreign investment and embracing the mass culture that arrived from the United States in particular.³³ As a living organism, the physical borders of Chile thus combined both closed-off and porous properties, territorializing and de-territorializing impulses. Moreover, at the same time as the Junta decreed a state of emergency that included a night curfew and the strict control of public space, the state secret police, as we have seen, resorted to the systematic practice of disappearance of the regime's political opponents. As transparency and opacity cohabited in the government's discourses and practices, the consequences of this two-fold phenomenon on Chileans' embodied sense of reality were particularly painful, leading them to feel both fiercely controlled and potentially subject to unexpected disappearance.

In this chapter, I examine the cartographic aspects of the skin from the point of view of this dual unleashing of coercive power and deterritorializing violence, as it manifests itself in a selection of Chilean photography-based mixed media works. The first two sections of my chapter look into artistic practices that reflect on the controlling and containing ambitions of the military Junta in regard to national space, particularly in its cartographic expression. The photographic work carried out by Paz Errázuriz, in collaboration with Diamela Eltit in *El infarto del alma*, examines the ways in which, by laying claim upon the territory as a transparent space, the military also created blind-spots, zones of *non-droit* to which they would evacuate the elements of society deemed marginal and dangerous – in one word: abject. In the following section, I examine a photo-performance by the queer duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*. Here, the artists execute a dance that aims at giving resonance to the strategies of dissent elaborated by female relatives of the disappeared in the country. In their performance, the map is depicted as an artificial surface of state control that ought to be ruptured in order to reveal the visceral wounds laying underneath. In these two sections, I argue that these artists' ambitions lay in rupturing the skin of the map as a metaphor of the Nation-body: a de-territorializing gesture that would allow them to escape the normative gaze of power. At the same time, an excessive undoing of territoriality runs the risk, as we will see, to effectively lose one's bodily and geographic referents– a risk, which, in the Chilean context, bears sombre parallels with the fates that expected the *desaparecidos* as haunting souls deprived of a decent sepulchre. For this reason, the final section turns

³³ See Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's semiotic interpretation of Walt Disney's Donald Duck as a new form of colonialist import coming from massmedia in *Para Leer al Pato Donald* (2005).

to works that take the acknowledgment of the wound as their starting point and mobilise gestures that attempt to fulfil a healing function. As I have written in Chapter 1, after the wound comes a restorative process that ends in the production of a scar. While Catalina Parra's take on the folk figure of the *Imbunche* might initially place the motif of the stitch as the graphic expression of a claustrophobic bodily enclosure, her suturing interventions on national newspapers also constitute a first attempt at weaving back national narrative into a reconciled – if uneven – skin, which places the scar as both an ineradicable stigma and the mark of a new beginning.

2) ZONES OF *NON-DROIT*: ABJECT SPACES AND MAD LOVE IN DIAMELA ELTIT AND PAZ ERRÁZURIZ' *EL INFARTO DEL ALMA*

Mapping the Marginal

Diamela Eltit is a Chilean writer who also developed in the 1970s a performative practice of her own, as well as part of the art collective CADA. Paz Errázuriz is a photographer who came to prominence during these same years. The two artists share an interest in exploring life as it takes shape in the zones of social marginality created by the military government's practice of censorship and their adoption of a neoliberal hard line in the economic running the country. In both of their works, the focus is placed on shedding light upon twilight zones excluded from official narratives, self-enclosed spaces standing outside of time and history. Places of extreme precariousness, the isolation imposed on these margins also transforms them into brittle shelters where notions of bodily, sexual and racial individuality dissolve, giving way instead to a sense of flux running uninterrupted between people, objects and space. In their attempts to map out these zones of exclusion, the artists use the surfaces of their protagonists' bodies as topographic supports to trace the outlines of alternative corporealities. In the works of Eltit and Errázuriz moreover, the eye retreats, giving free rein to more tactile forms of encounters. In the case of Eltit, this interest materialises through a literary and visual exploration of zones of sexual *non-droit*, where female bodies are portrayed as lusting after an erotic union with public space's soiled materiality: a dirty pavement, the light of a neon, or the vagrant bodies of anonymous passers-by belonging, like them, to the abject margins of society (Figure 2.2).³⁴ In mostly nocturnal scenes, deserted

³⁴ See Eltit's novels *Lumpérica*, *El Cuarto Mundo* as well as her performance *Zona de dolor* (1980).

squares and sordid brothels become, like in the writer's novel *Lumpérica*, the stage where individual skins operate a radical opening to the other and, in the process, expand to match the topographic limits of the space they inhabit.³⁵

The pale people's flesh reveals in their openings their process and on merging into the next one following they mark off infinite possibilities for any gaze. They fall into and out of their ranks, forming a deceptive boundary for the square (Eltit 2008, 17).

At the same time, the repetitive motif of self-imposed wounds and gushing blood in Eltit's writing and performances also contributes to bringing back the body to its own fleshiness and enacts the function of a symptom whose irruption points to a much more pervasive, collective trauma affecting Chilean society.

In Errázuriz's body of photographic works, it is the undoing of gender taking place in these social margins that the artist seeks to document. Whether she photographs transvestite communities living on the edges of the capital Santiago or the provincial town of Talca (*La manzana de Adan* or Adam's Apple, 1983) (Figure 2.3) or registers the dances of seduction and desire taking place in the bars and tango cabarets of the harbour city of Valparaíso (*Tangos*, 1992) (Figure 2.4), Errázuriz reveals her protagonists' efforts to suspend the deterministic aspect of affixed gender. In these works, the skin turns into a canvas or a performative screen upon which one paints, through cosmetics, artifices, as well as physical fluids (sweat, semen), physical contours whose only structuring principle is that of the desire that alternatively opens and closes bodies. As with Eltit, the pictures of Errázuriz also capture the consequences of such a radical gesture: the physical violence, of course, but also the abject rejection provoked by these unbound existences and their ensuing relegation to peripheral zones of invisibility. If, as Andrea Giunta argues, the meaning of Errázuriz' works dwells "camouflaged" (Giunta 2015) inside the pictures and requires an eye familiar with the local context to be deciphered, I would argue that the camouflage also constitutes a curse for these bodies that refuse to fit, making them invisible to the register of history.

In their respective works, Eltit and Errázuriz thus share an interest in recording lives that refuse to conform to the normative discourses of power and their consequent

³⁵ The literal translation of the novel's title would read as "Lumpen Woman" although it was published in English under the title *E.Luminata*.

expulsion from the Chilean “paradise” constructed by the military.³⁶ In this sense, both artists embark on a cartographic endeavour, mapping out these marginal and marginalised territories, returning them to the field of the visible, not as exotic vignettes that might echo the calls for a pluralistic, inclusive society as they were produced by the country’s progressive political parties but, rather, as the inassimilable truth of the different and the hidden wounds of Chile’s recent past. It is therefore quite natural that, when embarking upon a joint project in 1992, Eltit and Errázuriz turned toward another zone of social exclusion, a psychiatric yard whose location in the countryside, exposes as the veritable *pharmakon* of the Chilean polis.

Carceral skins

El infarto del alma [Stroke of the Soul] (1994) (Figures 2.5-2.9) is a captivating photography book, the product of a collaboration between the two artists. It registers life inside the mental hospital of Putaendo, a rural town located two hours outside of Santiago. Complementing Errázuriz’ black and white portraits of patients, Eltit produces a text itself split into two separate voices. While the core of the writing consists in the description of the yard and its inhabitants, as well as Eltit’s response to them, a secondary narrative thread frames the first story. More opaque and emotionally charged, it functions as a desperate love letter that the narrator addresses to a lost lover.

While the photographs of Errázuriz focus on recording the faces and bodies of the inmates as they go on about their lives inside the mental yard, Eltit’s vivid description of their journey to the hospital lays the ground for the image of a historically, geographically and mentally secluded place. As she writes, “[t]wo hours away from Santiago, the building seems excessively urban to me, as if a piece of the city had escaped – like a psychotic getaway – to form a surprising scene of its own” (Eltit & Errázuriz [1994] 2010, 9). In her description, the writer gives the hospital an agency of its own, escaping the throngs of the city. Her mention of the different spaces, fences and control posts that she and Errázuriz have to cross in order to access the building’s inside alter this reading, however. This layering of buffer zones separating the “normal” world from that of the “mad” evokes a carceral universe born out of a much more violent gesture: as a fragment of the city pulled out and expelled from the urban body and having come to graft itself haphazardly on this remote locality in the

³⁶ The Chilean national anthem, which found a new life with the arrival of Pinochet to power, describes the country as “the faithful copy of Eden”.

pre-cordilleran landscape. In this scenario, if the territory reads as a map, the extractive actions performed by official power also turns it into a jigsaw, shuffled and reconfigured at will to fit more comfortable narratives.

What happens inside the walls of the Putaendo hospital comes to us both visually and textually. Exploring the building's corridors, Errázuriz' camera registers its extreme material paucity, the fissuring and graffiti-laden walls, the exposed pipes, the iron bunks, the stained sheets and rough woollen blankets: a derelict materiality that echoes and underlines the damaged corporality of its inhabitants. In one picture in particular (Figure 2.5), patients appear sitting or lying on the tiled floor. The scaling coats of paint grant to the walls a desperate texture that turn them into foils for the stained, wrinkled, crevassed skins of the inmates depicted in other portraits. For all its ruined appearance however, the skin in Errázuriz' portraits, also fulfils the function of a guide to decipher the inmates' untold stories. This is the case because in this world of exception, while the fates of the prisoners unfold under the panoptical eye of a central control tower, they, themselves in their madness seem to have lost the ability to see, reflecting instead "the avid shine of these eyes that do not look" (ibid, 10).

The world portrayed by the pictures of Errázuriz and the words of Eltit points to an infra-reality, hidden from view, shamefully concealed behind barred windows, buried in the country's backwater, a world inhabited by bodies paying the price of their inability or their unwillingness to conform. This world, "which could be comical but is inexcusably dramatic" (ibid, 10) represents the underbelly of acceptable Chilean society, its ship of fools: both inherent in and excluded from it. As a microcosm, what it hosts is none other than the "bare life" characterised by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* as the dark side of the polis, both its opposite and the object of its revengeful wrath. Neither *bio* nor *zoë*, Agamben reminds us, bare life constitutes the condition of existence for those who have "the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusions found the city of men" (Agamben 1998, 7). Deprived of rights, yet subject to the Law, the bodies that dwell in bare life draw the contours of "a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast" (ibid, 109). As such, in bare life, every element that used to constitute one's standing in society – a name, a place, a family – becomes undone, leaving the subject naked and powerless in the face of arbitrary death. Errázuriz's pictures reflect such a destitute corporality, both man and beast and, at the same time, neither of them, taking the portraits of those who Eltit defines as "indigents, some without civil identification, catalogued as N.N. [No Name]" (Eltit & Errázuriz

[1994] 2010, 9). Moreover, in *Infarto del alma*, this utter debasement, the relegation of the mad to a rank of sub-citizens takes on a particularly epidermal expression. As the artists converse with two patients inside the clinical premises, Eltit notes how both are eager to show the scars that run through their bodies. In the case of the female patient, the scar cuts right above the navel. This scar, Eltit understands, is the “historical and obligatory” (ibid, 16) mark of a sterilisation procedure, most certainly performed without the woman’s knowledge and the result of eugenic state policies aiming at stripping “deviants” off their reproductive rights. In Putaendo, bare life takes both a spatial and a physical expression, inscribing the non-conformed bodies of the mad inside a space of geographic and social exclusion, while inscribing itself upon their very skin. If, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, the machine of Kafka’s *The Penal Colony* inscribes on the skin of inmates the nature of their crime at the same time as it enacts punishment for such crime, the mark of the scar in *El infarto del alma* similarly points to such a dual function of identification and expiation. At the same, the scar also provides the artists with a clue in their topographic exploration of the patients’ past stories, guiding them in their attempt to draw an epidermal cartography of these abject bodies.

Mad Love

The madness diagnosed in these patients and whose price they pay by incarceration, Eltit analyses, is that of an excess of love, a desire to blend in the body of the other so strong that it annihilates their own physical boundaries. “The inmates are materially another, opened to camouflage (and shelter) themselves inside any other body, inside any other mind, to inhabit the other at any cost” (Eltit & Errázuriz [1994] 2010, 43). This desire of dissolution inside the other to the point of losing oneself therefore fulfils a double function: both diagnosis and punishment. Trapped by their urge to find shelter in the other, the mad patients lose their name, their status and any other identifying bounds that would have situated them in outside “civil” society, their physical existence effectively wiped off the map.

At the same time, it is through their irresistible desire to love and be loved that the inmates of Putaendo begin to weave new bounds between themselves, drawing stories that run beyond the established diagrams of family and desirability (Figures 2.6-2.8). In *Infarto del alma*, the handsome pair up with the ugly, the young go with the old, and the old look like children deprived of any assigned gender, in a fluid corporal

dynamic that weaves itself around the protagonists, and, eventually, even captures the two artists inside its web. Upon their arrival at the asylum, Eltit notes, the patients address Errázuriz as “Tía Paz” [Aunt Paz]. Meanwhile, as soon as she enters the precinct, Eltit is hugged and kissed by an older woman who greets her with a “Mamita” [Mummy], following her all day, making demands of affection and attention typical of a young infant. As these new bounds of love transgress and reverse generations and blood ties, they write themselves on the containing walls of the hospital, a crisscross of names, hearts and arrows that grant a scarified validity to the existence of these romances (Figure 2.9).

As she observes the couples formed by the patients, “Margarita with Antonio, Claudia with Bartolomé, Sonia with Pedro, Isabel and Ricardo” (ibid, 21), Eltit is haunted by the words of André Breton’s *Mad Love*, leading her to wonder whether the love of the mad as it occurs in Putaendo is really that different from the one that seizes respectable citizens living on the outside. The co-presence in her text of the secondary, epistolary voice addressing her lost lover would seem to suggest that both manifestations stem from the same root. “After all, human beings fall in love like mad. Like mad” (ibid, 16). This trend of thought leads the writer to conclude that beyond the victim status so willingly attributed to these mental yard patients by well-wishing observers, their own reluctance to let go of this maddening power of love might in fact turn them into the true core of resistance and dissidence against the rationalizing and individuating demands made by society. “The mental yard embraces the manifestations of a renouncement. A renouncement so overwhelming that it would qualify as indeclinable” (ibid, 44). Seen in this light, the wretched space of the psychiatric hospital also opens a eu-topic horizon, as the secluded shelter for a community whose fluid conception of bodies and affects allows it to escape the cartographic frenzy that seized their country’s government. “Only after the sentence placed on them by social history were they allowed to enter love” (ibid, 47).

In her essay “Love, Territories of Desire and a New Smoothness”, Suely Rolnik describes

a treatment of desire that consists precisely in reducing the feeling of love to this kind of appropriation of the other, an appropriation of the body of the other, the becoming of the other, the feeling of the other. And through this mechanism of appropriation, there is

the constitution of closed, opaque territories that are inaccessible precisely to the process of singularisation. (Rolnik 2008, 43).

In *Infarto del alma*, what Eltit and Errázuriz document is a resistance from within the asylum to this appropriative nature of love, and the shaping of alternative territories where love operates as a transversal force dissolving bodies, identities and established bounds of kinship. In this, the patients of Putaendo map the outlines of what Rolnik calls “new coefficients of transversality” (ibid, 417) that manifest themselves through the radical adoption of a becoming-other. There is, however, as Rolnik reminds us, a danger in such an excessive deterritorializing gesture that might lead us to turn into “pure intensity, pure emotion of the world” (ibid, 417-418).

The fascination that deterritorialization exercises on us may now be fatal; instead of experiencing it as an element in the creation of territories, without which we weaken to the point of sometimes definitive dissolution; we take it as an end in itself” (ibid, 417-418).

By mapping the infra world of the mental asylum of Putaendo, the artists also point out the ways in which the achievement of such a physical dissolution contains, in its core, the risk of an utterly maddening deterritorialisation, a losing of the self. As the skin as a dividing limit between individual corporealities gives way, the very sense upon which the love *for* the other traditionally holds its ground also defaults, leaving no place for the other’s *alterity* to manifest itself, as the other is already part of ourselves. If this mutual co-habitation of mad love does indeed take place inside bodies, it also negates to the skin the chance to establish an interface upon which exchange occurs. The map loses its representative function and conflates, irremediably with the territory. Moreover, in this configuration, love returns to its most basic, animal aspect, as a trading of affection for protection, tenderness for a “little bit of tea and buttered bread” (Eltit & Errázuriz 2010, 15). In its devouring hunger for the other, the love of the mad negates the very existence of the other as other.

Due to her interest in depicting these margins of society often deemed deviant or “freak”, Errázuriz has often been compared to the North American photographers Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin. While this comparison is understandable in iconographic as well as formal terms – the choice of “outcast” subjects, their frontal, at times provocative poses in front of the camera – it is however important to note the different

approach that Errázuriz maintains in relation to her own medium. If for Arbus, the camera filled a protective function, as an apparatus that she could raise and aim, gun-like, on her subjects, Errázuriz acts upon a very different impulse which, rather than re-affirming a distance, strives to annihilate it, coming as close as possible to her subjects – close enough to touch. As Georgina Gutiérrez notes, “this portrait of social margins in Errázuriz is not [...] a criticism of human miseries but, rather a penetration of the contradictory and normal lives of beings who inhabit the other side of known stories” (Gutiérrez 1992, 8). At the same time, by coming close and touching her subjects – both literally and symbolically -, Errázuriz also reinstates the necessity for a threshold, however porous, to maintain itself, allowing for the exchange – rather than the co-absorption – of one and other to take place. In this, she also distances herself from Goldin’s photographic ethics for whom the act of taking pictures constitutes an extension of the caress she would otherwise give to her subjects, qualifying the realm of her photographs as a universe of physical union between artist and sitter.³⁷ With their words and their images, Eltit and Errázuriz also attempt to *situate* their subjects, tracing the contours of a disappeared cartography and providing the blind gaze of the mad with a reflective support that grants confirmation to their own existence, however precarious. “When [Paz Errázuriz] captures [the patients’] poses, she confirms the relevance of their figures, when she smiles to them, she acknowledges the godly in their bodily conducts” (Eltit & Errázuriz [1994] 2010, 22). Enwrapping themselves in the maze of love and desire that constitutes the inside of the mental yard, Eltit and Errázuriz also posit their cartographic gesture as the introduction of the right distance, allowing them to stand neither too far nor too close to the community that they depict. Out of this distance comes the analytical and, I would even say, pedagogic, dimension of their work, providing their subjects with a roadmap, allowing them to navigate, however precariously, the fluxes of their own out-of-bound embodied existences.

3) BLEEDING MAPS: LAS YEGUAS DEL APOCALIPSIS’ *LA CONQUISTA DE AMERICA*

Where this chapter’s first section documents the work produced by Diamela Eltit and Paz Errázuriz in their attempt to grant visibility to – to map out – the poetic and critical possibilities nestled in abject spaces concealed from official representations

³⁷ For a discussion of Arbus and Goldin’s opposite approach, see Goldin (1997)

of the country, this second section examines a photo-performance by the duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* [The Mares of the Apocalypse] which, on the other hand, turns onto the conquering and normative ambitions of the official map, placing it at the core of their criticism.

On 12 October 1989, the duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*, formed by the performance artists Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas intervened in the Chilean Commission for Human Rights in Santiago with a performance entitled *La Conquista de América* [The Conquest of America]. After unrolling a drawn map of South America littered with the broken debris of Coca-Cola glass bottles on the floor, the two artists, bare-feet and bare-chested launched themselves into a *cueca*, Chile's traditional folkloric dance (Figure 2.10).

Traditionally performed by a man and a woman, the *cueca* sees the two participants evolve in circular movements around one another, each waving a white handkerchief above their head. Inspired by the courting ritual of the hen and the rooster, the dance is usually accompanied by an up-beat music, encouraging the stomping of the dancers' feet on the floor. If the *cueca* is profoundly anchored in Chilean traditions, thus explaining its appearance in a performance critically reflecting on corporality and territoriality, the artists' decision to adopt its movements also refers to a specifically historic referent. During the years of the dictatorship, relatives of Chilean disappeared joined forces and created the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (A.F.D.D)*. While the movement never gained the kind of political weight of its Argentine counterpart, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* whose actions I will examine at greater length in the next chapter, the Chilean association staged on 8 March 1978 an event coinciding with the celebrations of International Woman's Day in Santiago. On this occasion, a female member of the group took to the stage and performed what would become known as a *cueca sola*, a lone *cueca*. As the woman danced, alone, her movements drew attention to the cruel absence of her male partner, providing a very vivid and personal expression to the political phenomenon of disappearance (Figure 2.11). Drawing a strong emotional response among spectators, the *cueca sola* became the most recognised form through which female relatives of the *desaparecidos* called the government and civil society to account. In fact, in the official ceremony marking the return to democracy in March 1990, dozens of women of the A.F.D.D. performed it on the lawn of the National Stadium hosting the event and in presence of the newly

elected President Patricio Aylwin. Performed on this monumental scale, the territorial connotations of the dance came through powerfully. As the circular movements of the women dancers effectively took place around a void, it also granted to the choreography the dimension of a search, a repetitive and desperate tracing and retracing of one's steps.

The parallel between the dance and the search for the *desaparecidos* also found a potent expression in the juxtaposition of two pictures taken by the photographer Paula Allen. Allen who produced the series *Flowers in the Desert, Chile* (1990-), spent years documenting the tireless work carried out by a group of women from the northern town of Calama as they paced through the nearby desert, looking for remains of their disappeared relatives. In one of these pictures (Figure 2.12), Victoria Saavedra González, the sister of an 18 years old high school student who was abducted and disappeared during the dictatorship is portrayed dancing a *cueca* in the street. In the second photograph, the same Victoria is shown from the back, her eyes fixed on the sandy dunes of the Atacama desert, looking for buried evidence next to a recently discovered excavation site (Figure 2.13). The formal similarities between these two pictures are striking. In both, the presence of a second protagonist to whom Victoria turns her back provides a counter-pose to the scene. In both, Victoria is seen in movement, following carefully elaborated steps that, by then, had become quite familiar to the protagonist: the dance and the search. Put together, the photographs also hint at the existence of poetic maps guiding the steps of the woman, assisting her blind search for traces of an erased memory.

If the performance of *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* constitutes a tribute to the endurance of sole *cueca* dancers, it is equally important to note the ways in which it also operated a transgression of both the original dance and its activist version. Indeed, the staging of a *cueca* performed by two homosexual male artists corresponds, in itself, to a queering of its traditional hetero-normative structure and the articulation of a *cueca rara* or camp *cueca*. Moreover, although the presence of a Latin American map underneath their feet might initially come across as an attempt to situate their dance as well as to underline, like in the case of the *cueca sola*, the topographic aspect pertaining to the search for the disappeared, it soon appears that, more than an effort to territorialise, *Las Yeguas's* performance in fact materialises a desire to rupture the surface of the map as an object of surveillance and disciplining of bodies. As the two men dance on the map, the fragments of broken bottles break

the skin of their feet, drawing rivulets of blood that run through the map. There is a cathartic aspect to this opening of the skin, and the staining of the paper. Indeed, if the map does occupy the function of “silent arbiter of power” as Harley writes (1989, 13), it is, in the Chilean case at least, also guilty of supporting the distorted visions of the all-controlling eye of official power, turning into a screen that passively reflects the expectations articulated by military normative discourses in regard to bodies and genders. Moreover, as the blood gushes out of the wound, it also brings a certain closure to the search of the women of Calama. Whereas their excavations of the desert reap nothing but dry dust, bits of textile and bone fragments blanched by the sun, in their performance, *Las Yeguas* not only relocate the women’s loss, they also *re-incorporate* it into the living, moving, bleeding body of the performer.

While the outflow of blood might momentarily provide the solace of an outlet and a reminder of the carnal nature of the lost body to mourn, in their performance, *Las Yeguas* also warn viewers about the dangers entailed by an excessive rupturing of the map-skin of the Nation-body. This threat represents an intrinsic aspect of the performance as *La Conquista de America* intertextually refers to the 1973 work *Anaconda, Map of Chile* by Chilean artist Juan Downey (Figure 2.14), itself a cartographic statement on the opening of Chilean borders to North American economic interests. In Downey’s work, the insertion of a live anaconda snake onto a glass-protected map of Chile made reference to the financial support provided by the North American Anaconda Copper Mining Company to the overthrow of President Salvador Allende in probable exchange for the advantageous exploitation of Chilean national resources. In their performance, as *Las Yeguas* dance on the shattered glass of the broken Coca-Cola bottles, their spilling and mixing blood refers both to the liquefaction of Chilean identity in the face of a mass “Yankee culture” import as they themselves put it, as to the spread of AIDS in Chile during these years, an epidemic that *Las Yeguas* perceived as one more colonising plague imported from the global-North (Palaversich 2002). There is an ethnic and social undertone to such a criticism too. If, Chilean identity is the product of a racial, cultural and sexual mix (the *mestizaje* that Sonia Montecino (1996) describes in her research on Chilean foundational myths), *Las Yeguas* strive to re-territorialise this identity into a map of practices that profoundly differs from the official narrative. As Jean Franco has aptly shown, while the Chilean elite often refers to its European, white blood and professional exchange with the United States as proof of its social superiority, the

Chile that Lemebel and Casas map out in their performance is the one excluded from this narrative “as a body, difference, morbidly sexed, and *lumpen*” (Casas in Franco 2002, 229).³⁸ In their performances, *Las Yeguas* thus also strive to queer the map as a cartographic support that comes to validate conservative power’s attempt to *empty* Chilean identity from its subversive, heterogeneous elements. In this, they echo some of the strategies that Lemebel also puts at play in his own writing practice. Indeed, as Diana Palaversich writes, “Lemebel’s texts dispute and dispense with these privileged cartographies which, not only erase Latin American differences but represent Santiago as part of a prosperous, postmodern global village” (2002, 102). In *Las Yeguas*’ performance, the outflow of blood on the map corresponds to such a gesture of undoing artificial geographies. However, if it points, in a first instance, to a desire to *stain* the official map, the presence of the blood also strives to re-materialise and re-embody an alternative configuration as a zone of locally anchored strategies of resistance.

In the short story *On Exactitude in Science*, Jorge Luis Borges writes about a forlorn Empire with such passion for cartography that it produced a large detailed map whose dimensions equated that of the entire land. Following generations, however, found the map obsolete, neglected it and let it fade in with the landscape that it covered (Borges 1999). Territories are full of these abandoned maps, scattered to the winds, fading under the desert suns or rotting away in rain forests. Reflections of dead men’s grand projects and tokens to their ambition to embrace in one gaze the worlds that they “discovered”, conquered and inhabited, these cartographic remnants grow old, wrinkle and tear, sticking like second skins to modern territories they no longer reflect. In their performance, *Las Yeguas* underline the toxic obsolescence of maps. At the same time, though, through the ruptures taking place on the surface of their bodies, they also point to the necessity of drawing alternative maps as a way to both account for the past and care for the future. In her aforementioned text, Rolnik writes that “the result of having sought to free ourselves from symbiosis is that in the end we lose the very possibility of assembling territories” (2008, 423). What *Las Yeguas*’ haemorrhagic performance and their opening of skin as both a protective and smothering interface therefore points to is the ambivalences inherent to the

³⁸ As Lemebel himself put it in an interview with Ignacio Iñiguez, the stigma he suffered in Chilean society was quadruple, for being “homosexual, poor, Indian, and badly dressed” (Iñiguez 1996, 42); translation taken from Palaversich (2002, 108).

concomitant enclosing and opening ambitions of the military Junta concerning the national territories.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I have examined artistic practices that question the motif of the map as a topographic object subject to political manipulation. Looking into modes of life and expression that refuse or are unable to fit inside the rigid borders that power placed around its image of a glorious territory, I have argued that the works of Errázuriz-Eltit and *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* also reveal how the deterritorializing strategies devised from inside these zones of marginality and resistance could constitute doubled-edged, possibly dangerous solutions. Indeed, while exploding and rupturing boundaries, be they physical or spatial, leads to catharsis and the carving out of an emancipatory escape, it also, as we have seen, might entail a disempowering loss of anchoring referents. In both *El infarto del alma* and *La conquista de América*, it is the cut that interrupts the course of this floating, liquid identity, re-territorializing the body – be it individual or national – into a material, embodied reality. In these two cases, the cut does not correspond to a relief of bodily pressure as it sometimes appears in self-harm narratives (Lemma 2010). Rather, it signals the existence of wounds that the smoothing and flattening aspects of the map have contributed to render invisible. In this following section, I start from this wound to offer a redeeming reading of the map: not so much as an object of optical control and physical coercion but as the surface inhabited by artistic gestures that attempt to heal the wounds imposed on the country during these years. Even here, however, the cartographies established by these works do not attempt to return to the map its ambition to reduce the Nation to a visual pleasing, coherent whole. Rather, what these works lead to is a conception of the scar as a stubborn, persistent presence contributing to the drawing of new borders.

4) THE AMBIVALENCE OF STITCHING: CATALINA PARRA'S *IMBUNCHES*

If the 1989 national referendum that took place in Chile marked the end of sixteen years of life under a dictatorial military regime, the narrow margin by which the “No” vote won (51% - 49%) also revealed a profoundly divided society in urgent need of collective reconciliation. At the same time, although the 1990 Presidential election saw Pinochet having to pass on his presidential scarf to the newly-elected candidate of the *Concertación* coalition Patricio Aylwin, the former would remain Commander-in-Chief of the army until 1998 and Senator for Life until 2002, continuing to fulfil his self-

appointed role of military vigilante and ready to intervene should the democratic “experiment” bring back the lurking threat of Socialism. Moreover, the Junta had long been preparing for the dictatorship’s aftermath, voting as early as 1978 an Amnesty Law that would preclude judicial charges from being filed for crimes committed during the country’s State of Emergency (11 September 1973 – 10 March 1978). In these circumstances, any genuine attempt at transitional justice and reconciliation would reap cosmetic results, at best.

At the level of civil society, a general sense of exhaustion pervaded and expressed itself in a collective desire to embrace more joyful and affirmative, if somewhat artificial, narratives. In his film *NO* (2012), Pablo Larraín captures how the success of the “No” campaign to the 1989 referendum had little to do with the calls for justice and the respect of human rights that came from left-wing parties and civil associations but, rather, served to promote a visual strategy that packaged the option of a return to democracy into a seductive image of carefree happiness.³⁹ While certainly understandable, this aspiration to move away from a painful past, also masked the dangerous desire to throw the country’s traumatic, unresolved past into oblivion: the application of a mere bandage upon the wound in lieu of a genuine reparative process. In the arts, the parallel and contradictory concerns to acknowledge the wounds left by the dictatorship on the Nation-body and to develop visual strategies contributing toward a collective healing process come together particularly potently in the collage works of Catalina Parra.

In 1977, Catalina Parra presented her exhibition *Imbunches* at the Santiago-based *Galería Época*. Showing 24 collage works produced between 1971 and 1977, the show took its name from an Aracaunian folktale about a small, dark, distorted being, dwelling in the caves of sorcerers and assisting them in their evil deeds. As the legend goes, the *imbunche* was initially a male child, abducted by the sorcerer who turned him into his creature, twisting his legs, forking his tongue, giving him a monstrous appearance and impeding him from communicating with the world. In his 1970 novel *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* [The Obscene Bird of Night], Chilean writer José Donoso paints a vivid portrayal of the *imbunche* as a figure of physical and pre-verbal incarceration, a human bag whose every orifice had been sewn up, literally shutting him off inside his body.

³⁹ The slogan of the NO campaign was, after all, “Chile, la alegría ya viene” [Chile, happiness is coming now].

The *imbunche*. All sewn up, the eyes, the mouth, the sex, the ass, the nose, the ears, the hands, the legs (...) All sewn up, obstructed all the body's orifices (Donoso in Parra 1977, 16).

Both descriptions which figure in Parra's exhibition catalogue turn her collage works – her Reconstructions as she liked to call them – into metaphors for the inescapable materiality of a self-enclosed body, an autistic, shut-off skin. In Donoso's novel, the *imbunche* is placed under the vigilant watch of “las viejas”, old, retired female servants who passionately watch over this monstrous infant, making sure that his physical impenetrability will save him from the sins of the world, turning him into a *santito*, a little saint. In the context of the dictatorship, these tales of monstrous enclosure also make of the *imbunche* a symbol of the enclosure performed upon the Chilean body in general, shutting it up from the outside world, infantilizing it, wounding it for the proclaimed sake of its own protection. At the same time, the flesh contained inside the sutured surface of the *imbunche* also corresponds to the excess of society, that which cannot be processed, tamed, controlled by the organizing frenzy of the military. As Ana María Dopico accurately writes, the *imbunche* constitutes “a record and a form that could not be packaged, ‘empaquetado’ by the state and made to disappear” (2001, 325). In this sense, the figure of the *imbunche* might be seen to represent both the attempted evacuation of the repressed and the simultaneous actualisation of its return.

The catalogue of Parra's *Imbunche* exhibition included a graphic text by artist Eugenio Dittborn that placed emphasis on the negativity of the sewing gesture, which, by closing-off the wound also draws attention to the violence that led to its existence in the first place, and effectively reduces the body to its damaged limits (Figure 2.15). As Dittborn writes, “reparatory processes like to wrap, to suture, to stick, to cauterise, to graft, to sew, to bandage, to patch, to mend, to signal on the surface of the erogenous carnal body, the reiteration of blows and encounters with cutting instruments, falls and prolonged immersions, shocks, contact with incandescent utensils, plugs provoked by digital pressure, gas inhalations, convulsive shakings” (1977, 4). This reduction of the body to the wound finds a particularly potent expression in the figure of the sewn-up *imbunche* as nothing more than a – barely – living, mute, giant wound. In the catalogue, Parra illustrates Dittborn's text with images of precarious bodies, covered by blankets, plastic sheets or surgery masks. In one untitled image in particular, Parra includes the printed photograph of a person dressed in plastic overalls and plastic shoes (Figure 2.16). The head is covered by a hood, while the face barely peers out over a large load,

also wrapped in plastic, that seems to rest on his/her chest. Dressed in an outfit that recalls the kind of protection suits worn by workers in zones of high toxicity, the figure reclines on the floor of what looks like an earth pit. While the wrapping of the human figure in layers of plastic conveys a sense of bodily enclosure characteristic of the *imbunche*, the effect is further underlined in Parra's image by the presence of irregular stitches of red thread that intervene to bridge together the two parts of the partly torn image. Sharply contrasting with the black-and-white low-resolution image, the red thread brings little comfort to the claustrophobic feeling triggered by the underlying photograph. Rather, its erratic attempt at mending the photograph recalls the gesture of a deranged hand, while the colour red brings to mind the image of a fresh wound. Moreover, as the figure's mouth is concealed under the mass of the plastic load, the cut in the paper that runs perpendicular to the face is suggestive of a distorted grin that could be interpreted by the viewer as an attempt at communicating, quickly interrupted by the sewing of the orifice. While the figure appears to stare directly into the camera, addressing it with his/her eyes, the suturing of the tear by the red thread acquires a censoring dimension, short-circuiting the figure's attempt to speak out and, instead, locking him/her further inside.

These negative aspects of the sewing gesture are further explored in one of the collage works exhibited by Parra in the exhibition. In *D.i.a.r.i.a.m.e.n.t.e.* (1977) (Figure 2.17), Parra stitches together pages of Chile's main newspaper *El Mercurio*, reconstituting them into a fictitious, patchworked front page. In the upper part of the image, a triangle-shaped fragment is sewn up, adhering to the main support through the inclusion of large, transversal black stitches. The clipping includes the partial reproduction of the daily's masthead in its characteristic font along with a publication date. Right underneath the date, one might detect the photograph of an unidentified couple, its view itself obscured by the application of a Kodalith film on top of it. The clipping cuts through a dark square including the printed words *diariamente...* (daily...) and the reproduction of a loaf of bread. The bread itself is adorned with pasted images and articles taken from other copies of *El Mercurio*. Underneath the main picture, the artist includes torn up fragments taken from the newspaper's announcement and obituary pages. In several places of the collage, black thread sews the different parts together and grants to the image the aspect of a clumsily performed skin graft. By making the collage's different fragments superpose each image and run both vertically and horizontally, Parra's interruption of the neat layout of the

newspaper's visual logic brings an element of semantic chaos to the work. In this sense, the incomplete, veiled or superimposed photographs, as well as the cut out, barely legible words, seem to provide a visual illustration of what the Chilean sociologist Rodrigo Cánovas defines as the "aphasic" nature of semantic exchanges as they took place during the years of the dictatorship. "At the level of culture", he has written, "aphasia implies speech that says nothing, an amorphous weave of signifiers that is the equivalent of what linguists call, simply, 'noise'" (Cánovas 1986, 131). By giving to her work such a segmented appearance, Parra therefore seems to point to the ways in which military power, through its official press organ *El Mercurio*, filled on a daily basis the homes of Chileans with the production of undecipherable and meaningless noise whose aim, undoubtedly, lay in distracting from other, more problematic topics.⁴⁰ The nature of the newspaper as a misleading press organ is further emphasised in Parra's image by the layer of Kodalith placed on the photograph of the couple, blurring its view. As the couple's slightly dishevelled appearance corresponded to the typical demeanour associated with "leftist subversives", their concealed inclusion in Parra's collage might, as Julia Herzberg argues, constitute "an oblique reference to the many who disappeared daily (diariamente)" (Herzberg in Varas 2011, 39). The inclusion of the photograph is not only veiled by the film, its existence is also denied by the presence of the black thread which, while uniting it to the rest of the collage, also transversally detaches the photograph from the background. This element appears to affirm, again, the toxic role performed by the stitches which, while introducing the reality of state repression in the country's main press publication, also conceals it under layers of fictional narratives, inserting it into the self-enclosed body of the press.⁴¹ As Dopico writes, "Parra makes an *imbunche* of both civilian bodies and civic speech" (2001, 346).

⁴⁰ For more on the complicit relation maintained between *El Mercurio* and Pinochet's regime, see Ignacio Agüero's documentary *El Diario de Augustín* (2008).

⁴¹ A common practice during the dictatorship was the use of national newspapers to manufacture stories that would explain the sporadic re-surfacing of corpses of *desaparecidos*. Agüero's documentary reports on such an episode. In 1976, when the corpse of Marta Ugarte, a 42 years old teacher and one of the first victims of the dictatorship washed up on a beach in central Chile, newspapers like *El Mercurio* were instrumental in crafting the story of a crime of passion, depicting the victim as a 23 years old beauty who had been killed by her lover, thus quieting any reference to the regime's practice of disappearance of leftist activists.

The country's principal newspaper, *El Mercurio*'s editorial line was generally aligned with the views defended by the military regime, to the point, as I have mentioned, of having been accused, with reason, of shameless complicity. Contributing to the crafting of specious narratives, the newspaper fulfilled a crucial auxiliary function for the regime. It effectively disseminated their propagandistic exercise of ideological mapping of the country to its most distant provinces and, in the same process, re-affirmed the government's hegemony over the production of national narratives.

The parallel between the map and the newspaper are not limited to this local context, however, the evidence of which is also found in the general tasks fulfilled by newspapers. By projecting a synthetic view of events that allows citizens to define and situate themselves, a national newspaper performs a cartographic exercise. The newspaper also introduces hierarchical codes of legibility, organizing events according to their "national" relevance and establishing the front page as its North. In the case of *El Mercurio*, it is, however, worth noting how, by adopting the political line of the military regime, the newspaper effectively did away with any "objective" or "realistic" intent. In this sense, if the metaphor of the newspaper as a map holds sway, it might be through the analysis that Thongchai Winichakul has made, in another context, about the prescriptive power of imperial maps.

In terms of most communication theories and common sense, a map is a scientific abstraction of reality. A map merely represents something which already exists objectively "there". In the history [of imperial maps] I have described, this relationship was reversed. A map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent.... It had become a real instrument to concretise projections on the earth's surface. (...) The discourse of mapping was the paradigm which both administrative and military operations worked within and served. (Thongchai 1994, 130).

While Thongchai's perceptive examination of the auxiliary role taken on by maps in relation to imperial power focuses on South-East Asia, Thailand in particular, a similar diagnosis may be applied to examine the relation that *El Mercurio* maintained with the military government. By playing an active role in manufacturing stories that twisted a

much darker reality, *El Mercurio* contributed to the mapping of the triumphalist, strong and self-contained Chile that the government seemed intent on promoting both inside and outside its national borders.

In the light of this, the sewing of the newspaper in *D.i.a.r.i.a.m.e.n.t.e.* acquires an indexical dimension, pointing to the specious nature of the stories contained therein as constructions that needed to be undone and “re-constructed” - as per the word preferred by Parra. If the manufacturing of stories to cover up the morbid truth of political repression and state violence represents one of the many wounds brought on the Nation-Body, the rough and apparent stitches with which Parra adorns her collages also take on the aspect of a diagnostic tool: the acknowledgment of the wound as the first step toward reparation.

In 1980, Parra secured a Guggenheim grant and moved to New York where she lived for the next twenty years. While the political content of her works during these years reflected a growing interest in international affairs (the reference to the Gulf War in her series *American Blues* (1990) for instance), Parra maintained a vivid interest in the political situation of her home country. While the return to democracy certainly marked a turning point, it was the arrest and indictment of Pinochet in London in 1998 that led Parra to produce the series *Run Away! Run Away!* (1999) (Figure 2.18). The work, resorting to Parra’s typical collage techniques, contains two photographs of half the face of a man. Both representing Pinochet at two different stages of his life – the man on the left of the picture is noticeably younger than the wrinkled, moustached character of the right – the two pictures are separated by the inclusion of a typed text taken from Parra’s email correspondence with the group of intellectuals and artists *Referente* whose purpose was to reflect on the consequences of Pinochet’s arrest and the political future of Chile. The text, obstructed in some parts by the application of an opaque tape, is also sutured together on its edges with black thread. Meanwhile, in the upper half of the collage, Parra includes part of an advertisement for a runaway sale that featured in *The New York Times*. The alarmist reiteration of “Run Away!” immediately confers to the work a dynamic sense of urgency that frames the viewer’s reception of the images below. In the face of such an injunction, it is indeed Pinochet who appears as a Janus-faced monster, an *imbunche*, his frontal gaze suggesting the persistence of an ongoing menace. The written text between the two images introduces an analytical interruption to this monstrous view while stitching the two images together. In this work, the black thread that unites the three fragments together, is not

synonymous with the erratic aphasia that we encountered in *D.i.a.r.i.a.m.e.n.t.e.* Rather, it intervenes as a cohesive thread that bridges the gap between the past and the future of politics in Chile. It is to this gesture that Parra refers when, in an interview with María Laura Rosa, she explains: “[s]ewing is for me what repairs, what unites, what bandages. It grounds realities that are incoherent, but that become coherent through the gesture of sewing them together” (in Varas 2011, 52). The suturing here also allows for events to be placed in an intelligible historical context, drawing what Francine Masiello defines as “connections between local and global powers, between present and past times” (2001, 219). In fact, it is via the interjection of the external voices provided by both *The New York Times* and the email correspondence of Chileans living abroad that the trauma of the Pinochet years are accounted for and thus begin to be processed in the collage.⁴²

If in Parra’s work, the two partial views of Pinochet’s split face also correspond to the internal division at play in post-dictatorial Chilean society, stitching these two views back together by way of the analytical text constitutes a first step in the direction of reconciliation and, consequently, of national healing. In this view, stitching starts to take on a reparative function. It identifies the wound and sets upon mending it, activating what Nelly Richard poetically defines as an “artisanship of repairing manufacture” (in Varas 2011, 119).

As noble as Parra’s reparative exercise might be, it is, however, important to note how the process of mending never quite erases the existence of the past wound. In skin, the tissues that have been harmed eventually suture, however, they never quite regain the elasticity of their original state. The crisscrossed arrangement of the collagen gives form to the scar: a re-unified, yet hardened skin, less sensitive to external stimuli: touch, heat, as well as the application of renewed blows. Similarly, in Parra’s collage works, the stitches give way to a scar, which, while less disfiguring, continues to contain within itself the memory of its injury. As Diamela Eltit writes, “Catalina Parra sutures and mends the wound to show the permanence of the wound, that is the equidistant relation between inside and outside as [the sign of] an extreme indifferenciation” (in Varas 2011, 107).

⁴² This three-band conversation is reminiscent of the model of triangular justice introduced with the arrest of Chile’s ex-president in London on the orders of the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón.

In her later work *Monumento de los españoles* (2008) (Figure 2.19), Parra expands upon this stubborn persistence of the scar to function as the mark of past traumas. In this work, part of the artist's *Estampas argentinas* series, Parra incorporates motifs that all pertain to territorial issues at play in Argentina. While the photography of the Monument to the Spaniards refers to a commemorative sculpture in Buenos Aires celebrating the country's 100 years since its independence, the upside down map of South America inserted underneath is as much a witty reference to Joaquín Torres García's seminal inversion gesture as a more serious comment on the contemporary state of a continent where internal social inequalities continue to define as territorially uprooted, "an intermediate territory in which one can find both misery and opulence and that continues to live out of the faith in 'developing processes'" (Parra in Varas 2011, 55).⁴³ More crucially, the way the different layers of Parra's montage hold together in this work is via the inclusion of two red-knotted threads located on either side of the image. While in earlier works, the stitches provided an effective, yet disfiguring point of union, in this later work, they transform into a binding, a discrete scar. Holding continents and countries together, Parra seems to suggest, the scar recedes but does not vanish. Moreover, in this work, the scar acquires an active property in re-activating the lost connectors of community. In botanical terms, a scar also refers to a former point of attachment, the point where the leaf used to join the stem. As the mark to a past belonging, the scar thus also prefigures the possibility of a re-growth and the configuration of new associations.

In its etymological lineage, the scar comes from the Greek *eskhára*, relating to the scab provoked by a burn. In José Donoso's novel, the *imbunche* is tended to by women whose domestic responsibilities entail looking after the hearth. As this association of the scar and the fire situates our discussion of epidermal cartographies in this chapter in a domestic economy of the home, it also reveals it as a territorializing force that combines both coercive and reparatory properties. The home as the realm of the feminine also functions as an underlying force in all of the works discussed here. In *Infarto del alma*, Diamela Eltit defines the utopic world of the demented as a pre-uterine realm of undifferentiation with the maternal body. Meanwhile, by appealing to a

⁴³ The press clipping included horizontally in the lower part of the image is taken from an article published by the newspaper *Clarín* in February 2007 and that reported on a border conflict opposing Argentina and Uruguay on the subject of the construction of a paper factory.

gesture associated with the female relatives of the Chilean *desaparecidos*, the duo Casas-Lemebel also appeal to a feminine power of embodied memory. As for the weaving gesture mobilised by Parra, Nelly Richard situates it firmly within a lineage of feminine practices, to “the reparatory surgery of a feminine handcraft” (1983, 45). Mapping gestures of belonging onto the feminine body is not, as we shall see in Part II, without its traps, running the risk, among other things, of turning women into petrified allegories of the Nation. In their effort to surpass the wound and achieve what Suely Rolnik (2008) characterises as a “new smoothness”, the balancing of territorializing and deterritorializing forces in these works finds in the to and fro alternation of the mending gesture an eloquent image, the expression - to use Roszika Parker’s beautiful book title - of a “subversive stitch” (2010).

**PART II: INSIDE-OUT
VESSELS, TUNNELS, BAGS.
MOTHERHOOD AND PREGNANCY
IN ARGENTINE ART**

CHAPTER 3:

PRIVATE MOTHERS, PUBLIC MATTERS. THE EPIDERMAL PERFORMANCE OF MOTHERHOOD

Public spectacles (...) function as a site for the mutual construction of that which has traditionally been labelled “inner” (from phantoms to fantasy) and that which has usually been thought of as “outer” (political reality, historical facticity). The terms spectacle, drama, scenario and myth are not antithetical to historical or material “reality”. Rather, they are fundamental to political life... (Diana Taylor *Disappearing Acts* 1997, 29)

This second section is a continuation of the first two chapters but it also operates a shift of focus in two significant ways. First, moving on from the examination of the political and cartographic qualities of skin in Chilean art, this second section studies the Argentine scene. Second, whereas I entitled my first section “Outside-In”, this second part comes under the heading “Inside-Out”. This distinction does not claim to draw a clear-cut division between the internal and the external, though. Rather, as we have seen, the very nature of skin as a non-directional Moebius strip rejects such dichotomy.⁴⁴ This is why, rather than talking about “insides” and “outsides”, I identify the changes distinguishing the two sections in terms of movements. In the first section, the movement started *on* the surface. To an extent, it constituted a kind of analytical flaying that moved from the epidermis’ outer layers to its lower strata as I examined the weight that events contingent to an official History bore on the “minor” stories of female embodiment and the experience inhabiting a skin as it came to flesh in art. In my study of Roser Bru, my reading offered to progressively move from the outer layer towards the identification and analysis of *infra* layers upon which the *desaparecidos* in their ghostly nature manifested themselves. Similarly, in

⁴⁴ The image of the Moebius strip, a three-dimensional twisted surface joined at both ends constitutes a paradigm of the co-existence of insides and outsides. Elizabeth Grosz borrows from Lacan to use it as “a way of rethinking the relations between body and mind” (1994, xii).

my second chapter, I offered a poetic survey of the cartography of skin via the examination of a series of works that placed the emphasis on surface as a territory to explore, in both its official and marginalised corners: an alternative map profoundly recalcitrant to the rigid territorial contours drawn by the official eye of Nation. In this second section, the movement is reversed and follows an inside-out dynamic. Starting with experiences of female embodiment often characterised as belonging to the realm of the intimate – motherhood, birthing, pregnancy – it expands on their significations as they emerge on the surface of skin. From the skin as reflecting screen and expressive map, one moves to skin as womb and membrane of emergence.

1) OUTLINES

El Siluetazo

On the morning of 22 September 1983, the centre of Buenos Aires awoke to the eerie sight of thousands of silhouette stencils glued upon the walls around the Plaza de Mayo, home of the presidential palace (Figure 3.1). Paper envelopes, these figures rose as phantoms, representing the victims of political disappearance in Argentina, turning the political centre of the country into an open-air stage of spectral resurgence. As uniformed men hurried to their daily tasks in the nearby ministries, these ghostly presences must have appeared particularly ominous, announcing, if anything, the impending demise of the dictatorship and the return of these thousands of vagrant souls that would come to haunt the transitional return to democracy in the country.

The action leading to such a dramatic sight had taken place the day before, on 21 September – National Student Day in Argentina – when the artists Rodolfo Aguierreby, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel held their participatory action *El Siluetazo* [Silhouetting].⁴⁵ (Figure 3.2) This event was organised to coincide with the Third March of Resistance staged by the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, a civilian association of mothers and – mostly female – relatives of the disappeared who had, since 1977, united themselves to call the military government to accountability for the disappearances. During their action, the artists took over a part of the square, inviting the public attending the demonstration to have their own silhouettes drawn

⁴⁵ For a full account and critical analysis of the *Siluetazo* performance, see Longoni & Bruzzone (2008).

on large sheets of paper that were then glued on the surrounding walls. According to the organisers, the goal was to provide visibility to the vastly repressed phenomenon of political disappearance, to represent “the presence of absence” (Flores in Longoni & Bruzzone 2008, 100) and to “generate visualisation (the dimensioning) of the physical space that 30,000 detained-missing persons would occupy” (Longoni 2007, 178). Throughout the duration of the march, a large number of people took part in the action, lending their own physical characteristics to the disappeared, and generating what Lía Colombino calls “a double trace: of the body [of the participant] and of the disappeared to whom they lend their body” (in Amigo et al. 2012, 127). In these days when the search for the *desaparecidos* still remained obscured and hampered by the military government’s voluntary ambivalence on the subject, this second trace that persisted on the wall also talked of the possibility of a trail to follow for the relatives and even, perhaps, the hope of a familiar silhouette waiting to emerge from the crowd.

El Siluetazo marked a milestone in both the political and cultural history of the country as “one of these exceptional moments in History in which an artistic initiative coincides with a demand on the part of social movements, and takes shape through an impulse of the collective” (Longoni & Bruzzone 2008, 1). Julio Flores himself insisted on this point when, reflecting on the critical afterlife of the action, he commented “[t]here are those who want give value to the silhouette in and for itself but in fact, the silhouette on its own is not important. What is important is the entire episode, including the demonstration” (in Longoni & Bruzzone 2008, 366). *El Siluetazo* has come to occupy a seminal place in the Argentine art canon of the late dictatorial years. While this historiographical success may be attributed to the visual efficiency of the piece, I would argue that it should also be ascribed to the action’s ambition to bridge the gap between political and artistic practices, thus re-activating strategies devised by the country’s historical avant-gardes of the 1960s. An important precedent to *El Siluetazo* would be *Tucumán Arde*, a 1968 collective exhibition that, by all accounts, sought to bring together the concepts of aesthetic and political avant-gardes.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Tucumán Arde* was a collective exhibition that that took place in Rosario and Buenos Aires in 1968 and through which a group of artists staged their support to the CGT of the Argentine trade union in its fight against the closure of sugar mills and the improvement of working conditions in the northern province of Tucumán. For

At a regional level, the modus operandi of *El Siluetazo* also fits neatly with the narrative offered by the advocates of a Latin American form of Conceptualism whose arguments I briefly examined in my introduction. This is especially the case in its ability to combine a conceptualist language – what Ramírez defines as “a strategy of anti-discourse” (Ramírez 2004, 425) – with an activist agenda of political resistance in order to bring artistic and civilian concerns together in a collective act of symbolic insurgency. For Luis Camnitzer, Ideological Conceptualism found its roots in a dual agenda, combining pedagogic and insurrectional properties specific to the continent.⁴⁷ Camnitzer argues, looking in particular at the Argentine artistic stage of the 1960s, that actions like *Tucumán Arde* not only allowed a *rapprochement* between artists and activists, but that it even operated a quasi-reversal of roles. “In pursuing this project, artists and political activists seemed to reverse strategies. Artists rationalised their strategies in terms of politics, and political groups intuited their way into aesthetics” (2007, 61). In its ambition to blur the boundaries between artistic and civilian action, *El Siluetazo* thus not only pre-figured a return to an era of mass political demonstrations after years of dictatorial repression, it also announced the reactivation of avant-garde strategies in an artistic field that had been left devastated by the Junta’s stifling censorship.⁴⁸

While this aspect of *El Siluetazo* has been the object of various articles, most of them compiled in Longoni and Bruzzone’s important edited volume on the event (Longoni & Bruzzone 2008), one aspect of the performance seems not to have benefited from the same attention. Indeed, if the action was the result of a collaboration between the artists, the demonstrators and the Madres association, it is also important to note that the input provided by the latter did not only relate to this

more on *Tucumán Arde*, see Longoni & Mestman (2010) and the artists’ texts recording the event compiled in Katzenstein & Giunta (2004).

⁴⁷ Camnitzer situates the genesis of “ideological conceptualism” in the pedagogic ideas of 19th century educator Simón Rodríguez and in the performative actions of the 20th century Uruguayan left-wing guerrilla group of Los Tupamaros that, Camnitzer argues, were the first to “use artistic creativity to impact on social and political structures” (2007, 26-27).

⁴⁸ Similar neo-avant-garde actions would follow in the dictatorship’s aftermath. In some, the art interventions even manifested an ambition to replace an inefficient judicial system, operating strategies that entailed the identification and public shaming of people suspected of having participated in human rights abuses during the Dirty War (strategies known as *fundas* in Spanish). See for instance the performances staged by collectives such as GAC *Grupo de Arte Callejero* [Art of the Street Group].

joining of forces between civil society and the artistic world, it also actively shaped the tone of the event, placing maternal affect at the core of its proposal.

El Siluetazo as Maternal Practice

Throughout September 21st, as the influx of participants to the demonstration added their silhouettes to the wall of *desaparecidos* that was slowly building, a strange impression began to take hold of the beholders. As the flux of people taking part naturally led the number of the outlined figures to increase exponentially, it also granted them a surprising sense of autonomous vitality, as if the making of one silhouette contained within itself the capacity to reproduce and proliferate (Figure 3.3). The contrast between the figure of the silhouette as an empty bodily outline usually associated with police forensic scenes and the collective energy animating the performance and providing a platform for the figures to manifest and multiply probably constitutes the most powerful aspect of *El Siluetazo*. In this, the action also resonates with *¡Aparición con Vida!*, the rallying call of the Madres association. By resorting to this injunction, the Madres showed the military government that their movement would not be satisfied by the mere provision of information regarding the whereabouts of their children and that it would only cease with their return *to* and *in* life. By providing the contours of a living body to host the disincarnate, disappeared bodies of the victims of political repression, *El Siluetazo* thus not only addressed the tragic status of the *desaparecidos* as “bodies without matter” (Calveiro 1998, 26), it also constituted the temporary – if short-lived – fulfilment of the Madres’ request to have their sons and daughters returned to the field of visibility *in* life.

The similarities between the artistic action and the strategies deployed by the civilian association are certainly not coincidental, for the performance was the fruit of a collaborative effort between the Mothers and the artists, to the point that one could infer that the *Siluetazo* represented an aesthetic pendant of the Mothers’ own political praxis. Examining *El Siluetazo* from this angle is relevant to my present purpose because it sheds light on the kind of political and aesthetic critique that the Madres articulated from their status *as* mothers, mobilising a form of “maternal

activism” that used the surface and, in this case, the graphic mark of bodily outlines, to draw attention to the missing bodies of their own children.⁴⁹

In a text reflecting on the action, the artists explain how the Madres contributed both financially and conceptually to the creation of the performance. In fact, the organisers of the action contacted the association prior to the staging and asked them for approval. The Mothers accepted to endorse the event but formulated a couple of recommendations regarding the way it should take place. First, it was important to them that the silhouettes appear without either a face or a name, coming to stand for the general status of the *desaparecido* rather than a specific individual.⁵⁰ Second, they asked that the figures be displayed vertically, thus avoiding the crime-scene connotation associated with the drawing of a silhouette on the floor. By requesting that the silhouettes remain anonymous, the Mothers placed emphasis on the phenomenon of political disappearance as one that ran beyond individual fates and concerned Argentine society as a whole. For Hebe de Bonafini, one of the movement’s leaders, this attitude came down to a project of “socialising motherhood” and “becoming Mothers of all [the disappeared]” (in Morales 2010, 80). Bearing this in mind, one may start to understand the performance of *El Siluetazo* as a form of maternal embrace, the symbolic adoption of the *desaparecidos* not only by the Mothers but by the entire group of participants to the event as well. Through this gesture, motherhood no longer restricts itself to the lived experience of a visceral bond uniting a particular mother to her offspring but, instead, turns into a civilian and political gesture against the government in place. Far from the violent acts of sabotage that the military government used to attribute to “left wing terrorists”, however, the dissent woven by the *Siluetazo* stems from intimate affects. It constitutes an act of benevolence toward the disappeared and opposes to the divisive discourse of the Junta the image of a physical receptacle open to welcome and host the missing bodies, nursing them back to life. In their refusal to exhibit the silhouettes on the floor, the *Siluetazo* also rejects the idea that the *desaparecidos*, as individuals, are most likely dead. By placing emphasis on the need to display the

⁴⁹ I will return in a later section of this chapter to the originality of the Madres’ performance of motherhood as a liminal experience that combines both subversive and conservative aspects.

⁵⁰ The first request was not always respected by the participants who took part in the action and who personalised their silhouettes with the addition of a name or a photograph of their missing loved one.

silhouettes vertically, the action erects a backdrop for the phenomenon of disappearance as a whole to emerge and acquire visibility as a force endowed with vitality.

For feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, the first aspect of what she calls “maternal practice” may be found in its preservative urge: “Preserving the lives of children is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice; the commitment to achieving that aim is the constitutive maternal act” (1995, 19). In its double-injunction of representing the disappeared as a collective and vertical force endowed with life, the performance enacts this preservative function although the literal meaning of the term seems to shift. Indeed, the maternal aspect of the performance, as it extends beyond the mere temporal scope of the dictatorship, no longer lies in preserving the life of their children as, in this case, this may unfortunately already be too late, but, rather, in preserving them from abject oblivion, reclaiming their memory from the invisibility which the military practices have attempted to cast upon them. In this sense, the *Siluetazo* replicates the holding and handling functions that Winnicott (1960) confers to mothers and which Anzieu translates into the supportive and containing roles played by the Skin-Ego. By lending the surface of their bodies to the disappeared, the participants in the *Siluetazo* offer a temporary substitute to this “containing sac” of the skin described by Anzieu and which so dramatically defaults in the case of the *desaparecidos*. In this sense, the drawing of the outlines as bodily hosts also entails taking upon oneself the function usually fulfilled by a mother as the enactment of the infantile fantasy of the “shared skin” that Anzieu identifies in a young infant’s mind. At the same time, the graphic mark of the outline also serves to point to the intolerable violence sustained by the actual body of the disappeared. By remaining irremediably empty, it shows how the maternal gesture of enfolding the disappeared within one’s body can only constitute a partial and temporary form of reparative action. While some relatives and families would, in later demonstrations resorting to the visual strategies devised by the *Siluetazo*, fill this void with the picture and the name of their disappeared loved one, in their initial request that this inner space remain empty, the Madres reject the temptation of such solace, somehow pre-figuring the nature of their action as a manifestation of wrath as much as of love. Both elements, while initially contradictory, are actually co-constitutive of maternal practice. As Ruddick writes,

“[m]aternal peacefulness is a way of fighting as well as of loving, as angry as it is gentle” (1995, 30).

By introducing maternal care as a form of political critique, *El Siluetazo* thus encapsulates important aspects pertaining to the performative actions conceived by the Madres and which I will examine in further details in what follows. Interweaving personal grief and collective empowerment together in one gesture, the action also prefigures the polymorphous and, at times, contradictory readings of maternal practice triggered by these performances; as an act of love as much as of anger and a gesture that equally seeks to give visibility to disappearance as well as to counter it.

Pursuing this initial reflection, the rest of this chapter examines artistic practices that portray motherhood in Argentina as a form of performance that takes place *on the surface* of maternal bodies. More precisely, it investigates the extent to which the experiences of motherhood and childbirth (in both their literal and symbolic manifestations) combine both intimate and very public –and normative – elements that exchange at and, at times, collide, upon the surface of women’s bodies. In the following section of this chapter, I examine the polymorphous conception of motherhood that the Madres articulate, inhabiting maternal grief as a form of political subversion. Considering a painting of the Mothers’ weekly rallies by Argentine artist Diana Dowek, I also question the effective scope of their actions, especially in regard to the pertaining topic of gendered embodiment that their public performances mobilise. As I argue, while the Mothers’ actions have been discussed as a way of inhabiting and acting on behalf of their disappeared children, the ultimate alignment of their posture with a rather conservative view of motherhood might contribute to deflating the political content of their message and, instead, lead to a political recuperation of their cause. It is bearing this in mind that my third section offers to draw a parallel between the Madres and the mythical figure of Eva Perón as, in both cases, the after-life of their actions runs the risk of having their bodies become empty vessels, ready to be filled by populist discourses at times alien to their own beliefs. To make sense of this phenomenon, I examine Nicola Costantino’s multimedia work *Rhapsodia inconclusa* (2013), in which the artist comes literally to inhabit and perform the different facets and iconic moments of Evita’s life, exploring the stakes of using a mythical body as an empty receptacle. Ultimately though, the last section of this chapter offers a redemptive reading of the Madres’ action. In contrast to previous studies on this subject, I suggest, going back to Dowek’s work,

that the most subversive element of the Madres' performance comes not so much from their take on motherhood as a political status – the so-called maternal activism – than from a form of “gestational politics”: a performance of birthing that comes to upset traditional representations of parturiency.

2) *LAS MADRES* AND THE PERFORMANCE OF MOTHERHOOD

Maternal Activism

In 1983, the same year as the staging of the first *Siluetazo*, the Argentine artist Diana Dowek painted the acrylic work *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Figure 3. 4). Paying tribute to the weekly demonstrations that the Madres association staged every Thursday afternoon on the public square, the work captures the striking visual effect conveyed by these dozens of mostly middle-aged women spinning around the square's obelisk. In the painting, the artist borrows from photographic techniques to suggest the gathering's collective energy. While in the background, the *Casa Rosada* – the presidential office – stands erect and detailed, the canvas' middle-ground is dominated by a crisscross of hazy hues, representing the Mothers' circular movement around the square's obelisk.

In this sea of dark figures depicted by Dowek, one bright detail stands out in particular, anchoring the Mothers both formally and semantically into the field of representation. The white headscarves that the women wear on their head function as foils to their absent bodies, concealed as they are under their black coats. The scarves were, among other accessories, a rallying sign for the Mothers to recognise one another and a symbol so closely associated with their collective persona that it became the logo of their association. The scarf bears some evident pacifist connotations and also contributes to emphasise the nature of their endeavour as both collective and somewhat out-of-worldly– undermining both physical weight and facial traits. Nevertheless, there exists another genesis for this choice of accessory as, originally, it was the *pañal*, the cloth diaper of their missing child that the Mothers placed on their heads. The *pañal* fulfilled a double function: while within the movement, it united the women within a self-referential framework that undoubtedly comforted them in their political involvement; it also emitted an outward message to politicians and citizens alike, namely, that the Mothers' action differed from traditional activism and political dissidence and had to do, instead, with an all too

natural maternal instinct.⁵¹ In this sense, the movement inscribes its claims in a form of “maternal activism” that Elva Orozco Mendoza defines as “a process whereby a woman, or a group, adopts the figure of the mother to make claims on behalf of her sons, daughters, and community” (2016).

At the same time, evoking maternal affect as the fuel for their political action might have constituted the most efficient – because dangerous – weapon in the Madres’ association arsenal, placing them outside of the categories of “dissidents” that the military government was used to dealing with. Shortly after the staging of the 1976 coup, the newly-formed Junta explicitly identified the enemies to be defeated in order to restore the country to its purported former greatness. Among them figured the import of foreign ideologies, including feminism. Suspicion of feminism was certainly not a purely militarist invention and, as Gisela Norat has rightly noted, constituted a general tendency in 1970s Latin America, where “the term *feminist* connoted women who spurned tradition, bashed men, acted like men, or maybe even wanted to be men” (Norat 2008, 220). As a movement, the Madres inscribed themselves in this tendency when they exclaimed, through the words of their leader Hebe de Bonafini that “the mothers aren’t feminists, we believe in equality between men and women. Feminists here are very radical. They want men out of the way and we don’t agree with that” (in Fisher 1997, 136). Beyond the fact that the equality between genders would, in most circumstances, qualify as a feminist standpoint, it is also worth pointing out, as Norat does, that in practice, the Madres’ actions did in fact fit in a feminist tradition.

If one considers that feminism as a social theory and political movement is primarily informed and motivated by the experiences of women and promotes women’s rights and issues, then these Latin American women acted as feminists. (Norat 2008, 221).

Similarly, Jean Franco characterises the Madres’ movement as having permitted the emergence of “a new kind of female empowerment” (Franco 2013, 194).⁵²

⁵¹ As they wrote in a letter addressed to Pope John Paul I in 1978, ‘[w]hat we are asking is very simple, very elementary: that they tell us what they did with our children. What they are being accused of. Nothing more. We are not even asking for their release’ (in Amigo 1995, 35).

⁵² For more on the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* as reluctant feminists, see Elshtain (1982), Dietz (1985) and Hower (2006).

The Madres' explicit rejection of the term "feminist" to characterise their actions should not be dismissed as entirely misled or timid, however, for it sheds light on the particularities of the movement and its ambition to reclaim maternal affect and bodies, distinguishing them from traditional models of political activism and, instead, re-directing them towards a form of performance that takes its strength from a different order. In both its methods and iconography, the resistance movement devised by the Madres evokes an out-of-worldly form of haunting that differed from established feminist forms of activism.

In Dowek's painting, the aforementioned contrast between the firm architectural settings and the blur depicting the crowd of mothers helps highlight the group's vitality. It also hints, however, at the peculiar nature of the Mothers' protests, characterised by a monumental yet mostly silent occupation of public space, which, on a weekly basis, would turn the administrative centre of the Argentine capital into a stage for the invocation of the disappeared. While some aspects of the Madres' performance were contingent on the restrictions on public gatherings established by the military government – the decision to walk in a circle around the square initially hailed from an official ban on static protests, for instance – the eerie atmosphere it created corresponds, as was the case with the *Siluetazo*, to a carefully crafted aesthetics devised in order to attract public and media attention to their cause. This distinctively uncanny aspect is captured in Dowek's canvas, where the hatched lines surrounding the collective yet discarnate body of the women suggests a ghostly apparition, as if the crowd of women might vanish into thin air as quickly as they appeared, leaving nothing behind but a heap of dark garments and white scarves. I argued in my first chapter about Roser Bru that in the public search for their children, the civilian movement of relatives of the disappeared in Chile adopted a posture that seemed to turn them into ghosts, fleeting figures actively engaged in an act that might be defined as one of haunting-by-proxy. On the Buenos Aires square, the Mothers equally seem to conjure up a different order of knowledge, one defying the very basis of rational thinking according to which disappearance, as an unexplainable state of hovering between presence and absence, did not constitute a credible possibility. Undermined as they were by the Junta's derisive comments regarding the impossibility of their claims – a sinister irony in its own right – the Mothers took upon themselves to make visible what had hereto remained concealed beneath the concerns of daily life: an infra-layer of reality hosting the thousands of vagrant

bodies of disappeared men and women, caused by what Michael Taussig would qualify as a “public secret” (1999). By haunting on behalf of their disappeared relatives, the Mothers were thus involved in the complex and somewhat paradoxical action of making disappearance visible. As Avery Gordon writes “[a] disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us” (2008, 63). Week after week, the Mothers temporarily renounced their living corporality, shedding their social skin – as housewives, reassuring symbol of domestic peace and harmony – and became the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* – not as much ghosts per se as guides opening the liminal space between life and death and convoking the disappeared back toward the former. Thus flayed of their individualities, they donned their Pythian uniforms to get in contact with the underworld, tearing open the tranquil backdrop of political order and social harmony minutely devised by the military leaders, to reveal what lies beneath its smooth surface: the inhumane screams hailing from the city’s secret detention centres, the sedated bodies of tortured prisoners thrown out of airplanes, the errant souls of thousands of Argentines whose fates ended up muffled under the trumpets of the dictatorial office.

The dissent of kinship

In her analysis of the Madres’ movement, Norat associates them with the figure of “a bereaved Demeter, searching for the kidnapped Persephone, snatched away and kept detained by the dictator/patriarch in his underworld” (2008, 221). This comparison is particularly relevant in that it sheds light on a crucial aspect of the Madres’ protest, namely, that in taking away their children, the military had transgressed the sacred boundary traditionally separating the public from the domestic sphere. Such breach did not only destabilise families, it also disavowed one of the cornerstones of the patriarchal model upon which these same militaries had erected their power and which clearly defined the public sphere as the realm of the masculine and the domestic as the prerogative of the feminine.⁵³ Through their practice of political disappearance, the government upset the social order which they had strived to establish and that the Mothers, middle-class housewives and *dueñas de hogar* until

⁵³ This aspect of patriarchy finds its local expression in *marianista* culture in Latin America, as Evelyn Stevens suggests (1994).

then, had seemingly accepted. By stepping over the threshold of their homes, the Junta opened the door, providing a justification for the Madres to venture into the Hades of the public square.

As I briefly expounded, the strength of the Madres' performances hails from their ability to convoke a different order in their protest: appealing to the natural compassion one might feel for a grieving mother, they defied the law of the land not to offer a viable political alternative – as would be the case with other forms of political activism – but, instead to right a wrong that had upset the established order and its distribution of gendered roles. Their performances devised as a calling for the return to life of their disappeared children, befuddled the military power because it did not obey the rational, earthly logic of political opposition. This is the case because, in their protests, the Mothers did not take the Law as the justification for their cause. Instead, they appealed to the order of kinship, the sacred tie of the blood, to ground their claims. This point appears as quite significant because it explains why many commentators have referred to another mythical figure to think about the Madres: Antigone and her desperate struggle to provide a burial place for her dead brother, bringing his memory and dead body back to the field of public visibility and social acceptability from which he had been deprived by the edict of Creon.

In their analyses of Sophocles' tragedy, Hegel and Lacan interpret the ancient heroine as the representative of a pre-political for one, symbolic and pre-verbal for the other, order of kinship embodied by the feminine. As it constitutes the platform upon which political power comes to build itself, kinship also acts as a counter-power of sorts, leading Hegel to famously describe it as the "eternal irony of the community" (in Butler 2002, 4). Examining the Madres as modern-day Antigones bears the particularity of situating their claims in an outside or before-politics that they themselves called for (rejecting the epithets of "feminist" or "activists" for instance). Rather, by invoking the supreme bond of kinship, the Madres wish to re-assert their authority over a sphere that the military themselves had already appeared to give them: the protective home and the maternal as the very condition of stability for the running of the Nation. This position is certainly not without its pitfalls however for, as Judith Butler correctly notes, the feminist standpoint that tends to criticise the discourse on kinship as remaining irremediably outside of politics is, in itself, misled. Indeed Butler (2002) writes in her own take on *Antigone* that the main mistake made with regard to how kinship represents just another patriarchal trap for

women lies in how many authors tend to see it as an outside to politics, a pre-political order. For Butler there is no such strong division between kinship and the political for both remain constitutive of and conditional to one another. Seen in this light, the fact that Antigone seems to dutifully accept her position as feminine and makes her own the language of power, does not represent a subjection to the dominant oppressor any longer, but a kind of sabotage whose very subversive strength lies in its mimicking stance. Butler writes, “as Antigone emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalously impure” (2002, 5). While for Butler this dissent operates at the linguistic level, a similar claim could be made in regards to the Madres’ use of their maternal bodies. By performing *as* mothers, the Madres submit to the social organisation of the military government but, by doing so, they also bring back to the fore the embodied nature of political governance and its construction upon the bodies of mothers: of civilians and of the Nation. In this sense, the Madres’ protest contributes to *re-embody* the rule of law, bringing it back to its existence as flesh, blood, and, especially, womb.

Ultimately though, there seem to be limits to the efficiency of the Madres’ reference to the blood tie in their protests. If it may have contributed to bypass some aspects of the military repression, numerous commentators have also noted that by politicising – or socialising as Bonafini has it – motherhood, the Madres, especially in their adoption of the figure of Antigone, might also run the risk of re-activating a discourse of victimisation of the feminine at the hands of a patriarchal power fully aware of its own superiority. Even the well-meaning Jean Elshtain, author of the well-known article “Antigone’s Daughters” (1982), notes in a later publication documenting the Madres’ actions:

The Mothers remained faithful to the dominant image of the mother in their society. Yet they politicized this tradition against a repressive state, both as a form of protection - the state should fulfill its rhetorical claims to defend motherhood - and as a new-found identity - mothers looking for their children; mothers for human rights. (Elshtain 1992, 93).

For Diana Taylor, by aligning themselves with the figure of Antigone – a reference actually encouraged by the aforementioned Elshtain – the Madres actually contribute to mystify further the powerlessness of their movement. Indeed, for Taylor,

because they did not want to or were unable to challenge some of the social mores governing women's lives, the Madres were framed by the social construction of acceptable, self-abnegating 'feminine' roles (...). Thus the Madres were trapped in a bad script, a narrative activated by the junta and which they themselves, no doubt unconsciously, re-enacted (1997, 220).

An additional problem identified by authors critical of the type of performance shaped by the Madres concerns their explicit identification with the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary. While the comfort the women found in the Marian cult is explained by the fact that most of them were practicing Catholics, they seem to have pushed this emulation further, using the image of the Virgin who also lost and wept for her dead son, as a model to emulate, an identification which expressed itself in both posture and iconographic details.⁵⁴ In the movement's early days, each Mother wore a small nail pinned to her coat, a reference to the *via crucis* that both her child and herself had been forcefully embarked on.⁵⁵ Even more so, as the Argentine art historian Roberto Amigo notes, the Mothers who often collaborated with artists – the *Siluetazo* standing as the most powerful illustration of this bond – hosted exhibitions that expanded on these religious motifs.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Madres soon associated the scarves they wore on their heads – which was often woven with the name of their child and adorned with a black and white portrait – with the motif of the Veronica veil, the shroud as a “register of the absent body of the disappeared, a

⁵⁴ In a text entitled *¿Quiénes somos?*, the Mothers wrote that “believers or not, we all adhere to the principles of Judeo-Christian morality” (in Amigo 1995, 34).

⁵⁵ It is important to note however that in Argentina, the religious leaders of the Catholic institution revealed a high level of complacency toward – if not active collaboration with – the military authorities. Thus, the Mothers did not manifest a strict religious orthodoxy in their religious identification but rather, a politicised faith that might find its roots in beliefs closer to those of the movement of Liberation Theology, highly popular throughout Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s.

⁵⁶ Some art events hosted by the Mothers include *Pinturas por la vida*, Universidad Popular Madres de Plaza de Mayo (March 2001) and, later that same year, *Desapariciones. Encuentro Internacional de Arte Correo*, Universidad Popular Madres de Plaza de Mayo (3-31 October, 2001).

proof of his existence” and a testimony to their suffering flesh (Amigo 1995, 37). In their religious identification with both the Virgin Mary and St Veronica, the Mothers take up as their own the figure of the weeping woman, the Madre Dolorosa as a self-abnegating female figure who had to give away her son for the world to be redeemed of its sins. The backbone of the critique voiced by feminist writers like Taylor lies both in the victimisation of the feminine as performed by the Madres as well as its restriction to the status of motherhood, seemingly marginalising other aspects of female identity. By adopting this figure of maternal grief, the Madres thus appear to have contributed to a fossilisation of the feminine within a disembodied, desexualised identity – an aspect that appears quite salient in Dowek’s painting - placing as the only valid critique of the Junta the one hailing from a group of women who did not, in essence, transgress the gendered norm. Even more so, this critique draws on the idea that, by appealing to a virginal model, the Madres did place themselves as the embodiment of what Julia Kristeva qualified as a figure of social appeasement, “that enables it [the figure of the Virgin] not only to calm social anxiety and supply what the male lacks, but also to satisfy a woman, in such a way that the community of the sexes is established beyond, and in spite of, their flagrant incompatibility and permanent state of war” (Clément & Kristeva 2000, 75-76). This last point is particularly relevant in regards to the gendered component of the Madres’ movement in the aftermath of the dictatorship, at a time when the general discussion regarding human rights abuses committed in the years of the Dirty Way shifted from political change to one about reparative justice.

From maternal activism to the institution of motherhood

While the work achieved by the Madres during the dictatorship as well as in its aftermath was nothing short of heroic, it is also important to point out how the discourse they articulated in regard to gender might have grown more conservative as the organisation gained in importance in the years following the dictatorship’s collapse. Within the movement itself, a schism appeared between two conceptions of motherhood: one biological, the other more political, and materialised itself through the emergence of a separate group that called itself *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora* and whose pragmatism led to a much greater compliance with the

post-dictatorial governments.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the writings of some of the children and grandchildren of the Madres have provided some insight in the stringent orthodoxy advocated by the association, leaving little space for alternative scenarios pertaining to gender and motherhood.⁵⁸

Bearing this in mind, let us return to's painting of the Madres' action for a moment and pay attention to the slightly off-centred position in which the artist places the group of women in relation to the core of the action. To the right of the canvas, almost erased by the white smudge smearing its upper corner, one detects a dark green mass, signalling the towering presence of the plaza's obelisk, which would have constituted the actual centre of the Mothers' circumvoluntary performance. When the faces of the Mothers remain absent, concealed by the cloth of maternal grief, when the dark cloaks contribute to hide these women's feminine attributes that could reaffirm them in their sexuality, the barely suggested presence of the obelisk suggests a necessarily – if perhaps, easy? – reading of the demonstration as a form of submission to the persistence of a phallic law, even in the aftermath of the dictatorship. As Taylor writes,

the political denouement of this national fantasy was predictable, built into the fantasy itself. The 'son' [the next generation], according to the scenario, cannot afford to ally himself with the weak mother. He must identify with the father and bypass her to join the ranks of power. (...) National reconciliation leaves women on the sidelines, somehow marginal to the happy ending." (Taylor 1997, 205).

⁵⁷ The differences between the two groups that nevertheless continue to demonstrate together lie at both a personal and an ideological level. In regards to what interests us here, the main topic of disagreement between the two deals with their conception of motherhood. The *Asociación Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, headed by the charismatic – yet criticised – Hebe de Bonafini – maintained a hard line in regard to the process of transitional justice and continued to ask for the return of their children *alive*. Meanwhile, the dissident *Línea Fundadora* accepted the official status of *detenido-desaparecido* that the state gave to their disappeared children and the symbolic and financial reparations that came with it.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, the largely autobiographic novel *Diario de una Princesa Montonera* by the young Argentine writer Mariana Eva Perez whose parents were both victims of the dictatorship and whose grand-mother was a founding member of the Madres movement.

Ultimately, what the off-centeredness of Dowek's canvas might proleptically announce is this very shifting of the neuralgic point of political action in Argentina, leaving the Madres on the side – a marginalisation due in part to their reluctance to embrace the gendered aspect of their political actions and to remain defined by their status of grieving mothers to their disappeared children.

In the aftermath of the dictatorship, this situation of marginalisation of the Madres was particularly acute during the Menem administration (1989-1999) and has vastly improved since. The Madres have become a much more regular presence on the political stage in Argentina over the past few years and the recognition of their movement in international academic and political circles has also turned them into the most visible face of the country's recent past. This, however, also raises the question of their potential recuperation and manipulation by political parties wishing to exploit their popularity and the natural empathy that their movement triggers in and outside the country. Suffice to follow Argentine contemporary political life to see how the Madres became an attractive ally to have by one's side, a phenomenon well understood by the Presidential duo represented by Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, who governed Argentina between 2003 and 2015. If the three presidential mandates of the Kirchners achieved the formulation of a real state programme of recognition, prosecution and reparation for the crimes committed during the dictatorship, thus explaining the support of the Madres movement for their political cause, the tendency of Cristina Kirchner in particular to surround herself with some representatives of the Madres points to an ambition to permanently tap into the affective reservoir that their presence might provoke. In this sense, it would be fair to question the extent to which the presence of the Madres on the Argentine political stage might in fact constitute a trump-card, a go-to trope – emotionally loaded yet somewhat politically void – validating some of the populist rhetoric of post-dictatorial discourses of power.

In her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich draws a distinction between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood. The latter, she explains, pertains to the plethora of societal laws and norms that claim to define motherhood not so much as a subjective and everyday experience that mothers partake in but as a cultural and political framework that places certain burdens on women and dispenses men from these same tasks. The institution of motherhood, moreover, is a particularly pernicious mechanism in that “it has alienated women

from our bodies by incarcerating us in them” (Rich 1986, 13). The most striking effect of Dowek’s canvas appeals to this very phenomenon: depicting a collective force which, while invoking the power of their fertile bodies to lay their political claims, nevertheless remains thoroughly disembodied. If this aspect did, as we have seen, provide an apt support to ground the aesthetic of the Madres’ performance as one of collective haunting, it also points to the body as an absence in the Mothers’ narrative. From an epidermal point of view, if, in the canvas, their clothes act as a symbolically-loaded substitute for the Madres’ bodies, they irremediably confine their performances to one of funerary lament, wrapping them in layers of shrouds, imprinting upon their skins and hair the name and the face of their lost offspring. While the Madres, as a collective force, were successful in bringing attention to a national tragedy, they also surrendered the surfaces of their bodies to this occupation by another. Here lies the risk of an emptying out of the feminine as the Mothers might become mere receptacles, opened to be filled and animated by others’ ideologically driven messages. In this sense, the impulse that gave light to *El Siluetazo* - this generous predisposition to open one’s body and to lend one’s skin to host the *desaparecido*- may also harbour a darker underside, leading to what Taylor has defined as the “ventriloquism” of the maternal figure in Argentina (1997, 222). This tendency that consists in turning public female figures into the disembodied mouthpieces of official power is certainly not new and, in order to make sense of this emptying of the feminine as an inherent risk pertaining to the Madres’ performances, it seems pertinent to turn to another manifestation of this phenomenon, namely the manipulation of the maternal figure embodied by Eva Perón, as examined in a 2013 work by Argentine artist Nicola Costantino.

3) VESSELS: THE EVITA COMPLEX

Rapsodía inconclusa

In 2013, the government of Cristina Kirchner chose the artist Nicola Costantino to represent the country in the *Biennale de Venezia*. This edition was to be of particular importance for Argentina as it would also be inaugurating the country’s new permanent pavilion. Costantino won the representation with a multimedia installation/performance entitled *Rapsodía inconclusa* [Unfinished Rhapsody] that

offered a seductive and highly polished reflection on the multi-faceted life of Argentina's legendary First Lady, Eva Perón.

The installation is divided into four parts, each focusing on one aspect of Evita's life. In the first room, multiple projections show Costantino, groomed as Evita – the distinctive platinum blonde bun, the strict skirt suits and even a recreation of the First Lady's famous Dior white gown - enact different moments of a typical day in the life of the First Lady (Figure 3.5). As the figures busily cross paths in the same space, sorting out papers, answering the phone, opening the window or getting dressed for a formal dinner, they remain seemingly unaware of the others' presence. The atmosphere is subdued and velvety, reminiscent of interiors of presidential palaces and high-ranking offices. Evita, in this kaleidoscopic scenography comes through as a glamorous, yet poised figure: the dignified repository of state power. The second part of the installation, located in an adjoining room contains a recreation of Evita's bedchamber, also all dark wood and gilded furniture (Figure 3.6). Entitled *Eva-El Espejo* [Eva-The Mirror], it displays a video-projection embedded in a mirror of Evita-Constantino, sitting at her dressing table, preparing herself for a night out at the theatre. A video-projection placed at the opposite end of the room reveals the back of Evita, thus multiplying the points of view and conveying a sense of voyeurism to this seemingly private scene. Here again, the aesthetics is highly polished and places emphasis on the alluring style of the First Lady. In both of these two initial scenes, however, Costantino suggests the existence of a looming threat and unshakable melancholia to her character. As she gives Evita a subtle gaucherie in her movements, shows her touching her stomach as if in pain or staring a little bit too long into her own reflection, the artist hints at Evita's physical frailty and her untimely death from cancer. This feeling climaxes in the installation's third act that reveals a robotic iron corset mounted on wheels, erratically moving around an enclosed space made of glass panels, repeatedly banging against their surface (Figure 3.7). A reference to Evita's struggle with the disease, the corset is a replica of the one that the real Evita reportedly wore, when, too frail to stand by herself, she saluted her people one last time from the Presidential balcony. Naked and hollow, the automaton's disjointed movements turn into a metaphor for her struggle against a disease that slowly eats at the attractive body portrayed in the first two scenes, forcing it into a rigid carapace to hold it upright. The atmosphere of this third room dramatically contrasts with the hushed settings of the first two and turns

metallic, mineral. As the corset goes round and round, each time hitting the glass panels with a dry, painful bang, in the background, the noise of melting ice adds a hissing quality to this acoustic envelope. The noise, it turns out, comes from the other side of the room where a stainless steel table placed under surgical lights, almost collapses under the weight of hundreds of tear-shaped ice cubes (Figure 3.8). In *Eva – La Lluvia* [Eva – The Rain], this fourth and final act of the installation, the ice tears slowly melt and fall in drops onto the concrete floor, coming to symbolise the country's collective grief following the death of the one whom many people called the "Mother" of the Nation, as well as the downpour that fell upon Buenos Aires during the several days that Evita's state funeral lasted.

With *Rapsodia inconclusa*, Costantino pursues an interest in cross-dressing and embodying iconic figures that she had initiated years earlier with her series of re-stagings of iconic artworks belonging to both the national and international corpus – from her take on Antonio Berni's *La mujer del sweater rojo* (2008) (Figure 3.9) to Millais' dead *Ophelia* (2008) (Figure 3.10). In these works, Costantino plays with the codes of visual representation of the female body in art, at times sticking faithfully to the original image (as in her take on Berni's painting) and, at others, inserting iconographic and stylistic elements that ground her work into its local cultural and political context.⁵⁹ In each one of them, however, the idea behind the presence of the artist as main protagonist lies in an effort to personalise the portrait, locating it within her own artistic corpus and life. As she explained to curator Hans-Michael Herzog, "[m]y photos feed upon my previous work, and I, as a character, contribute with recognisable connotations related with the rest of my production and with my own life" (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 52). While not explicit in the artist's explanation, one might expand that Costantino's decision to re-enact scenes that include female sitters is also indicative of an attempt to account for the embodied subjectivity of the woman sitter traditionally depicted by a male artist, to sneak beneath the smooth surface and fill the contours, to inhabit the skin of this other. Rachel Alpha Johnston

⁵⁹ Costantino's take on Millais' *Ophelia* for instance differs drastically from the idealised, flowery representation of the original. In her work entitled *Ofelia, muerte de Nicola No 2* (2008), the close-up of the white and soiled corpse floating in a swamp bears little resemblance to the Pre-Raphaelite singing maiden and, in the Argentine context, would rather bring to mind the intolerable images of female disappeared whose corpses sporadically washed upon the shores of the Rio de La Plata

Hurst says something similar about the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman when, locating the “identificatory position” occupied by the (female) beholder, she refers to Kaja Silverman’s use of Winnicott to explain how “a ‘good-enough’ approximation of femininity suggests that the women in Sherman’s photographs take on femininity in a way that is provisional and does not attempt to fill the space from which desire springs” (Hurst 2015, 199). Similarly, by literally putting herself in the place of feminine icons of the History of Art, Costantino does away with the reproduction of the gaze of desire, replacing it instead by an attempt to come close to the sitter’s embodied experience, to live it, not as an ideal but as this provisional subjectivity discussed by Silverman.

If these previous works might be read as an empathetic gesture on the part of the artist aimed at countering the loneliness of the female sitter, Costantino might, in her work on Evita, have found the body of her subject an already cramped space, filled as it were by numerous political and literary accounts of the mythical First Lady that all performed an appropriation of her figure, in turn “emptying her out and resignifying her” (Rosano 2006, 19).

Mother of the Nation

In order to account for the symbolical implications of Costantino’s choice of subject matter, one ought to consider the fascination that Evita continues to exercise in Argentina’s collective imaginary. Eva Duarte, a woman of humble and rural origins rose to prominence, first as a model and starlet, appearing in advertisements and on the covers of women’s magazines. Her encounter with colonel Juan Perón in 1944 and the election to the Presidency of the latter two years later would turn her into a crucial hinge of Peronist state power and a figure both adored by the working class and abhorred by the country’s lineage of powerful industrialists and land-owners. Argentina’s obsession with Evita outlived her and was channelled through a peculiar cult of her body whose early disappearance only heightened the fixation. After Evita’s death, her corpse was embalmed and displayed in a glass casket at the Peronist Party’s headquarters in Buenos Aires and when, a few years later, a military coup forced Juan Perón to flee into exile, Evita’s coffin followed him around Europe.

Although childless herself, Evita built her popular appeal on the image of a “bridge of love” (Favor 2011, 84) uniting the masses with her presidential husband, defining herself as the maternal figure looking after her *descamisado* children, these

“shirtless” workers who constituted the bulk of Peronist support. This is particularly relevant because, while a highly influential figure in the political sphere (in 1952, she was honoured with the title of “Spiritual Leader of the Nation” by the Congress), the distribution of power within the presidential dyad would not break away from the patriarchal narrative that traditionally ascribed gender roles. As Ben Bollig correctly notes, “[t]he basic unit of social organisation was the Peronist family, the place of the woman being firmly within the domestic sphere” (2010, 12). Evita herself willingly took part in this paternalist fiction, writing of her supportive role of Perón in her memoirs: “he great, I small, he cultured and I simple (...) he the figure, I the shadow, he sure of himself and I sure only of him” (in Bollig 2010, 12).

The image of Evita as the shadow of her husband is a telling one, however, it does not faithfully capture the power dynamic that animated the couple and, most importantly, the symbolic role to which Evita submitted her body in the construction of the Peronist state fiction. Indeed, as Costantino convincingly reveals in her own treatment of Evita’s body, more than an erasing of the contours of her fleshy body to retreat and dissolve behind the luminous presence of Perón, Evita performed an emptying out of her bodily envelope. Complying with the cosmetics of the public role expected from her, Evita dyed her hair, lost weight, polished her skin, imposing a control that would turn her into a perfect surface, an empty vessel ready to be filled with whatever ideology the Peronist rhetorics deemed adequate. Resorting to high-definition video, Costantino emphasises the smooth surface that her protagonist(s) has become and the artist’s own occupation of the vessel-Evita only serves to highlight this phenomenon further. Through this emptying out of feminine embodiment, what ultimately remains of Evita is the normative structure that shaped her, the iron corset, which, in the end, contains nothing but thin air.

The smooth skin of female public figures as an indicator of an internal void is an aspect that Diana Segal underlines in her own analysis of the epidermal perfection of the late Princess Diana when she comments on her “radiance” as a form of outward emission of light and heat, a skin with little interiority, entirely turned toward its receptor (Segal 2009). Similarly, even in death, the corpse of Evita was embalmed, her perfect skin acquiring plastic eternity, preserved forever in its radiance and continuing to exercise its warming power to the crowds of adorers coming to worship her remains. As a maternal figure, Evita then dwells on the side of the idealised and the hagiographic, her relics conserved, reproduced and worshipped.

In this sense, Evita represents the perfect illustration of this pairing of the Mother as an embodiment of the *Patria* or Motherland that Taylor associates with a disappearing of the feminine during the Dirty War.

Patria, a feminine term for nationhood is entangled with *patriarchy*.

Thus, the word itself alerts us to the slippery positioning of the feminine in the discourse. There is no woman behind the maternal image invoked by the military. (Taylor 1997, 77)

In political terms, the stakes of such a process of idealisation as corporeal emptying run very far, for they also constitute the very bases of populism, as Ernesto Laclau argues. Laclau writes that the modes of representation through which populist power maintains its attraction rely on the creation and circulation of “empty signifiers”, images allowing for the “construction of a popular subjectivity” that stands for universal truth (2005, 40). As a vessel for collective and nationalistic Motherhood, Evita constitutes one of these empty signifiers that allow for the construction and circulation of the Peronist national narrative, granting it an aura of quasi-religious truth. The lure of the vessel that Evita’s body became seems to have outlived her; as Costantino’s installation testifies, it continues to exercise its power in contemporary politics in the country. In fact, the story surrounding Costantino’s representation of Argentina in the Venice Biennale is revelatory of this. Days before the unveiling of the exhibition, Costantino and the pavilion’s curator Fernando Farina, complained of the Argentine state interventionism in the making of the work. Indeed, not only did the government request that the title of the piece be changed to *Eva-Argentina, una metáfora contemporánea* [Eva-Argentina, a Contemporary Metaphor], thus anchoring further the reading of Evita as metaphorical stand-in for the country as a whole, but the Ministry of Culture, as the artist and the curator complained, also damaged the integrity of the work, adding to it a “documentary” annex at the last minute. Effectively, in the final version accessible to the public, the installation does not end with the dramatic display of the ice tears dripping on the floor. Instead, the visitor is directed to another adjoining room that offers a selection of press clippings and video archives. Some of them are historical documents showing the Perón couple at the apex of its popularity, others follow the crowds of grief-stricken mourners who participated in Evita’s state funeral. In a final section that aims at reflecting on the “after-life” of the Eva metaphor and the Peronist movement, photos

and videos are presented, depicting the Kirchner couple basking in the adoration of *La Campora*, the political youth organisation that represented the bulk of its supporters. With this additional room apparently requested by the then President Cristina Kirchner, the attempt to recuperate Evita could not be more obvious and adds a final, ironic twist to this reflection on her figure as an empty receptacle to inhabit and manipulate for one's own populist ends. Ultimately though, what this side-story reveals might be the impossibility to escape what I would define as the "Evita-complex". Even Costantino in her seductive take on Evita cannot do away with her own absorption in the fetishistic lure of Evita's body. "The women who perform [Evita] speak as ventriloquists", Taylor writes. "They absent themselves in their bid for public acceptance. They too, are caught up in the 'desiring machine', both the product and the producers of the same fetishistic spectacle" (1997, 53). If for art historian Vittoria Martini, permanent pavilions of the Biennale de Venezia function as "national art containers" seductively packaged for foreign consumption (Martini 2005), in the case of the Argentine pavilion, one might actually be in front of an irremediable *mise-en-abyme* of this insertion of empty boxes one into the other. At the bottom of it remains the empty corset banging blindly against the blind panels: a metaphor much more telling than the one wished for by the officially staged play of mirrors.

The Evita-complex

The Evita-complex serves as a cautionary tale of sorts to the performative aesthetics that the Madres have built around their maternal status. Their presence to the sides of the Kirchner couple in the "documentary annex" of the Pavilion only serves to highlight their insertion into the narrative woven by official power around the figure of the Mother of the Nation. If, in Costantino's installation, the corset functioned as an exoskeleton that replaced the skin as porous and breathing membrane, constraining as much as containing whoever tried to fit inside it, something similar could be said of the clothing— the dark cloaks and white kerchiefs — of the Madres. For all their ability to weave a protective skin around the collective, embracing them into the soft memory of their children's clothes, the softness of this image might also turn rigid and coercive in the light of its recuperation by a lurking populism. As I have argued, as the institution of motherhood constitutes the real threat for the type of maternal activism devised by the Madres, it is the surface of their bodies, their

skins that might fall as the first victims of such recuperation, undergoing the same mummification and fossilisation that awaited Evita, constraining them to the role of empty vessels to someone else's ambitions.

If the Evita-complex is not a syndrome, it is however because, in the very figure of the mythical First Lady, a redemptive possibility exists that would allow her to escape her fate as hollowed wax figurine and that might inform our reading of the maternal as a – still – subversive force in the Madres' performances and their artistic representations. This redemption lies, I will argue in what follows, in the vitality of the skin to resist indexicality.

The fiction woven around the body of Evita as Mother of the Nation met, as we saw, an incredible and enduring success that ran far beyond the years of Perón's government. Co-existent with this popular cult, a much darker narrative also took place during her lifetime. Stirred by the fears of the Argentine elite to lose its privileged status in the face of a left-wing government, Evita was also depicted as the witch, the whore, the feminine evil that put at risk the stability of the country. While making great case of the First Lady's childlessness, these stories in fact inscribed themselves in a maternal dualism in which the benevolent image of the all-giving Mother found its counter-part in the depiction of a murderous, selfish usurper of maternal power.

In 1949, a few years after her arrival in Buenos Aires, the Austrian-born psychoanalyst Marie Langer commented in a paper called *El niño asado y otros mitos sobre Eva Perón* [The Barbecue-Child and Other Myths on Eva Perón] on the spreading of "urban legends" in the city, conveying nightmarish tales of homicidal nannies who, supposedly killed the children they were looking after and cooked them up as a meal to the returning parents. Langer notes that she could not find any evidence in newspapers that such horrible deeds had really taken place and concludes that the circulation of such stories most likely constitutes a "modern myth", void of empirical truth, yet highly revealing of the fears harboured by the Argentine society during the Peronist years. For Langer, this fear found an outlet in the construction of these modern myths and the real figure behind it was none other than Eva Perón herself, the "all-powerful and despotic Mother who dominated everyone" (1966, n.p.). Even more so, Eva Perón represented for the ruling class a usurper of maternal power, a maternal power in drag that had used her sexual appeal to transgress social barriers and reach the highest office in the land. "Eva Perón was

the good and humble servant, from a low social condition, but, simultaneously, she was perverse, dangerous and feared” (Langer 1966, n.p.). Langer is right to note that while these stories are particularly telling of the fears harboured by representatives of the upper-class in the country, their circulation in more popular circles also speak of the co-constituency of idealisation and abjection, especially in regard to the maternal figure. “The extreme idealisation of Eva Perón was the reason why so many of her followers, although unconsciously, equipped her with the terrifying, because this is what leads to idealisation” (Langer 1966, n.p.).

Libidinal skins

The polarisation surrounding the significance of Evita as maternal figure partakes in a typical splitting of the feminine into two opposite categories, the “whore/Madonna or active/passive binary so prevalent in Argentine sexual discourse” as Bollig has it (2010, 12), a phenomenon also detectable in the reception awaiting the Madres movement, qualified, in turn as saints by their supporters and as “locas” [mad women] by the military government. The popularity of Evita’s figure beyond her own death, brings something more to this equation, however, allowing for a possible reconsideration of the public figure beyond this good/evil binary encircling the maternal and which, by extension, would impact upon the Madres’ performative shows of dissent.

Echoing her on-going popularity in the country, Evita turned into a central presence in Argentine literature. While some accounts, like María Elena Walsh’s poem *Eva* (1976) actively took part in the consolidation of her myth, others, like Tomás Eloy Martínez’ *Santa Evita* (1995) revealed the psychological and political mechanisms that led to the fetishisation of Evita’s corpse.⁶⁰ Standing out within this corpus, Nestor Perlongher’s short story *Evita Vive* offers a transgressive re-reading of the figure of the First Lady, transforming her into a gender-ambiguous, lust-driven zombie, roaming from brothel to lurid hotel, in search of sexual encounters and the company of the city’s queer community and drug-consuming bohemia. In Perlongher’s story, as Evita returns to life, she is carried out by her own body’s fetish lure, turning her into a libidinal force whose voracious appetite feeds off the

⁶⁰ Some of the pens to have addressed, explicitly or not, the figure of the First Lady are Osvaldo Lamborghini, Copi, Nestor Perlongher, Guillermo Saccomanno, Leonidas Lamborghini and Rodolfo Walsh.

desire of others for her deceased, embalmed body. In this sense, Perlongher's Evita is pure skin, a tactile envelope entirely devoted to the reception of these adoring caresses that had, up to then, remained mediated by the screens and glass casket through which her worshipers would approach her. Evita comes to collect her deserved prize: having outlived her own death, she sheds her iron corset and exposes her skin to the touch of others.

In *Evita Vive*, the first narrator walks on Evita's sexual encounter with his own lover. Trying to overcome his jealousy,

I said 'Ok, it's fine, but what about her? Who is she?' (...) 'What do you mean? Don't you know me? I'm Evita'. 'Evita?' I said, I couldn't believe it – 'it's you, Evita?' – and I waved the lamp toward her face. And it was her, no doubt, unmistakable, with her shiny, shiny skin and the little cancer stains under it, which – to be honest – did rather suit her. (Perlongher 2010, 3-4).

In her analysis of Princess Diana's radiance, Segal notes that when examining forms of embodiment adopted by public women, it is generally the anorexic model that prevails, revealing for instance how the imposition of a tight discipline over one's body participates into the shaping of an official image – something shared by both Diana and Evita. Segal also notes, however, that in the case of Princess Diana, one would in fact seem to face a bulimic type of embodiment, that is a type of dynamic forming "a circle around, into and out of the surface-point of the skin" (Segal 2009, 102). For Segal, "fluidity" constitutes the key to understand "the circuit of bulimia" (ibid). In the case of Evita, if the construction of a populist myth around her persona (whether laudatory or downright demonising) contributed to emptying out her body, turning it into a hollow vessel, the queering of her persona in Perlongher's novel and her depiction as a bulimic figure, starved of tactile encounters, gets the fluidity of desire to move again. In Perlongher's description, this return of desire actually comes through in an epidermal way, through the little cancer stains peering through under the "shiny, shiny skin" of his protagonist. Both Bollig and Francine Masiello consider the body's excess, including "fluid, skin, nails" (Bollig 2010, 14) as that which escapes the exercise of power in the bodies of the mighty, that which keeps mummification at bay. Bringing back desire to the fore, the stained skin of Evita also allows her to break away from the dualistic pairing good mother-bad mother,

inserting a “problematic third term” – as Bollig (2010, 12) puts it – that returns the Mother to her own embodied condition as desiring and desired flesh. The queering of the maternal figure of Evita that Perlongher articulates by placing her epidermal stains as the place for a return, a surfacing of desire is highly relevant to my current topic. Indeed, by bringing the maternal figure back to her embodied condition, it opens a way out of the fossilisation of motherhood into an abstract and coercive institution. Returning to the representation of the Madres in Dowek’s painting, I would argue that this insertion of a sexualised third term in the Mother equation does also come through: not as a return to unfettered sexuality, as in the case of Perlongher’s Evita. but by going back to the physical origin of motherhood: the experience of childbirth as a radical opening, an outward rupturing of the skin.

4) TUNNELS: SYMBOLIC BIRTHS AND GESTATIVE POLITICS

Gestation

Throughout the years, the existence of the Madres as a movement evolved, as I have discussed, following a course that gradually saw them “becom[ing] political rather than biological” (Taylor 1997, 188). This strategy allowed for the displacement of the conflict from a domestic to a public domain. We have, however, seen how this change also led to a potential recuperation of the movement to populist ends and the transformation of the Mothers’ envelopes into disembodied vessels. While there are elements of truth in this interpretation, the crux of the argument continues to rely on the physicality of the maternal body, in its reproductive capacities, which despite its progressive symbolisation and collectivisation, never ceased to be anchored in the visceral. Returning to Dowek’s canvas, it appears that the collective’s subversive energy rises from what remains concealed: the *gestational* power at play, the dark hole created by the Mother’s moving bodies which, paradoxically, shifts the focus back onto their hidden – yet vocal – corporealities. However, more than embodying this protective power, it is from their performance of the birthing body that the Mothers dig out the most transgressive aspect of their public presence.

The trauma provoked by the abduction and disappearance of their children by the military authorities was experienced deep into the flesh by many of these women. Indeed, while the separation constituted a physical trauma, and the creation of an inner *void*, it also led one Madre to describe disappearance as an experience of being

“pregnant forever” (in Taylor 1997, 220). By taking away their children and leading them to a probable and horrifying death, the politics of terror operated by the militaries also led these women to become stuck in an endless gestation – re-impregnated of their own unbirthed children through a process that erased all the divisions and boundaries created by the experience of post-natal childrearing. This is, to some extent, what the *pañal* [the diaper - kerchief] may be hinting at in Dowek’s work, displaying the faceless Mothers as ‘wearing’ their children, absorbed in a circular dance around the obelisk – standing for both the erect power of the Nation and the symbol of the lost son. In this sense, the performance of the Madres may be interpreted as one of collective and public impregnation, of these dozens of female bodies pulling their children out of limbo and back into themselves – a visceral performance tearing open the veil of decency and concealment usually laid upon the birthing body, revealing in bright daylight and in the political core of the country what the skin usually strives to impede: a return to the mingling of bodies and the opening of a matricial vortex threatening all of reincorporation. Of course, this collective experience of unbirth was also a reactive one, reminding all present witnesses of the real monstrous body inhabiting public space: the military apparatus itself as a murderous, starving organism which, having claimed to itself the maternal power of gestation, devoured its opponents, making them disappear in its own dark spaces. If passers-by fearfully avoided the Mothers, crossing the street at their sight, it was as much because of the “monstrous feminine” that their performances evoked as by fear of the other monster embodied by secret police cars and the derelict undergrounds of police precincts.

Birth and being birthed

There is a secondary discourse articulated by the Mothers with regard to the theme of pregnancy and childbirth that also comes to take shape in Dowek’s canvas. Until the disappearance of their children, most of these women were apolitical, adhering to the gender distribution of roles in Argentine society. The Madres defined themselves as mothers and housewives inhabiting the realm of the domestic, unconcerned by political or professional debates. They respected the military regime until that regime breached the implicit contract dividing public from private spheres, forcing entry into the domestic realm to snatch their children away in the dead of night. This transgression, combined with the disappearance of their sons and daughters led to a

political awakening in the Mothers. As one of the movements' leaders Hebe de Bonafini once explained "[e]very day when we wake up, we think of the day of work that our children call us to, those children that are on the square, who are in each and everyone of us, those children who gave birth to us and to this awareness and to this work that we do" (Fisher 1993, 135). The motif of the disappeared children having birthed the Madres to their political selves constitutes a recurring image in the movement's rhetoric and while it is also anchored within a familiar Christian discourse – the infamous Dantesque characterisation of the Virgin Mary as "figlia del tuo Figlio" as Kristeva reminds us (1986b, 169) – it also attests to a polemical reversal of roles in which the Mothers became their children's children, revealed to themselves by the beyond-the-ether calls of their sons and daughters. Could it be, then, that in the hazy circle created by the Madres in Dowek's picture, what might actually take place is an experience of collective births, shrouded and surrounded by the interwoven white scarves, functioning as an amniotic cloth of emergence? In this case, rather than a loss of corporeal shape triggered by the trauma of disappearance, what might formally take place is a shaping of the women's new selves – the clearly defined figures closest to the beholder standing as the final stage of this public parturiency.

I suggest that both images – that of being 'forever pregnant' and that of 'having been given birth to' – ought to be interpreted concurrently, giving space for an emergence of *gestational politics*, a dissenting movement profoundly grounded in the womb as a space of identity mingling and inter-individuality. It is in this loss of societal categories that the Mothers' subversive message seems to take its greatest strength, turning the public nature of the square into a womb in which elements become coerced but where they also exchange. While this image sheds a very different light on the interpretation of the Argentine military regime through the scope of body-politics (Bell 2010), it also outlines an epidermal reading of political power as a brittle space of representation whose foundations lie in the birthing body of the Mother. This image may actually be found in another series of paintings by Dowek entitled *Las heridas del proceso* [The Wounds of the Dictatorship] (1985) (Figure 3.11) in which the Madres' *pañal* appears sewn with barbwire onto the skin of a female body, concealing the area of her groin. The stained triangular scarf here seems to be absorbing blood coming from an underlying wound – relating to either

violence, menstrual blood or, closer to my present argument, the fluids coming out of the birthing womb.

By wrapping their clothes and scarved selves around the square the Madres grant visibility to this underlying female body –one of endless gestation, a rampant, vigilant order which, triggered by the abuses of political office, might unleash its bacchanalian might, birthing and unbirthing simultaneously, sticking like moist skins to the bodies of those wishing to do away with it. As I mentioned earlier, for Butler, the strength that Antigone opposes to the political order of Creon relies on kinship not just as the ‘pre-social’ order that has to die in order to make space for either the building of citizenship or the entry in the symbolic, as Hegel and Lacan would respectively have it. Rather, kinship constitutes the never quite repressed strength living right beneath the social order. “[C]itizenship demands a partial repudiation of the kinship relations that bring the male citizen into being, and yet kinship remains that which alone can produce male citizens” (Butler 2002, 12, emphasis in original). The Madres thus intervene in the political order by digging up the bonds of kinship that, while invisible, continue to sustain the backbone of society. Thus, by revealing what the sociologist Laura Rossi provocatively calls “the power of the cunt” (in Taylor 1997, 193), the Madres deployed a counter-power much more threatening than the weeping calls of desperate Mothers and their recuperation by post-dictatorial governments might have triggered.

5) STAINING THE RITUAL

In an article on the Madres, art historian Gustavo Buntinx hints at this re-birth aspect of their performances, examining it not just as a political or aesthetic manifestation but as a ritualistic return to life too.

The take-over of the Plaza does undoubtedly have both a political and an aesthetic dimension but it is also ritualistic in the full anthropological sense of the term. It is not so much about generating awareness of the genocide as about reverting it: to bring back to a new life these loved ones who are stuck at the phantasmagorical borders of death. (...) A messianic and political experience in which resurrection and insurrection come to blend. (...) It is about giving to art an active force on concrete reality. As well as a magical gesture toward it. To oppose to the renewed political power of the

empire an unsuspected mythical power: that of the ritual pact with the dead. (Buntinx in Longoni & Bruzzone 2008, 270)

If for Buntinx the ritualistic nature of the Madres' performative occupation of the plaza can be found in the movement's cleansing ambition, "purify[ing] it [the plaza] with the heroic sacrifice of their children, which is also their own" (in Longoni & Bruzzone 2008, 258), I argue that, on the contrary, the key to a reading of their interventions as a form of ritual lies in *staining* this very public space with the viscerality of their fertile and birthing bodies. As Della Pollock writes in her study of the narratives of childbirth performances, "[b]irth stories put the maternal body – in all its carnal, social and political plenitude – center stage" (1999, 8).

There also exists in the performances of the Madres a transgression of the typical format of performance. It has indeed been noted that performances are traditionally separated from real life by the existence of *frames* whose more or less conspicuous presence serves to note the end of the performance and the return to so-called normal life. In the case of the Madres' public performances, while the regularity of their weekly circumvoluntary movement around the plaza and the silence respected during the marches all constitute codes that mark the time of the performance, the Madres' staging of collective births also serves to explode the safe boundaries distinguishing the performative from the daily spaces. If the event opens through the mobilisation of ritual elements, it never really closes or ends. Past the departure of the Madres from the plaza, something seems to linger on: reality struggles to get back on its feet and reclaim its due space. The public space has been *stained* and, far from the purificatory element noted by Buntinx, what remains are remnants of the wound.

By opening their fertile skins to a re-staging of circular birth narratives the Madres conflate history and maternity together, bringing the inner and the outer into a liminal experience of boundary dissolution. If this aspect is undoubtedly ritualistic – suffice to refer to Turner's own definition of the liminal as a form of ritual (1969) – it also constitutes an undeniable leap of faith on the part of the Mothers. Indeed, while the ritual, as Buntinx has shown, entailed to a great extent shattering the safe border between the living and the dead, and opening the public sphere to the vagrant souls of the *desaparecidos*, reading the weekly performances of the Madres as an ongoing repetition of childbirth also requires the mobilisation of hope. As Sara

Ruddick argues, “[t]o engage actively in giving birth is an expression of trust in others and a determination to become trustworthy. It is an expression of hopefulness in oneself and in ‘nature’, one’s own and that of the child to whom one has given birth.” (1995, 210). Seen in the light of this hope, Ruddick continues, the performance of childbirth “ought to be seen as a crystallizing symbol not of self-loss but of a kind of self-structuring” (1995, 210).

The maternal performance orchestrated by the Mothers in search of their disappeared children is a risky one, as we have seen in this chapter, having to navigate the hurdles of an idealising crystallisation that could harden their skins, turning them into empty vessels. Ultimately though, what the precedent of Evita might have to teach the Madres is that the epidermal surface, more than a rigid envelope wrapped around their movement by populist ambitions hoping to make of them empty signifiers, also constitutes the very locus of the circulation of desire: a libidinal force located as much in the re-sexualisation of their performances as in the acknowledgment of its gestational and parturient capacities. The skin that opens in the public performance of childbirth constitutes the first step towards a re-articulation of a gendered embodiment, staining through a ritualistic display the narrative that tackles the feminine as an experience of lack. At the same time, by re-staging time and again their experiences of childbirth, the Madres escape the pitfall that might entail turning their performances into a melancholic repetition of the lost child’s entry into the world. Rather, as Ruddick’s reading of maternal practice as an ethos of peace informs us, every week, in their birthing performance, the Madres renew their faith in the future, entrusting their individual stories of origin to outer society. The opening of the skin performed by childbirth might actually constitute a first point of entry, allowing female artists to examine the fertile potential of their skins and its inherent link to motherhood. In the following chapter, I trace back this narrative of motherhood and childbirth, examining the experience of pregnancy as a symbolically loaded topos for three Argentine artists working with the sculptural medium: Lydia Galego, Liliana Maresca, and Nicola Costantino.

CHAPTER 4:

BAGS, CRUCIBLES, MONSTERS: PREGNANCY AS BECOMING IN ARGENTINE SCULPTURE

. . . the pregnant body . . . calls into question these assumptions of separateness and sameness. When I am pregnant, 'my' body is both 'I' and 'not I', mine and not mine. The boundaries of the body shift as the pregnant body creates its own expanding space. While the skin stretches, the boundary between the body and its outside is continually renegotiated, until in birth the inside enters the outside. (Anne Elvey *The Material Given: Bodies, Pregnant Bodies and the Earth* 2003, 203)

1) *MÁMA*

In 2011, the Buenos Aires museum Fundación Proa inaugurated the South American leg of *Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, a touring retrospective of Louise Bourgeois' works curated by Phillip Larrat-Smith. An extensive survey including 86 works by the French-born-U.S. artist, the exhibition opened with the monumental *Maman* (1999) (Figure 4.1), installed on the square outside of the institution's entrance. An ode to the minuteness of female labour, the sculpture is particularly eloquent in the popular settings of La Boca, where the museum is located. A working-class neighbourhood of shipyard workers' families, its characteristic architecture is made of colourful houses built with the scattered remnants of abandoned ships, on the estuary of the Riachuelo. The motif of the spider that Bourgeois associates with both memories of her mother and her creative process, evokes such material kinship between labour and intimacy, making explicit the links uniting production and reproduction and encapsulating the tensions, difficulties and paradoxes lying at the heart of the nurturing process. Moreover, by resorting to disparate elements (steel, bronze and marble) to produce her sculpture, Bourgeois seems to suggest that nothing in this act (maternal, creative) is ever done *ex-nihilo*,

bringing together in a gesture of poetic justice the recycled materials of La Boca houses and other, more embodied, cycles of gestation and creation. Whilst Bourgeois herself associated the image of the spider with her own weaver mother and whilst entitling the sculpture *Maman* points to this personal, affective bond, the spider also resonates with an experience that most women would associate with. Indeed, another prescient aspect of the sculpture lies in her nestling condition, carrying her marble eggs in a uterine bag of steel towering over the viewer. The spider is not yet a mother but an expectant one, engaged in a gestational act and visually defined by it; and if the eight pointy legs of the creature lead to a zenital point of focus, it is to the bag and the eggs, as the face of the spider itself is merely pictured in a crude, abstract way. Moreover, through its choice of materials, deliberately hard and cold, the pregnant spider brings to mind the image of a carapace, evoking a closed-in, almost autistic gestation that reveals little possibility of contact with the outside. As we saw in the previous chapters, if skin constitutes a surface of communication with the outside, it can also, in conditions perceived as hostile, turn into a shell, a rigid “second-skin” to recall Esther Bick’s expression (1968), that impedes communication with the outside. At the same, in the experience of pregnancy, skin also constitutes an active and reactive surface: changing in form, texture, colour as the gestation progresses but also turning into a proto-screen, a membrane used for probing and projecting by the medical body monitoring the growth of the foetus held inside. Ultimately, pregnancy may also be characterised as an experience of opening and an ex-filtration of bodily fluids seeping out at the moment of birth.

Placed under the sign of Bourgeois’ gestational arachnid, this chapter investigates the topic of the fertile skin as it came to figure in the production of Argentine women artists whose works react, explicitly or not, to the aesthetics of “maternal activism” of the Madres discussed in Chapter 3. While it follows on chronologically from the previous discussion on the Madres’ performative interventions into the public realm of politics, from a thematic point of view, it also operates a return to the womb, turning to the topoi of gestation and pregnancy. If, as we have seen, motherhood became a fiercely contested field for feminism, politics and visual arts alike during the Argentine dictatorship and its aftermath, a form of *ouverture* might occur through the topic of pregnancy, providing women artists with a breach to escape and turn, instead, to the pre-uterine experience as an equally complex, yet less saturated field of investigation and motif of creation. This chapter

thus examines how pregnancy has come to represent both a lived experience and a motif of transformation pertaining to the feminine condition itself. Moreover, if pregnancy and maternal affects constituted intimate experiences, they did not escape the military government's conservative gender policies and its political instrumentalisation of motherhood, an instrumentalisation, which, as we will see, younger generations also struggled to do away with. Pregnancy also comes laden with symbolic connotations, especially in regard to the collapse of physical and psychical borders between insides and outsides and the making of another "inside" inside oneself. This has led artists to explore it as a motif of ambivalence and a borderline state of becoming, fraying imaginary escape routes that subvert fixed readings of bodily orders and defying the conservative tendency to view pregnancy as a state which, in Iris Marion Young's terms, "does not belong to the woman herself" (1984, 46). Moreover, in pregnancy, as we will see, the antithetic yet complementary functions of skin – as a constraining border locking the subject within and a screen reflecting external expectations, but also, as a necessary container creating a zone of shelter from outside pressure and a locus of unfettered imagination, come to the fore particularly saliently. The inner nature of the experience of pregnancy also turns the skin into a blind zone of pure tactility and thus, places it in opposition to the optical normativity implemented by the patriarchal gaze. A survey of these artists' take on pregnancy thus allows an investigation of the topos of skin not just as a surface negotiating between a liberating inside and a repressive outside but truly as an inhabited liminality, an epidermal envelope allowing for a gestational metamorphosis – and the numerous fantasies that it triggers – to take place and confront social and political reality. While this chapter examines works that deal directly with the lived pregnancy, it also argues that in them, the experience runs beyond its own finite state, becoming a symbol of self-empowerment for female embodiment and of resistance against rigid readings of gender determinism. Thus, the pregnant motif accommodates space for various interpretations and while some artists incorporate it to back a view of gender strongly anchored in what could be defined as an essentialist strategy, others turn to pregnancy as a trope to criticise gender as a social construct manipulated to the detriment of women.

A corollary ambition of this chapter is to pursue the critical re-examination of different artistic media's treatment of skin I have undertaken in this thesis. If opening

this chapter with a reference to the sculptural work of a by-now canonic female sculptor of the twentieth-century might sound somewhat surprising, I would argue that both Louise Bourgeois' sculptures as well as the works produced by the artists I study here had to weather the criticism of their own media's obsolescence. This chapter thus investigates the sculptural medium as another form of artistic language that was "abandoned" in its strict form by the conceptualist-fuelled discourses on the Latin American avant-gardes of the 1970s. Bearing in mind these concomitant concerns, this chapter engages with artistic treatments of pregnancy not so much through the conceptualist and minimalist lexicon that might have characterised its inclusion in European feminist artistic production of the 1970s (Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller) but, rather, addresses its material and spatial characteristics – as a subversive union of substances and a specific type of sculpture "in the expanded" – and I would add "embodied" - field, as volume which, while paradoxically defined by its inside, also takes a bite at modernist and conceptual readings of sculptural surfaces.

This chapter examines three alternative discourses shaped around the motif of pregnancy by three artists departing from and - to an extent – opposing the "official", established view on the topic. It follows an order that will attempt to account for the evolution of the pregnant motif from one generation of women artists to the next. A first episode examines a series of works from the 1980s and 1990s by the Argentine sculptress Lydia Galego in which violent conceptions of pregnancy in terms of self-confinement and wounding are countered by "maternal *reveries*" (Parker 2005, 117) and the articulation of a specifically feminine temporality inspired by metaphors of insect cocoons and vegetal seeds. From the dreams of pupas and germinations suggested by Galego's sculptures, the artist Liliana Maresca develops an alchemic conception of pregnancy running beyond the strict experience of reproduction. Maresca, whose works produced in the 1990s delved in the erotic power of material production and degradation, conceives of pregnancy as an experience of material transmutation that, while following the alchemic model of intrinsic change in elements, also suggests the impossibility of ever achieving a state of pure matter. Pursuing this internal journey, the third section looks at the cast animal foeti produced by Nicola Costantino, an artist already discussed in the last chapter, as works that put at risk the thin line dividing seduction from abjection. Moreover, in Costantino's works from the late 1990s and early 2000s, the concept of "maternal ambivalence" suggested by Roszika Parker (2005) to account for the contradictory

emotions felt by the mother toward her child, comes to the fore in terms of both a parasitical invasion of one's body and the relief stemming from a becoming-animal.

2) LYDIA GALEGO: CONFINEMENT, WOUNDS AND COCOONS

Devouring Interiority

The Argentinean artist Lydia Galego has been making sculpture since the 1960s. Her work *Embolsado* [Bagged In] (1993) (Figure 4.2) is a discomforting piece and its very display, perched upon a plinth, invites the audience to spin around it in concentric circles, growing increasingly uneasy. The sculpture evokes a vaguely anthropomorphic form entirely contained in a large sewn-up sack of textile. As the top of the face barely peers out of this enclosure, the only trace of life emanating from the sculpture is located in the figure's staring eyes and in the sharp angles framing the head on both sides suggesting two hands and conveying to the structure a dynamic sense of resistance. This forced enclosing movement is contained in the manufacturing process itself as Galego wraps a sculpted Styrofoam block into layers of textile that adhere to the original support with glue, sewing and the application of a matte coat of varnish, providing to the outer layer the appearance of a dried, solidified hide. Galego's sculpture exudes a profound awareness of its own material condition. The artist's wrapping, tightening and caressing gesture is somehow marked into the finished object and contributes to conceal the industrial origin of the underlying Styrofoam. At a time when Argentine avant-garde artists rejected the very idea of material production in their artworks, insisting rather on a semiotic codification of meanings, Galego seems to proceed in the exact opposite way: hiding the processed aspect of her work under a veneer of artefact—a manual quality conveyed by the texture, form and palette of her sculpture.

At first sight, it is unclear whether the figure trapped in the bag is male or female, however, upon closer examination, the subtle hint at a bump situated in the centre of the figure's trunk would appear to suggest the presence of a woman and, more specifically a pregnant woman. This anatomic detail does little however to assuage the angst provoked by the sculpture. Rather, it only serves to emphasise it further, bringing to mind the image of a gestation placed under the control of a rigid envelope, both holding the figure upright and limiting the scope of her physical expansion. Moreover, the apparently rigid texture of the containing material, as well

as its fleshy hues both recall the appearance of mummified figures found in pre-Colombian museums, an element that Galego explicitly commented on, recalling the deep impression that the view of human mummies made on her, during a trip to Mexico (Galego 2013). As such, if the pregnant state of the human figure in the sculpture suggests the idea of a gestation, its appearance as an enclosing hide immediately forecloses any happy outcome, leading instead to the frustrating image of a morbid incarceration of both mother and foetus inside a tightening bag that, seen in this light, also fulfils the function of funerary sac. As a take on pregnant embodiment, the sculptural figure of Galego therefore conveys a rather worrying image. Taking literally the image of carnal plenitude as its starting point – an image which, as Rozsika Parker has shown, is traditionally associated with pregnancy (2005, 30) -, the artist pushes it to its own exhaustion point, revealing the image of a skin that expands to the point of engulfing and swallowing its own inhabitant and her unborn child.

Numerous authors have commented on the ambivalence felt by women in regard to their pregnant bodies. As Joan Raphael-Leff rightly argues, “[w]hen so much in life is dedicated to maintaining our integrity as distinct beings, this bodily tandem is an uncanny fact” (1993, 8). If, in these accounts, the ambivalence often has to do with the risk to one’s physical integrity entailed by the experience of accommodating one’s body to the presence of a new life growing inside it – the image of the foetus as a parasite which, as we will see later in this chapter, also constitutes a potent motif for artists working on pregnant embodiment - one aspect of this anxiety might also have to do with the change in gaze required by pregnancy, focusing the woman’s concern on her own physical interiority. As Liss writes, this new configuration requires an adjustment in a woman’s own embodied subjectivity, asking her “to emphatically be in the place of the other *and* inside one’s self” (Liss 2009, xx). Galego’s sculpture reflects such a suffocating experience, suggesting a way in which the body’s interiority, in its growth, also comes to match the contours of the skin, turning effectively the limits of the amniotic sac into those of the woman’s skin and conveying the worrying image of a devouring interiority.

Looking closely at Galego’s sculpture, a detail seems to impede the full acceptance of this reading, however. To create a continuous surface to her work, the artist sewed together different bits of textile, leaving the probing sutures apparent and

even colouring them in a darker hues, thus making them function as structuring lines to the figure's volume and underlying the area of the womb in particular. In addition, the artist also painted some extremities of the figure in a check-board motif. This graphic intervention certainly contributes to the general structure of the sculpture in space, shading and providing depths to certain areas of her anatomy. Nevertheless, in a work which, as I have argued, seems to grant so much importance to its manual quality, this chromatic pattern also draws the eye to the existence of an external intervention, shifting the attention away from a reading of the work as one of worrying interiority and, instead, bringing the spectator back to her own external standing and, by extension, her active role in the sculpture's apperception. Moreover, the grid-like motif certainly contrasts with the rest of the sculpture, introducing a normative aspect to it. As it is stamped upon the surface, the pattern seems to suggest that the coercive aspect associated with pregnancy might also come from the outside, and more specifically from a set of societal expectations intervening upon the bodies of women, attempting to make them fit into a cast of idealised fertility. Galego herself certainly appears to support this view when, asked about this work, she associates it with "all this social load that surrounds human beings" (Galego 2010). Here as well, the danger lies in a loss of embodied self as an autonomous organism and to the concomitant crippling of the skin as a porous platform of exchange with the outside. By stamping the skin, these external forces contribute to shutting it off irremediably. The Skin-Ego as the support for the "inscription of the first marks" as Anzieu has it, denies its complementary function as a "site of exchange" (Anzieu 2016, 3). As a product of pure exteriority, the skin is denied its possibility of reciprocity. Nothing comes in or out of this epidermal shield.

Bearing in mind the year of production of the sculpture, shortly following the return to democracy in Argentina, a parallel may be drawn between this negative view of pregnant embodiment and the rhetoric developed by the military in regards to pregnancy as the natural fulfilment of women's duties as citizens. As Lita Lazarri, former President of the conservative League of Housewives would eloquently put it, "women shouldn't compete with men. Women were born for one thing and men for another" (Fisher 1993, 144). As we saw in the previous chapters, the status of motherhood was the object of manipulation by the military government in their attempt to conflate it with their vision of an idealised *Patria*, or Motherland. A similar process appears to be at play with pregnancy, at both a symbolic and

normative level.⁶¹ While pregnancy certainly did not protect leftist women from being detained, it also imposed on more “acceptable” forms of motherhood the responsibility of creating patriotic children for the nation. Addressing the question of pregnant embodiment in such a context therefore brings an element of societal and, even, territorial coercion to Galego’s sculpture, revealing how, by turning into walking allegories of a fertile and docile *Patria*, pregnant women during the Dirty War saw their bodies closed off, their skins hardening under a monumental cast.

There is a historical precedent to such violence in Argentina. In the historical novel *Facundo* that retraces the life and deeds of a 19th century caudillo, D.F. Sarmiento recounts the cruel methods of execution used by armed bands roaming the Argentine lowlands. As Sarmiento writes, the montonera “*waistcoated* his enemies; that is, sewed them up in an envelope of raw hide, and left them in the fields in this condition” (1998, 60). As it dried, the animal hide tightened around the victim’s body, eventually smothering him to death. This image is strikingly similar to the “bagging in” ordeal that Galego’s figure is submitted to, suggesting how, more than a psychological ambivalence related to the body’s expanding surface in pregnancy, the image of this tightening skin situates itself in a long-standing historical tradition in Argentina. The smothering envelope as a punitive measure implemented by the Nation itself achieves in the work its contemporary expression: that of the perverse instrumentalisation of women’s reproductive bodies by the patriarchal voice. The hard surface of the sculpture becomes a poisonous aegis, slowly tightening its hold upon female pregnant embodiment.

The Wound

As discussed in the third chapter, in her analysis of modern myths surrounding the maternal figure of Eva Perón, the psychoanalyst Marie Langer pointed out the double-edged nature of official attempts to idealise the feminine, revealing the existence in its core of a coterminous, abject other. If idealizing pregnancy certainly constituted a violence in its own right (as the image of Galego’s pregnant figure being buried alive in a tightening sac might suggest), it also served to conceal the existence of another, very physical type of violence imposed on the pregnant bodies of so-called “leftist subversives”. In *Nunca Más* (1984, first

⁶¹ For more on this, see (Fisher 1993)

translated into English in 1986), the official report of the crimes committed during the dictatorship, survivors and repentant culprits declare having witnessed the abduction, torture and assassination of pregnant and post-partum women. This pairing of two co-constitutive orders of violence – one symbolic, the other physical – does not escape Galego and comes through particularly powerfully in another of her sculpture called *Bicho Canasto* (1987) (Figures 4.3 & 4.4).

Bicho Canasto shares formal similarities with *Embolsado*, depicting an apparently female pregnant figure stuck and coerced into a tight envelope impeding her gestures. While the protagonist of *Embolsado* appeared to try to resist such a fate, extending her arms outward in a last effort to escape being swallowed by the epidermal bag, in *Bicho Canasto*, the figure is more resigned and passive, her face, quite visible this time, yet void of any expression. In this sense, this second sculpture might express the ultimate defeat of the feminine in its struggle against societal claims over the fertile body. The reasons for such powerlessness might also be found in another part of the work, however. Circulating around the work, the viewer will find, in its back, the presence of a gaping, painful-looking wound running vertically from the figure's scapula down to her buttocks. The wound is ancient it would appear, as no blood or fluid oozes out. Rather, the skin on each side of the slit has dried and wrinkled, apparently refusing any cauterizing union. Violence has come full circle, the artist seems to say, confronting us with the image of utmost cruelty of a physically restrained pregnant figure stabbed in the back. In the sculpture, moreover, skin defaults in two crucial ways: while its hardening into a carapace incapacitates any communicative possibility, it also fails to protect the figure's interiority, leaving it opened for all to see and poke. Furthermore, when read as mark of surgical intervention, the gaping wound in the back of the pregnant figure also hints at a medical, extractive process that targeted directly the foetus, removing from its host, a violent image that may have found in the stories of young children and babies taken away from the detained mothers, a contemporary resonance.⁶²

Galego's sculptures therefore represent critical commentaries on the co-option of female reproductive bodies and their subservience to the military state. In

⁶² The work carried out by the *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*, a branch of the Madres association, has to do with identifying these "stolen" children and reunite them with their biological families.

terms of embodiment, what this double violence - the mummification and the extraction – entails is the disappearance of the feminine. As Diana Taylor writes, “[t]here is no woman behind the maternal image invoked by the military. The absencing of women from *Patria* constitutes one of the many disappearing acts of this drama” (1997, 77). In formal terms, the persistence of the figurative in Galego’s sculptures might, however, only constitute a temporary stage, leading to a final *coup de grâce* best expressed by the ultimate de-humanisation of the female shape, despite her pregnant plenitude. This last stage comes through in two additional works by the Argentine sculptor. Indeed, in the appropriately called *Gestación* (1997) (Figure 4.5), any reference to the bodily nature of the pregnant body has given way to a mechanistic assemblage, suggesting the erasure of the female body and its replacement by an upright structure which, if it continues to contain the foetus, also submits it to an outside, controlling gaze. Meanwhile, the disappearance of feminine embodiment via a process of suffocation takes a dramatic dimension in Galego’s series of *Rollos* [Rolls] (Figure 4.6) where the monstrous materiality that engulfs women within appears to have succeeded in turning the entrapped female body into an abstract roll from which all traces of anthropomorphism have disappeared, as if digested and evacuated. Moreover, the textured and pigmented appeal of Galego’s earlier sculptures – these material aspects that used to provide an embodied sense of fleshiness to her work – give way to a much more polished and processed appearance. The spell is broken, Galego seems to suggest. As the – however impeded – recognisable humanity of her early works recedes, these works sound as the admission of defeat: the defeat of sculpture to address, through its materiality, pregnant women’s sense of embodiment in a time of state terror.

This terrible consequence falls in line with the deep-seated pessimism of Galego’s works. I would however like to qualify this view for, in the disappearance of the feminine suggested by the dissolution of women under the proliferation of an out-of-bounds, punitive skin, the motif of the wound also begins to suggest the possibility of an opening, and thus, a return to inter-subjectivity as a re-activation of the dialogue between interior and exterior. This is the case because, for all the violence that it entails, the appearance of the wound in Galego’s *Bicho Canasto* is also reminiscent of a vaginal slit, evoking the relief and opening associated with the experience of birthing. As I will argue in what follows, the opening of the slit as the

culmination of gestation might, in fact, start to offer a different narrative pertaining to the fate of pregnant embodiment in the artist's work.

Pregnant Time

For all the violence against the feminine form conveyed by *Bicho Canasto*, a word on the sculpture's title might suggest a slightly different axis of reading. While *Embolsado* pointed explicitly to a painful process of being bagged-in a fleshy envelope, which, as we have seen, could equally pertain to a devouring amniotic sac as to the layers of social expectations placed upon women's bodies during the years of the Dirty War, the term "bicho canasto" actually refers to a moth endemic to the Argentine pampas. Shortly after its birth, the grub weaves a cocoon made out of vegetal remnants and silk threads in which it nestles and prepares to mutate into a moth. The appearance of this cocoon is strikingly similar to the outer layer of the sculpture, as a brown rigid envelope from which the insect regularly escapes in search of sustenance. Seen in this light, the general feel of the work shifts, suggesting a return to active participation on the part of the female form contained therein. As the tight cast turns into a cocoon, it also involves the figure therein in a work of both physical and material production, preparing a home for her offspring.

If this aspect of Galego's sculpture seems relevant, it is because, in her ongoing research on female embodiment and the pregnant form, the reference to a non-human species' breeding cycle also introduces the possibility of another temporality in the gestation process. With *Bicho Canasto*, as we have seen, the texture of the outer envelope speaks of a mummification process. Far from the subtlety of the human living skin, the external layer appears dry and wrinkled; the old wound has somehow calcified in its stubborn refusal to heal. If it addresses pregnant gestation, it is to a past, interrupted and fossilised one that the sculpture points. By introducing as its reference point the existence of an insect's life and breeding cycle however, Galego's work suggests that, while pregnancy is itself conditioned by its own finite, temporal horizon – the completion of the nine months or so-called three trimesters - a different temporality is also at play inside the pregnant woman's body, altering and resisting the linear direction required by the outside. In its resistance to external, official time, Galego's pregnant figure is certainly reminiscent of the existence of a "women's time" defended by Julia Kristeva. Indeed, as the French philosopher argues, through its embodied condition,

“female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression and arrival - in other words, the time of history” (Kristeva 1986a, 192). While Kristeva’s comments concerned the situation of women in post-war Europe, emphasizing the imperative for their own sake to escape and alter both linear and monumental conceptions of time, I would argue that this analysis could equally be applied to the Argentine context, especially in regard to the type of teleological and triumphalist conceptions of time introduced by the military Juntas. In pregnancy it would appear, the female gaze turns inward, familiarizing itself with the different pace required by her slower, denser body. “Time stretches out, moments and days take on a depth because she [the pregnant woman] experiences more changes in herself, her body” (Young 1984, 54). As a cocoon, the outer layer of the *bicho* provides a secluded space for this shift of gear to take place, fending off the intrusive eye, be it governmental or medical. While, in this reading, the risk of falling into an essentialist interpretation of pregnancy is never quite resolved, embracing the alternative temporality of pregnancy also serves to unlock the autonomy of the gestational body as a form of embodied existence that challenges Western philosophical traditions. Indeed, the image of the pregnant woman as an autonomous organism moving at its own pace frustrates the mechanistic view on the body as submitted to the mind articulated by Cartesian thought. At the same time, as Marion Iris Young convincingly shows, pregnant embodiment also represents a difficulty for the phenomenological tradition that posits the subject as a unified consciousness. As she writes,

This description of the lived pregnant body both develops and partially criticises the phenomenology of bodily existence found in the writings of Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, and those of several other existential phenomenologists. It continues the radical undermining of Cartesianism that these thinkers inaugurated, but it also challenges their implicit assumptions of a unified subject and sharp distinction between transcendence and immanence. Pregnancy, I argue, reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves and the bodily attends positively to itself at the same time that it enacts its projects. (Young 1984, 46).

This last aspect pertaining to the “projecting” capacity of the pregnant body appears as particularly relevant in its relation to the question of temporality. Indeed, in her account of pregnant embodiment, Young suggests that in the “split” nature of the pregnant body – a motif to which I will return when examining the motif of the double in Costantino’s works - the pregnant woman connects with a unique experience of time, allowing her to reside in both the past – her own uterine pre-existence – and the future – the prospect of the child to come. “Pregnancy entails (...) a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future” (Young 1984, 46).

With *Bicho Canasto*, Galego thus draws the contours of a trans-species route toward pregnant embodiment, imbuing it with this alternative, cyclical temporality discussed by Kristeva, allowing her to partially escape the edicts of linear time. In this sense, if the skin of these sculptures might suggest an existence entirely *outside* of time – which may also be one of the consequences associated with a symbolic reading of pregnancy as performed by the patriarchal gaze – it also works as a shield, the outer layer of a time capsule allowing the pregnant figure to freely navigate between past and future, supported by the trans-generational bond offered by pregnancy: as a re-experiencing of the mother-to-be’s own pre-uterine life and as a projection into the future via the growth of her unborn child.⁶³ This space, I would suggest, following Roszika Parker is that of *maternal reveries* (2005, 117), allowing women to deal with their own maternal ambivalence via the crafting of fertile fictions.

From the *bicho*’s cocoon, Galego moves in a later series of sculptures to the motif of the *semilla*, the vegetal seed. Entitled *Germinación I* and *Germinación II* (1998) (Figure 4.7), these works initially appear to pursue the artist’s exploration of alternative, non-human narratives to account for the cycle of gestation. Here, however, the artist does away entirely with the pregnant body as a host to the growing life. Instead, what remains is a bean-shaped bag out of which a hand pokes and breaks through the shell, as if trying to extirpate itself from the containing bag. If this disappearance of the recognisable, anthropomorphic figure might cause concern at first, it also permits to break away from the common understanding of the female body as hollow receptacle, a disembodied host to the growing foetus, suggesting

⁶³ For more on the relationship foetus-mother-grandmother inaugurated by pregnancy, see Kristeva (1986b).

instead a conflation between mother and child and the concomitant experiences of metamorphosis that pregnancy entails for both. While in its first occurrence in *Embolsado*, the image of a uterine membrane invading the mother-to-be and impeding her own bodily boundaries by wrapping and locking her inside herself was interpreted as the result of a deep concern regarding the physical changes introduced by pregnancy, in this ultimate work, the skin of the uterine bag takes on the qualitative properties of a shell, temporarily isolating the mother-child unit. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, psychoanalysts Nicholas Abrahams and Maria Torok suggest ways in which the ectoderm of the skin, as it takes on this shell-like quality also reiterates its protective role of the kernel-ego lodged inside it. Moreover, as the authors argue, the occurring of an event creates a trace, which through its inscription in one's inner narrative comes to constitute a memory – which can be traumatic. This trace operates both inward and outwardly or rather, it operates on the liminal space that ties both realms together: “on the surface of contact – so to speak – between the Kernel and the Periphery” (Abrahams & Torok 1994, 24). As a shell or a vegetal seed, the pregnant skin takes on an active role, as the surface of metamorphosis rather than the mere container of gestation.

Precarious Visuality

In her sculptures, Galego combines the ambivalent feelings associated with the experience of pregnancy, outlining the ways in which the fear of an all-mighty, growing interiority taking hold of the body might be lived as a conflation of the uterine membrane with the woman's own skin and, thus, reducing her own corporeality to that of a host to her growing child. This ambivalence, hailing from the pregnant woman's reluctance to let go of her familiar sense of physical uniqueness and integrity, finds, as we have seen, a resonance in another type of take-over performed, this time, by the state's discourse on fertility and pregnancy as the natural missions of a woman. When the skin hardens under the burdens of such societal expectations, it also turns against its host, undertaking a process of slow suffocation whose final outcome will be the ultimate transformation of this tightening derma into a funerary sac that interrupts the gestation at play therein. The symbolic violence associated with such a dynamic finds a physical counterpart in the motif of the wound that disembodies the woman further, turning her into a mere receptacle for the child who will be extracted and removed from her. However, the wound also

introduces, as we have seen, the prospect of an opening that comes to find its fullest expression in the trans-species reveries of insect pupas and vegetal germinations that Galego explores in later works and that introduce a different temporality to the linear one defended by patriarchal power.

I would moreover argue, to sum up my examination of Galego's works that if military power placed emphasis on the controlling notions of vision and transparency in their conception of social order, the concealing aesthetics of the artist's work constitutes, in itself, a resistance to such a probing effort. Indeed, by proceeding through a layering and wrapping of her Styrofoam sculpted blocks, Galego effectively hides them from view, re-instating a welcome opacity to the cycle of pregnancy. This aspect, which resides at the core of her manual process, also finds an expression in her choice of media. Indeed, if some of her sculptures like *Bicho Canasto* were produced with acrylic, the final aspect of other works like *Embolsado* and the two *Germinaciones* is achieved via the sewing together of women's opaque tights that the artist then pastes and colours. In itself, this choice of medium points to an ambivalence. On one hand, resorting to this poor and feminine material underlines the "atavistic" nature of "this feminine world where one is always conditioned to what they call 'fashion' but which always refers to a determined form of being 'wrapped in'" (Galego 2013). On the other hand, however, in their fleshy colours, the tights come to stand in as avatars to the skin's protective and opaque properties. As Galego herself explains, "Where we are outside our house, our clothes become our house" (Galego 2013), pointing to the comforting properties attached to external containers. By re-affirming the existence of the body's surface as a layer that fends off intrusions from the outside gaze, the artist's choice of medium thus participates in this frustration of vision, offering instead an experience of precarious visibility that the art historian Christine Ross would define as "an unsettling of vision that occurs at the viewer-image interface, a quality addressed to the viewer that troubles the full visual access to the image (and beyond, to the reality to which it refers)". (2008, 20).

As an artist, Galego has remained a rather marginal figure in Argentine contemporary art, failing to achieve the public recognition that her work deserves. In a concluding section to this chapter, I will examine the extent to which this isolation may be related to the choice of sculpture as an artistic medium often deemed obsolete by a post-dictatorial art scene dominated by conceptualist and performative languages. For now though, I would argue that the absence of Galego from most

historiographical accounts of the period also pertains to the culture of fear that characterised the years of the Dirty War for so many artists who lived through them and that forced them to retreat from their artistic practice. Argentine artists who chose exile had to go through the painful process of leaving their roots and homes behind but they were also able to return in their host countries to an uncensored art practice. In the case of Galego who stayed in the country, however, the daily reality of working as an artist was made all the more arduous by the daily control imposed by the military. In an interview with the author of this thesis, the artist recalls how, to reach her studio, which, in these years, was located in an industrial estate, she had to cross a bridge that was monitored, night and day, by the military. With every inspection of her car, the vigils would question her about the presence of materials that they considered suspicious: paint, textiles, sewing kit, etc. As a young mother of two children, Galego was highly aware of what this constant threat could mean for her family and chose to suspend her practice. The sculptures that she produced immediately following the return to democracy and which I have studied here, thus constitute the delayed production from these dark years. “Gestated” inside the artist, they express the traumatised and traumatising memory of the Dirty War. At the same time, through their formal referents to actions of bodily foreclosing, duress and disappearance, they are reminiscent of the corpus of works that Maria Teresa Constantin included in *Cuerpo y Materia*, her 2006 exhibition which accounts for Argentine artistic production during the years of the dictatorship. Constantin explains how most of the works produced during this period in Argentina vanished from the circuits of contemporary art and art history, some “out of self-censorship and others for the specific itinerary that they followed” (Constantin 2006, 12)⁶⁴. While the works of male sculptors like Juan Carlos DiStefano or Norberto Gómez – both sharing striking similarities with Galego’s – did eventually know a late revival thanks to retrospective exhibitions like Constantin’s, Galego’s *oeuvre*, on the other hand, has continued to constitute a peripheral chapter in historiographical accounts of late dictatorial Argentine art.

⁶⁴ By this second possibility, Constantin refers to works that go directly from the privacy of the artist’s studio to the homes of private collectors and foundations, effectively never being exposed to the public.

3) THE ALCHEMIC WOMB OF LILIANA MARESCA

(Self-) Portraits

In 1993, one year before her untimely death of AIDS at the age of 42 years old, Liliana Maresca took part in a roundtable with other artists and theorists. Asked to define her practice, Maresca provocatively explained that what interested her was “to put fingers in people’s arses” (in Hasper 2006, 113), to stir them out of their spectatorial stupor. The artist’s declaration is quite unequivocal and inscribes itself in a spirit of juvenile irreverence that animated the Buenos Aires cultural scene of these years.⁶⁵ At the same time, the resonance given to this kind of statement obscures a more subtle— and darker - aspect of Maresca’s practice. If the frequent inclusion of the artist’s nudity in her works certainly aimed at provoking an audience deemed over-reactionary, it also constituted a profound criticism of the kind of discourses traditionally ascribed to femininity and the (pro-)creative potential of women’s bodies.

Ten years earlier, in 1983, the young Maresca staged with her friend, the photographer Marcos López, a photographic session entitled *Maresca with her Work*.⁶⁶ The pictures show the artist, naked in her studio, posing accompanied by some of her female-shaped sculptures, assemblages made out of disparate materials (Figure 4.8). In some shots, Maresca’s nude body constitutes a sort of prosthesis, complementing the sculptural objects while, in others, it is the artist’s body that takes centre-stage, turning the sculptures into props for a sexually-charged *mise-en-scène*.

One picture in particular depicts the artist sitting cross-legged on the floor and holding in her arms her sculpture *Carozo de durazno* [Peach Stone] (1982) (Figures 4.9 & 4.10). In the black and white picture, Maresca looks on lovingly upon the sculpture that rests on her right breast like a nursing baby. The contrast between the rough texture of the wooden work and Maresca’s smooth, fair skin grants to the object a creaturely aspect that only serves to highlight the maternal dimension of the pose, suggesting a post-partum encounter between a mother and her new born child

⁶⁵ See for instance the return of a punk scene in the Buenos Aires of the 1990s. (Amigo et al. 2012)

⁶⁶ An artist in his own right, López would go on developing a characteristic *queering* of scenes associated with Argentine masculinity (the football game, the Saturday barbecue, etc.), theorising his colourful, explicitly *camp* style as a practice of *Pop Criollo*.

still adjusting to its human form. While it is unclear whether Maresca was aware of the recent precedent, the photograph also recalls Robert Mapplethorpe's 1982 portrait of Louise Bourgeois holding her latex sculpture *Fillette* under one arm (Figure 4.11). There are significant differences between the two images though. Indeed, while Mapplethorpe's portrait of an older and established woman artist playfully carrying her phallus-shaped work has often been interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the psychoanalytic notion of penis-envy and women artist's attempts to compensate for the lack inherent to their gender (Kuspit, 2010), in the case of López' picture of Maresca, the subject is approached from a different angle. First, contrary to the wrinkled, mature appearance of Bourgeois as a woman who has closed the "reproductive" chapter of her life, Maresca's youthful beauty acquires a Madonna-like dimension. Moreover, whereas *Fillette* formally refers, despite its title, to the male sexual organ, Maresca's *Peach Stone* is quite evidently female whose vaginal-like quality is further heightened by the coat of red colour applied to the inside of the slit made in the wood. Consequently, while Bourgeois' sculpture and its staging in Mapplethorpe's picture commented on male co-option of the creative field, the photograph of Maresca rejects such a view and, instead, offers a gynocentric conception of art making where the outsized vagina becomes the object of a revering, possibly fetishist, admiration – as well as a source of creative power to be nurtured and protected.

At the same time, the inclusion of this shot in a series of photographs that present the artist's body as an erotic strength able to return to her sculptures a sense of lost embodiment, contributes to re-inject a sexualised aspects into the topic of procreation. In her essay "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation", Iris Marion Young writes about the tendency to de-sexualise the pregnant body: "[t]he pregnant woman is often not looked upon as sexually active or desirable, even though her own desires and sensitivity may have increased" (1984, 52). For Young, this disembodied and desexualised conception of pregnancy is not only detrimental to women, it also fails to account for the auto-erotic dimension of the pregnant woman's pleasure in the face of her own carnal plenitude, especially as it escapes the aesthetic norm shaping the external gaze of desire. Instead, the pregnant woman "recollects a primordial sexual continuity with the maternal body which Kristeva calls 'jouissance'" (Young 1984, 53). While in the photograph, Maresca does not figure as physically pregnant, her facial expression and the symbiotic unit that she

forms with her work are suggestive of a post-partum physical pleasure, when the limits between mother and child are still unclear, so imbued they both are in their recent experience of enclosure and unity. If, as Young suggests in another essay, “patriarchy is founded on the border between motherhood and sexuality” (1990, 166), Maresca’s work intends to fill that gap with a return to gendered desire existing at the core of the (pro-) creative experience.

Undoing Alchemy

Through her on going effort to reconcile the notions of creation and procreation by making both interact in the materiality of her works and body, Maresca became interested in the alchemic metaphor of transmutation – that is, the transformation of base matter into a higher, more valued material – gold, in particular. Alchemy as a source of inspiration for artists is certainly not new and even dates back to the early days of the discipline. In fact, the alchemist’s claim regarding the transmutation of matter appealed to artists for the parallel it drew with their own practice, a parallel that would come full circle with Modernity. As Urszula Szulakowska writes, “[b]y the early twentieth century, [the] superhuman image of the Renaissance alchemist and magician had been transferred onto the artist” (2011, 2). The original contribution of Maresca, however, lies in critically anchoring the alchemist metaphor in the social context of epidemic poverty that struck her country during the 1990s as well as in the gendered, fertile body of women.

In her show *Recolecta* (1990), a pun on the Spanish verb “recolectar” [to collect] and the Buenos Aires upper-class neighbourhood of Recoleta where the exhibition venue was located, Maresca exhibited the real cart of a *cartonero*, an informal worker whose daily tasks involved walking through the streets of the city, collecting rubbish and discarded materials to recycle, re-use or re-sell for a meagre pittance. In the exhibition room, the artist displays the cart in all its soiled, odorous materiality, confronting the well-to-do public of the centre with the reality of their own waste production (Figure 4.12). At the same time, the artist performs two transmutations of the original object. In a first instance, Maresca makes a real-size copy of the cart in a white cast that smoothens out the textures and disparities of the original, transforming it into “a sculptural white monument, almost marble-like, classic” (Lauria in Hasper 2006, 64) (Figure 4.13). Next, she produces a small-size, gold-leafed replica of the object that she displays on a plinth. At first view, these two

copies appear to speak positively about the transmutative power of art to transform grim materiality into a precious thing of aesthetic beauty (Figure 4.14). This is the poetic reading adopted by Adriana Lauria as she comments on Galego's alchemic exercise: "To find in chaos the black, primal matter, the 'nigredo' of the alchemists, to manage to purify it and reach its spiritualisation, the philosophical goal or the 'artistry' of the work" (Lauria in Hasper 2006, 64). In its very display however, the work denies the seduction of such a reading. Indeed, through the double process of hygienic replication and downsizing, Maresca suggests that what is at play in these copies is also the loss of political valence inherent to the original object: by sublimating and inserting it into the polished context of a museum, the cart is stripped off its critical potential to comment on the daily reality of an Argentine underclass. Towering over the two replicas, the precarious materiality of the cart ultimately triumphs and even acquires, through the presence of these two foils, an auratic dimension of its own, as "a giant ex-voto to praise the rubbish received and to pray that it will never end" (Lebenglik in Hasper 2006, 153).

There is also a strong gender element to Maresca's critical take on the alchemic metaphor. As Szulakowska argues, "[t]he historical alchemical discourse had been based on concepts of the feminine realm as magical, alien, essentialist, wild, primal, material, unstable, lunatic, infantile and uncontrolled" (2008, 93). By turning the material chaos of the base matter deemed feminine into a tidy, beautiful material, the alchemical process re-affirms the "organizing" power of the masculine. By opposition, in *Recolecta*, Maresca, returns to the mundane materiality of the cart a nobility, which, it appears, does not require any esoteric practice to come through. On the contrary, what Maresca seems to suggest is that this very nobility was present all along in the daily work performed by the *cartonero*. Indeed, in its labour of collecting, cleansing and organising, the *cartonero* performs a similar task as the alchemist's working in his chamber. The crucial difference, however, is that while the alchemist inscribes his practice in a belief in transcendental transmutation to achieve his work, the *cartonero*'s approach lies in an immanent faith in the value inherent to base materials themselves.

By granting visibility to the existence of the menial, often derided tasks of the *cartoneros*, Maresca operates at a level that I find reminiscent of US artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' so-called "Maintenance Art". Laderman Ukeles who started in 1976 a performance that entailed greeting personally and shaking the hands of every

worker of the New York City Sanitation Department, wrote in her earlier Manifesto of Maintenance Art about what she meant by such a term:

Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time
The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom
The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs =
Minimum wages, housewives = no pay. (Laderman Ukeles 1969)

It is worth noting that in this text already, the American artist associates the daily labour of underpaid workers involved in “maintaining” the city with that of women, particularly, housewives, as they go about maintaining their homes and their families, running myriads of errands and taking on the full brunt of child care. With her open-ended *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1976-), Laderman Ukeles aimed at acknowledging and thanking sanitation workers for their invisible, yet essential labour. This recognition hails from the artist’s intimate knowledge, as a wife and mother, of what “maintenance” entails and the often under-recognised aspects of its daily reality. At the same time, in her collaborative piece, Laderman Ukeles does more than likening her own subaltern feminine status with that of sanitation workers. Rather, and more crucially, her expression of gratitude for the workers’ daily labour also makes her adopt a characteristically “maternal” attitude. This is the case because, following Rosalyn Diprose’ evocative notion of “corporeal generosity” (2002), the maternal locates itself on the side of the giving and caring for. Similarly, Maresca’s own acknowledgment of the work performed by the *cartoneros* of Buenos Aires functions as a form of maternal gratitude. In both their works, these artists thus make theirs the “ethics of care” that Carol Gilligan (1982) identifies as characteristically feminine.

At the same time, if the maintenance art of Laderman Ukeles and Maresca pertains to functions associated with the maternal body, it is also apparent in their works’ ability to grant visibility to an alternative circuit of production. Indeed, while the alchemic model defends a transmutation of matter that entails a change in the nature of materials, in the model introduced by the artist, transformation operates within the material itself. This posture comes through in another work of Maresca that stands at the threshold between performance and collaborative sculpture.

In *Una bufanda para la ciudad de Buenos Aires* [A Scarf for the City of Buenos Aires] (1985) (Figure 4.15), the artist collaborated with the artist Ezequiel Furguiele. Inaugurating the new exhibition space of the art gallery Adriana Indik, the

two artists affixed to the windows of the venue and its neighbouring shops, a woven structure of wool whose many threads spilled onto the street below. As it came to hang on lampposts, kiosks and parked cars, this “scarf” enwrapped and embraced the city. Passers-bys were invited to intervene in the amorphous sculpture, completing it with threads of their own. The action took an unexpected turn when residents started to deposit in the web of wool, objects from their daily life: rubbish but also food, discarded objects, clothes and even a gun. The idea, according to a press clipping of the time resided in “integrat[ing] the heterogeneities of the street into another, freer heterogeneity” (in Hasper 2006, 176). In the same article, the artists who were asked about the nature of their intervention explained that “winter is coming, one has to look after the city’s health” (in Hasper 2006, 176). This declaration, while providing a humorous take on the reading of the city as a living organism, also clearly inscribes the performance in a gesture of concern for the other that prefigures Maresca’s articulation of an ethics of maternal care in *Recolecta*. At the same time, I would argue that the spontaneous addition of random – and in one case lethal - objects to the scarf also participates in this effort to re-materialise transmutation away from the transcendental tradition. Even more so, it shows the ways in which this kind of immanent transmutation is always an embodied one. Indeed by wrapping and protecting the city from climatic aggressions, the scarf also functions as a second skin, mobilizing the thermal and shielding properties of the human derma. This skin is not a homogenous, smooth membrane, however. Rather, it intervenes as a patchwork of disparate and discarded materialities that also constitute the genetic make-up of the city.

Producing hybrid works that critically reflect on the limits of the alchemic model of material transmutation and introduce, in its place, an alternative narrative of transformation that returns to base matter its creative potential, Maresca is thus successful in operating a return to the embodied nature of art production. Worthy in its own right, the examination of this process is also particularly relevant to my attempt to locate the core of Maresca’s criticism in a reclaiming of the female womb. Indeed, in her interpellation of the alchemic process, Maresca also targets the esoteric discipline’s ambition to make its own the pro-creative properties of the female body.

In their article “Outrunning Atlanta: Destiny in Alchemical Transmutation”, Sally Allen and Joanna Hubbs write the following regarding alchemy’s usurpation of female procreation:

Alchemical symbolism, rich in both mythological and biological allusion, presents the image of the opus as the wresting of an embryo from the womb of the earth, embodied in woman, a birth from a man-made alembic. This recurrent symbolism in alchemical works suggests an obsession with reversing, or perhaps even arresting, the feminine hegemony over the process of biological creation’ (1980, 213)

Rosi Braidotti seconds this view when she explains that alchemy corresponds to “the appropriation of the womb by male ‘art’” (1997, 71). According to these two views, the alchemist’s crucible functions as an exteriorisation of the female reproductive apparatus, submitted as it were to the controlling gaze of the male magus who, through initiation, comes to master the art of disembodied procreation.

Maresca’s sculpture *Unum Vas* (1990) (Figure 4.16), which borrows its title from the Latin utterance “One Vessel” that used to refer to the alchemic crucible, consists in a cut pyramidal plinth on top of which a high, empty recipient rests, itself topped by the gilded figure of a radiating sun. The alchemic connotations of this piece are quite evident. As the pyramidal structure refers to the initiation process that the apprentice undertakes in order to learn the secrets of the trade, the textured appearance of the high recipient provides to the object the status of a crucible that went through fire in order to achieve the transmutation of substance. The sun, in alchemist iconography, corresponds to the final stage of this transmutative process and the achieved transformation of base matter into gold. At the same time, as Carl Jung reminds us, the sun is also associated with the masculine nature of the alchemic end-result, which he associates with the conscious mind. As Szulakowska writes, paraphrasing Jung, “the conscious rational ego, was a masculine space symbolised by the forms of the Sun, soul, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity” (2008, 23). With this sculpture, Maresca gives form to the alchemist’s ambition to wrestle the procreative power of the womb away from its female host and locate it, instead, in the crucible, this recipient upon which he reigns as initiated master. While the crucible retains a feminine quality in its hollowed, containing qualities, it is, in the alchemical process,

subjected to the purifying power of the flames. In his *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard reminds us of the erotic qualities associated with fire: as much a destruction as a libidinally-charged caress of the surface. At the same time, the writer points out fire's transformational ambitions, writing that "fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter" (Bachelard 1987, 16). Actively taking part in this out-of-womb insemination, fire thus intervenes as a decidedly male force, caressing and penetrating the crucible, as well as imposing its own tempo, "speeding up" the gestation in a way that could not more radically differ from the notion of pregnant time discussed as being at play in Lydia Galego's sculptures.

With *Unum Vas* then, Maresca appears to "masculinize" her practice, mimicking the creative process that claims to itself the procreative strength pertaining to the female body. As the same time, by mobilizing the formal and iconographic properties characteristic of an alchemic conception of art making, Galego also sheds light on its conquering ambitions. It is certainly not coincidental that the pyramidal structure present in *Unum Vas* as well as the reference to material transmutation offered by the presence of gold would recur in a later work by Maresca: her collaborative installation *El Dorado* whose making coincided with the "celebrations" of the 500 years of the Conquest of America. In this sense, *Unum Vas* prefigures a criticism of the alchemic metaphor as the very epistemic backbone of the arguments provided to defend the *Conquista*: the Enlightenment-based ambition to "civilize" a wild, feminine territory and transform it, via conquest, into a golden land— the so-called El Dorado. An in-depth examination of this later work goes beyond the scope of this thesis, however and, returning to Maresca's effort to reclaim autonomy for the fertile, female form, I will now consider one final work by the artist.

Ouroboros

In 1991, Maresca was invited by the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires to create a sculptural work that would be displayed inside the institution. Maresca produced the monumental *Ouroboros*, a twenty-four square meters abstract piece whose general form and title recall the universal motif of the serpent biting its own tail (Figure 4.17). To replicate the snake's scales, the artist tore off pages from books belonging to her private library and glued them upon the

structure. At the end of the exhibition, Maresca took away her work and burnt it in a private ceremony.

In an interview with journalist Gisela Rota, the artist provides the rationale behind this work. As she explains, when she received the university's invitation, she visited the venue and there, she encountered,

“all these languid youths, their butts glued to their chairs, caught in a fetishism for ideas, for books. I wasn't going to exhibit a sculpture there! Why would I add another fetish among the fetishes? That is when the idea of exhibiting books and then burning them occurred to me. I worked at the design of a viper that bites its own tail. It is a circle, a Moebius strip, it is the symbol of infinity. A thing that devours itself, philosophy. This disgusting act of swallowing, spitting out and shitting theory, that devours us” (in Hasper 1991, 26-27).

Maresca's piece thus aimed at revealing the self-referential and fetishistic aspects of theoretical knowledge as it was imparted in academic institutions. The outraged reaction to the work that ensued among the student body, their denunciation of vandalism and the worrying connotations that a burning of books brought to mind in the context of recent Argentine history, must certainly have pleased Maresca.

If the sculpture takes a bite at academic dogma and its worship of words and books, I would argue that the nature of Maresca's provocation also resides elsewhere. In the alchemic tradition, as we have seen, the masculine became associated with reasoning and organizing principles. One of these principles concerned the concept of an infinite one and all, of universal circular harmony, which, in alchemical iconography, was associated with the figure of the ouroboros. By usurping this symbol, Maresca's snake therefore also constitutes a critical take on the claims of intellectual order proffered by the – dominantly male – world of academia, bringing it back to its brittle materiality, as a precarious aggregation of paper and ink soon to be destroyed. At the same time, despite its title and general appearance, Maresca's treatment of the motif of the snake is not easily identifiable. In fact, as an early preparatory sketch of the sculpture reveals, in its opening, the sculpture is actually much more reminiscent of a vaginal threshold, granting to the ouroboros an evocative womb-like quality and thus, re-injecting into the symbolic realm of words and language a profoundly problematic feminine element (Figure 4.18). If the entry

into language corresponds, for the infant, to the strengthening of one's individuating principle, the re-appearance of the womb brings back, on the contrary, to the existence of a pre-Symbolic, semiotic stage marked by an absence of physical boundaries, an experience lived as abject by the infant. "In the condition of the infantile abject consciousness", Szulakowska writes, "the mother's body is amorphous, inconstant in shape, leaking fluids and giving birth (2008, 90). The reference to the abject nature of the maternal womb is also telling in regards to the physical boundaries of the body. Indeed, one of the central aspects of the abject pertains to the confusion of swallowing and expulsive gestures, and a blurring of distinction between the oral and anal/sexual canals. In Maresca's work, as the snake's mouth becomes a vaginal point of entry, it conflates the body's upper and lower parts, upsetting physical hierarchies. Bearing this in mind, I would suggest that if Maresca's *Ouroboros* fulfils the role of re-introducing the feminine body into an alchemic conception of art making, such a return to female embodiment via the womb-like figure of her snake, is also cautious not to fall back into an abstract image of the feminine form. Instead by orchestrating the final destruction of her work – a fate that would actually befall many of her sculptures – the artist brings together circuits of material production and destruction. Such a gesture would appear to provide to her work a carnivalesque aesthetics which, as Rosemary Betterton reminds us, Bakhtin had located at the very union of bodily production and debasement. "To degrade means also to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs: it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (Betterton 2006, 96).

In *Mothers, Monsters and Machines*, Braidotti writes about how "[t]he woman's body can change shape in pregnancy and childbearing; it is therefore capable of defeating the notion of fixed *bodily form*, of visible, recognisable, clear and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body" (1997, 64). As a monstrous, mutable womb, both swallowing and spitting itself out, penetrating and giving birth to its own shape, *Ouroboros* convokes such an undoing of form. This is why the sculpture might, to an extent, also be interpreted as a radical re-thinking of the Bataillan *informe* in the sense that the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman gives to the term – that is, not so much as a rejection of forms themselves (the *informe* is not the *non-forme*, he reminds us,) but as tearing taking place within

the form itself (2003b). As it folds back upon itself, Maresca's formless snake provides an opening to such a suffocating phenomenon. The opening in *Ouroboros* does not however, provide a resolution to formal stability. Rather, it takes the *informe* as a constantly mutable strength that also constitutes the very basis of pregnant embodiment. "Pregnancy exposes the woman to a primitive form of experiencing in which the known landmarks of ordinary bodily sensations and emotional organisation shift and alter, at times falling into a FORMLESSNESS with no fixed framework but the idea of her due date" (Rose 1986,17; capitals in the original).

By re-situating the fertile, feminine body as the locus of material production and reproduction, Maresca therefore makes a dent in the alchemist narrative and its attempt to disembody and de-feminise pregnancy. In the Argentine context, this is particularly relevant because it sheds light on her works' ambition to undo the appropriative effort performed by patriarchal power and its ambition to shape and control women's fertile bodies. If, as I have argued, Maresca's works, most of them produced after the return to democracy in the country, do not relate as directly as Galego's to the epoch of the Dirty War and the gendered violence that it operated, it continues to keep vigilant watch on the forces that might have led to such a configuration. Moreover, as Barbara Sutton (2010) has argued, one of the consequences of the profound economic and political crisis that would shake Argentina in the early 2000s pertains to the re-articulation of conservative discourses on female bodies and their reproductive functions, thus providing an urgent contemporary relevance to the artist's work. What Maresca's ouroboros might ultimately signal, as a symbol of infinity, is the never-ending recycling and repackaging of narratives attempting to acquire or re-direct the processes of procreation and gestations inscribed in the female body. In the following section, I turn to Nicola Costantino's work with other creaturely referents to raise the posture of a becoming-animal as one of the many potentialities triggered by pregnancy.

4) NICOLA COSTANTINO: PROBING THE INTERIOR, BECOMING ANIMAL AND THE DOUBLE

In the written autobiography that appears in her *catalogue raisonné*, Nicola Costantino remarks on the porosity that has always constituted the relation between her personal life and art, a porosity that, quite naturally, led her when she became

pregnant, to incorporate this experience and its post-partum reality in her practice. In a subsequent part of this section, I will examine in further detail the work that came out of this intimate journey, the hybrid *Trailer*. For now though, I would argue that metaphors pertaining to female gestation have actually been present all along in the artist's production, and expressed themselves via her long-standing interest in the topic of animality.

Starting in the early 2000s, Costantino began working on a series of sculptures that took the corpses of stillborn animals – colts, calves and pigs principally – as its main motif and material support. In these works, the artist proceeds by producing silicon casts of dead animal foeti out of which she realises copies in polyester resin. A highly pliable material, the polyester resin grants a detailed verisimilitude to the sculptures and allows the artist to manipulate, twist and fold her dead animals into expressive poses. As some of these works are crammed in wooden boxes, others are arranged in classical-looking decorative friezes, running along the walls of her exhibitions' venues. The contrast between the repulsion provoked by this choice of subject matter and the sophistication of their formal display further highlights the deeply disturbing nature of these sculptures. It is worth noting, however, that for the artist, the aim of such works does not lie in an attempt to shock her audience. In fact, as Costantino explains in an interview, she actually modified her production process mid-way in order to avoid the trap of an overtly "gory" interpretative framework (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 43). Initially, the artist had chosen to display real, taxidermied animal foeti. She felt, however, that the disgust that the view of these corpses triggered among her audience impeded them from fully grasping the works. "I started to realise that this type of technique [taxidermy] caused a great impact; it aroused rejection and disgust, which somehow made it more difficult for the viewer to connect with the meaning of the work" (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 43). Displaying realistic enough copies of the corpses thus allows Costantino to keep at bay an overtly violent type of physical rejection which, felt by her viewers, would divert their attention from the ethical questions raised by her sculptures. For many commentators of Costantino's works, such an ethical stand situates itself in her criticism of the hypocrisy characterising our relation to animals, especially from the point of view of meat consumption. As the art critic Fabián Lebenglik writes, "the artist unveils the commonly invisible sub-world of the necessary industry of death, which is the basis of our food provision and the leader of our gastronomic culture"

(Lebenglik 2004, 145). While the artist herself agrees with such a view, it is also important to note, following Carlos Kuri's analysis, how Costantino's sculptures of animal corpses also constitute a commentary on the process of mechanisation and serialisation that has come to characterise our relation to life and death in contemporary society.

Creating artworks with molds of bovine and porcine fetuses, casting those bodies with the wrinkles of their stillborn skins, making them realistic enough to arouse suspicions about the embalment of actual carcasses, and displaying them in friezes, pipelines of spheres result in a *fetal fabric* that unquestionably wraps our humane images of nature (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 126. My emphasis).

In mass-scale meat industry – an important and lucrative field of production and export for Argentina – death becomes hygienic, reaching abstract dimensions that remove any association with the visceral nature of the animal body that is slayed and prepared for human consumption. By resorting to stillborn corpses, what Costantino's work might reveal is the existence of a similar process at play within the professional practices surrounding pregnancy and childbirth in the country and the consequences that this might have on Costantino's female contemporaries, especially in regard to their own perception of gendered embodiment.

In the installation photographs documenting the display apparatus of Costantino's polyester sculptures of calves and colts, each work appears neatly lodged inside a wooden box whose top lid has been removed, providing visual access to the works contained therein (Figure 4.19). The presence of identification tags and of arrows pointing the "right way up" soon reveals the nature of these boxes as crates, designed to protect the works during transport and installation. In Costantino's work, the crate comes to constitute an integral part of the sculpture, providing it with a limiting and containing frame that would not be without recalling the function fulfilled by the maternal skin in regards to her unborn infant. At the same time, their squared and rectangular shapes as well as the removal of the upper layer revealing the work below makes the crates reminiscent of a screen, conjuring the image of the pre-natal scan through which the medical community typically

gains visual access to and monitors the growth of the foetus. In post dictatorial Argentina, the relaxation of rules surrounding medically-assisted procreation led to a boom of in-vitro procedures to which Costantino herself would resort when she chose to conceive a child, a few years later. For Rosi Braidotti (1997), the increasing medicalisation of pregnancy as it takes place in contemporary society might actually represent the present-day manifestation of the alchemic impulse to export procreation outside the female womb. In contemporary terms, this impulse might be found in the medical field's attempt to control the female interior, making the opacity of the skin retreat in the face of the doctor's probing instruments. As Jennifer Shaw writes, "[t]he modern medical body is from its inception figured as a site of interior knowledge that must be excavated in order to be made functional" (2012, 112). While such a practice might, undoubtedly, have made pregnancy and childbirth safer for many women, it is also important to note the risk that such a surrendering of procreation to medical science entails for female embodiment. As Shaw further argues, "the visualization of the foetus carries with it the risk of elision of the mother's body in visual culture" (2012, 111). Through its recourse to the crate, Costantino's work appears to fulfil such a pessimistic prophecy: as the woman's body disappears, all that seems to remain from it lies in the box's containing property and yet, its incorporation into an economy of display further displaces and rejects its concealing, intimate properties.

Costantino appears to push this disembodied dynamic even further in another work where the animal casts are presented as embedded into a sinewy frieze taking over a wall of the artist's exhibition (Figures 4.20 & 4.21). In its general form, the frieze actually looks more like a web of pipes, clustered by an accumulation of unborn animals cramped into it. While it also appeals to the probing gesture of science initiated with the animal crates, this work, I argue, goes one step further. Indeed, in this sculptural installation, it is no longer a matter of removing the "lid" – of the crate as an avatar of the female body – in order to study the gestational interior but, rather, to excavate the wall, to physically scalp off its outer layer to reveal the existence of a visceral, yet interrupted, gestation taking place below the surface. As it cuts through the wall to expose the stillborn foeti below, Costantino's frieze mobilises a similar gesture to the one performed by the obstetrical-surgeon during a caesarean procedure. In the years following the dictatorship in Argentina, the progressive privatisation of the field of health care led to significant changes in

the ways childbirth was conceived. As giving birth became a lucrative activity for clinics and health practitioners, C-sections started to be advocated in the place of natural births. This was the case because such procedures provided two sets of advantages for doctors: they were more expensive and they allowed them to plan births, removing the element of unpredictability that typically characterizes birth. As a procedure that also promised the patient an anesthetised, painless birth, its occurrence increased, leading present-day Argentina to become 7th in the world in the practice of surgical birth with a rate of unnecessary caesareans estimated at above 35%. In Costantino's work, the pipes filled with foeti bring to mind the image of a factory line of production and of large-scale serialisation. Emily Martin also refers to the industrial metaphor when she describes the contemporary doctor as a "factory supervisor" (1987, 57) whose task entails monitoring products to avoid default, as well as making sure that the rhythm of production remain steady and flowing. Overall, what this shift entails is a distancing from the felt, tactile experience of pregnancy and its replacement by the imposition of a permanent, even possibly panoptical control of the visual, a change which Barbara Duden identifies as "a transition from hapsis to ophis, from the haptical to the optical hexis of the pregnant woman" (1993, 91). Sculpture in the age of the *in-vitro* and the C-section, Costantino seems to suggest, is therefore submitted to the on going attempt by contemporary and medical expressions of the alchemic impulse to wrest procreative power away from the female body. Moreover, as the exhibition wall comes to step in for the maternal skin, Costantino also reveals its complicit nature. Painted a pastel pink, the wall partakes in this effort to conceal the visceral feminine, providing it with an acceptable, yet anaesthetised, dermic surface.

Costantino's sculptures of dead animal foeti therefore provide an inspiring platform to reflect on the disembodiment of the pregnant body when it is left at the hands of a medical profession eager to achieve full control over its stubborn materiality. At the same time, it is also important to note how, in Costantino's work, the feminine is not relegated to a secondary plan of passive importance. Rather, one way that it might be able to regain agency upon its body lies in embracing a posture that might be likened to a "becoming-animal", defining pregnancy as a profoundly transformative experience that also puts at risk fixed bodily boundaries.

In the same period as she was squeezing her animals casts into crates and enclosing walls, Costantino was also working at the creation of "animal-balls" which,

while following the same production procedure, did away with the containing display mechanism, being, instead exhibited directly onto the floor. Varying in size, these sculptures escape the distance introduced by the screen as the visual field of action of a monitoring medical eye and, instead come to cohabit in and with the viewer's own space. In this, the removal of the distancing display mechanisms present in Costantino's earlier works, allows for a retreat of the phallic gaze characterised by medicine, introducing, instead, the possibility what Bracha Ettinger has defined as a "matrixial gaze" that attempts to re-establish the strategic idea of a lack of defining borders between the foetus and the mother: "an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the *I* and the unknown *non-I*; matrix [a]s a shared borderspace in which *differentiation-in-co-emergence* and *distance-in-proximity* are continuously rehed and reorganised by metamorphosis" (in de Zegher, 1996, 22). Moreover, as some of these works are photographed in the artist's own home, they are presented as Costantino's own offspring, repellent in form, yet an integral part of her disparate family (Figure 4.22). The maternal link that this proximity weaves between the artist and her creations comes through even more powerfully in a photographic series that depicts Costantino posing, Madonna-like with one of her *Hog-balls* (Figure 4.23). Adopting the subdued attitude characteristic of the Virgin Mary, Costantino appears with one knee on the floor, holding in her arms the monstrous body of a dead pig, kept in a circular shape by a structure of steel and thread. In this image, by both maternally looking over her pig-ball and revering it, the artist, I would argue, attempts to undo the hierarchical categories distinguishing the human from the animal realms, reuniting both in a family narrative that transgresses established bonds of lineage. At the same time, by claiming the hog as her son, Maresca also places her own gestational body into a realm of trans-species monstrosity. In this, her "adoption" of the pig carcass constitutes a liberation from fixed definitions of identity that appears to apply equally to the animal and the artist herself. Deleuze and Guattari say something similar when, resorting to the idea of a "becoming-animal", they posit it as a strategy to fully embrace nomadic existence (2005, 237). Feminists have critically commented on what this attitude might entail for embodied and, particularly, gendered subjectivity though. As Braidotti rightly wonders, "[c]an feminists at this point in their history of collective struggle aimed at redefining subjectivity, actually afford to let go of their sex specific forms of political agency? (...) Only a man

would idealise sexual neutrality” (Braidotti 1991, 120-21). However, becoming-animal, also constitutes, as Gerald Bruns writes “a movement from body to flesh”, thus performing a re-incarnation of bodies in the most literal sense of the word (Bruns 2007, 703), returning to the body its fleshy, carnal, mutable nature. Women and animal also share the subaltern experience of being spoken of in someone else’s language – male and/or anthropocentric. Moreover, in these utterances, both get consumed in a play of cannibalistic impulses. In the becoming-animal nature of their alliance, therefore, “both feminism and the causes of animals must share a concern with the ways that the Other becomes subordinate”(Birke and Parisi 1999, 55).

With her sculptural works of animal foeti, Costantino thus attempts to carve herself a path outside of the established narratives that attempt to place the conjoined themes of creation and procreation under the control of a male-dominated episteme. As the artist gives metaphorical birth to her animal works, she also embraces her own metamorphosis as a profoundly embodied creative force. This process will take in her later work *Trailer*, a much more intimate dimension as it presents the artist reflecting on her own personal experience of pregnancy and the profound ambivalence that it triggers, especially in regards to the splitting of the body that pregnancy operates.

Doublings, maternal ambivalence and the split subjectivity of pregnancy

In 2010, Costantino unveiled a three-minute video work as part of her multimedia exhibition at the Buenos Aires YPF Foundation (Figure 4.24). Appropriately called *Trailer*, it embraced the aesthetics of the promotional video, appearing to announce the imminent release of a *film noir* that starred the artist as the central protagonist. In the video’s first seconds, a red car pulls over in a dimly lit, deserted parking lot. A woman – interpreted by Costantino – gets out, looks worriedly around and opens the trunk. The rest of the video is made of three sections, interposing scenes from the upcoming action with flashbacks of events leading to this mysterious finale. In the first section, entitled *El soñado* [The Dreamed], the same woman is filmed nervously waiting for the results of a pregnancy test; her smile of relief at its positive reading suggests the fulfilment of a long-time wish. From this diurnal, sun-bathed scene, the video cuts to darker, interior shots that document the artist in her studio, working at the crafting of a plaster dummy that looks eerily just like her. As she labors at the

making of this strange twin – manually implanting each hair and eye lash, sewing her a dress – temporal progression is registered by the swelling of Costantino’s own belly – the one physical attribute she does not share with her double (Figure 4.25). When the time of birth comes, the completed dummy accompanies her fleshy counterpart to the maternity ward and stands protective watch over the new mother’s hospital bed, taking on a role that seems to combine aspects of sisterly and amorous care (Figure 4.26). This symbiotic fusion gradually darkens however, as the arrival of the child inaugurates a new step in the relation between the woman and her double. In a second section entitled *El doble es el ominoso* [The Double is the Uncanny], the real mother shows increasing discomfort at the presence of this oddly static double whose lifelessness comes across as neglect and passive malevolence toward the child. *Lo inevitable* [The Inevitable], the third part of the film, returns to the night car park scene of the beginning. It shows the same woman pulling a wheelchair out of her trunk and loading the dummy on it, as a plane flies overhead. Hesitant at first, the character ends up pushing the wheelchair off the top of some concrete stairs. In the last scene, a cloud of dust that rises from the bottom of the stairs leaves little doubt as to the accomplishment of a morbid deed – a fate confirmed by the presence of the broken bodily fragments of the plaster dummy exhibited alongside the video in the venue (Figure 4.27).

In an interview with curator Hans-Michael Herzog, Costantino explains the genesis of her double project in mostly personal terms. According to the artist, her decision to have a child on her own at the age of forty-five triggered two types of anxieties: if the solitary condition of the single mother made her feel a need to craft a proxy parent with whom to share responsibilities, the making of a double also directly involved the artist’s relationship to her own body as a complex site of desire and desirability. As she explains, “I thought that pregnancy would be devastating to my body [...]. I thought it a very tender metaphor to cast the woman I was before the ravages of pregnancy and childbirth, and before becoming the mother that suffers the physical debacle” (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 47). Through this, Costantino expresses a deeply anchored fear accompanying pregnancy: namely, the physical changes that a woman’s body goes through and that affect her sense of embodied integrity. Bearing this in mind, it would appear that, more than a “tender metaphor”, what Costantino attempts to achieve with the making of this double is closer to a *monument*: both preventing and preempting the nostalgia to a former self whom, she fears, might be

irremediably lost. Nevertheless, the artist remains aware of the nature of this endeavour as one of idealistic projection. As she points out, “[her] *artefacta* bears extreme artificiality because she [the dummy] combines parts that possess an almost perfect sensitivity, such as her hair and her eyes [...], and elements that are a bit grotesque: separate pieces and limbs that have visible unions in their articulations” (Herzog & Kuri 2013, 46). By emphasising the parts that betray the artificial nature of her double and through her choice of medium – rough, fragile plaster – the artist shows how this sculptural eulogy to a *vanishing* self constitutes as much a narcissistic indulgence as a gentle parody of such a gesture.

The physical modifications anticipated in the making of the double represent the most visible aspects of a profoundly transformative process undergone during pregnancy. As Rosi Braidotti writes, through the new elasticity of its own boundaries, the pregnant body becomes “morphologically dubious” (1994, 80), suspicious and unreliable. While this uncomfortable feeling might be encountered in other life experiences affecting one’s general sense of embodiment such as disease, puberty and old age, in pregnancy, it becomes coupled with the acknowledgment of an active *other* dwelling inside oneself, making demands upon its host and generally affecting the future mother’s familiar sense of physical and psychological integrity. As Marion Iris Young writes, the pregnant body “is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head” (Young 1990, 160). If the pregnant body constitutes the site of such an inner doubling, the making of the dummy in *Trailer* works as a reassuring – because visible – externalisation of this phenomenon.

Freud was one to explore the topic of the double in regard to the construction of an individual identity, arguing that the common discomfort felt at the thought of doubles actually constitutes a secondary stage in an infant’s psychic development. Referring to the work carried out by his contemporary Otto Rank, Freud describes how, for the young child, imagining one’s own double initially constitutes a reassuring operation of safeguard of the ego’s pervasive sense of vulnerability and it is only later in the child’s development that the double becomes a threatening figure.

This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction
[...] ha[s] sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from

the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as in that of the primitive man; and when this stage has been left behind the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death. (Freud 1955, 235)

This evolution of the child's – or the 'primitive man' – relation to his or her double is oddly reminiscent of the narrative arc followed in the protagonist's feelings toward her own double in *Trailer*. Indeed, the initial stages of manufacturing reveal an emotional involvement that stems from the ability to exteriorise one's gestational impulse as well as to reassure one's maimed ego as to its own existence. In the culmination of this process, symbolised by the arrival of the child however, one moves from the type of primary narcissism described by Freud to a new stage, in which the double becomes a threat to the integrity of the 'original' and of her offspring and thus, must be gotten rid off.

Moreover, in curbing the fears of physical disappearance experienced by the pregnant woman, the double embodied here by the plaster dummy also turns into a container for her precarious embodied self. In this sense, it functions in a manner similar to what Donald Winnicott has defined as a "transitional object": an emotional and psychological support external to the self that allows the subject to inhabit the liminal space of her suddenly uncertain bodily contours.⁶⁷ Moreover, for Winnicott, transitional objects dwell in what he calls "the third part of life":

the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute [...], a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (Winnicott 2011, 104)

⁶⁷ Both Freud and Winnicott's theses concern the development of the infant and do not consider the case of pregnancy. Far from suggesting a regressive tendency in the pregnant woman, my reference to these authors here inscribes itself in the idea that pregnancy echoes those early uncertainties regarding one's embodied identity. To an extent, I would argue that looking at pregnancy through this angle even throws in crisis those very theories that restrict their interpretation of the construction of identity to the somewhat univocal scope of early infancy.

In *Trailer*, if the double constitutes a transitional object, it is the artist's studio as documented in the video that comes to represent this spatiality: the "third part of life", a threshold zone and "a resting place" for the pregnant artist. Going further, the studio itself might seem to take on the qualities of an intrauterine space of gestation, manufacturing both mother and child and preparing them for the post-partum encounter. In this space, freed from the social injunction to keep "inner and outer reality separate", the artist finds herself authorised to give unfettered rein to her *reveries* – the locus of "self-knowledge" as Parker puts it (2005, 228) – voluntarily blurring the line typically drawn between creation and procreation – a topic to which I shall return in a subsequent section of this chapter.

In *Trailer* moreover, the doubling metaphor is reinforced by the recurrence of mirror images (the medallion that Costantino wears around her neck and that contains the face-to-face portraits of her and her double, the reflection in a glass panel of the 'real Nicola' as she observes her dummy counterpart, etc.) that play further on the uncertainties affecting the female protagonist's sense of identity. This doubling effect is, however, far from balanced and already the surgical appearance of Costantino's studio – somehow reminiscent of a mad scientist's lab – helped foresee how this self-replicating process could not lead to anything but a monstrous outcome. Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting how the doubling of the two women actually also becomes a splitting of the maternal, as a place comprising both benevolent and toxic properties.

In *Torn in Two*, Rozsika Parker points out that in pregnancy, the mother-to-be might experience contradictory feelings toward her unborn child, leading to the splitting into two opposites of the mental image she nurtures of her future maternal self. Defining this experience as one of 'maternal ambivalence', Parker suggests that:

On the one hand, pregnancy fosters an identification with a powerful, generous, nourishing maternal figure. On the other, pregnancy can constellate a terrifying sense of unity with her opposite image of the mother – the witch-like, murderous mother.
(Parker 2005, 88)

In *Trailer*, the plaster double also works as an expression of this maternal ambivalence where, while the real Costantino fulfils the role of the wholly

benevolent maternal figure, the dummy comes to embody the toxic, neglectful mother who remains oblivious to her child's needs: staring absently into space or watching TV all night, as illustrated by some scenes of the work. From this point of view, the double's final ordeal corresponds to a casting off of the negative, harmful side of the maternal. In retrospect, it might even appear that this constituted its fate all along, taking on the role of cathartic scapegoat to Costantino's maternal anxiety.

This partial conclusion – the doubling of the mother and the sacrifice of that part of her deemed toxic to the child – does however stand out as problematic in its apparent refusal to integrate the ambivalences inherent to what Winnicott has defined as “good-enough mothering” (Winnicott 2011, 111), namely the capacity for the mother and the child to respectively impart and sustain frustration and disappointment. Moreover, the apparent candour with which Costantino approaches the maternal crisis and its resolution places her in stark contrast with most feminist discussions on the politics of representation of the maternal in contemporary art. While I shall return to this point, in the next section I would argue here that Costantino's apparent lack of interest in reconciling these two opposite poles of female identity into a more realistic whole also constitutes a bitter critique of the gender disparities present in contemporary Argentina, especially in regard to the issue of motherhood.

Although at first glance, nothing in *Trailer* seems to refer to any recognisable context of production, a closer examination of some of the video's elements do, I would argue, clearly point to Argentina's recent past. The documenting of the double's manufacturing, for instance, repeatedly returns to shots of bodily fragments - the artist working on a head, a hand, a leg or unflinchingly sawing through a shoulder. Later on, as she prepares to throw her burdensome alter ego off the stairs, a plane flies overhead. Placed in the context of Argentina's modern history, these gestures resonate with the country's Dirty War period. From this angle, the artist's studio comes to bear troubling similarities with the torture chambers of the military government's secret detention centres and the inclusion of the plane cannot help but remind the spectator of the sordid practice of *death flights* as a systematic method to disappear political opponents' bodies during these years. I have discussed in other parts of this thesis the collective trauma arising from these years. The inclusion of these references in my examination of Costantino's video serves to show how, even with the return to democracy, the gendered type of violence that the military

government exercised against women's bodies, if particularly virulent during those years, has continued to represent a trans-generational wound that comes through in the works of younger Argentine artists; and also constitutes a point of reference to account for its ramified presence in contemporary reality. This is also the case because, as I contend, the particularity of this violence truly lies in its *doubling* of the feminine, pitting women against an ideal image of Womanhood and Motherhood that, as Diana Taylor has so perceptively pointed out, constitutes little more than a "projection of the masculinist version of maternity – patriarchy in drag" (Taylor 1997, 177).

Out of the possible 30,000 disappeared victims of the dictatorship, a third were women, many of whom were taken to detention centres and submitted to 're-education' programs aimed at leading them back toward acceptable models of femininity and away from partisan militancy and other political activities deemed unfit to their sex. The violence – both physical and psychological – that women underwent should be read as a strategy to *break* female dissidents as well as a bonding terrain for male militaries, thus transforming the female body into a currency that maintains a homonormative social structure while keeping at bay the lurking threat of homoeroticism accompanying it (Taylor 1997, 89). If this gendered violence might appear surprising at first in a society where women seemingly benefit from a special moral status, I have already shown how this attitude is actually constitutive of the dualistic image of femininity conveyed by patriarchal structures. Indeed, the duress that women inmates were subjected to was all the more violent in that it was performed against a feminine body deemed deviant from its original purpose and thus, a danger for society. By contrast, the 'positive' image of femininity conveyed by the military was that of dutiful wifery and motherhood. 'Femininity', Caro Hollander analyses, "was defined as passivity, self-abnegation, and obedient adoration of men, traits viewed as the necessary complement to male glory and heroic dominance" (2010, 106). This doubling thus became a splitting, an ablation of the feminine to the profit of a fossilised, abstract image of the Maternal to which flesh and blood women were requested to conform. As Jacqueline Rose rightly argues – although not referring to the Argentine context in particular, "[o]nly a rigid dualism pits fantasy against the real; only an attempt to reduce the difference between them by making one a pure reflection of the other has, finally, set them so totally apart" (1986, 16)

This dualistic conception of femininity runs through Costantino's work and her visual references to the dark years of the Dirty War. Indeed, in *Trailer* the artist and her double come to represent this split in the feminine between the idealised image of the benevolent, attentive and submissive Mother and its toxic opposite: the childless temptress, the dangerous Woman. In its role distribution, however, the piece also reveals something darker about gender discrepancies. If the pregnant Costantino firmly remains on the 'acceptable' side of femininity while her double belongs to its obscene margins, the video also depicts the artist taking on the roles of torturer and culprit in the eradication of her alter ego, thus implying that the splitting of femininity implemented by the military was actually interiorised by women. In this sense, Costantino seems to suggest that gender violence always contains an element of self-harm, particularly in a society in which women came to embody the patriotic values of the *Patria* – or Nationhood.

Feminist authors like Julia Kristeva would argue that this dualistic categorisation of women is certainly not restricted to the Argentine case and lies at the very basis of societies building themselves on Christian values, especially in their worship of the Virgin Mary as a pure and benevolent figure standing for all faces of Motherhood. In Argentina, if this strict categorisation partially constitutes a European, Catholic import dating back to the epoch of the *Conquista* in the 15th century, it continued with the at least tacit support of the Church to assert its hold on society during the troubled decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ Even more so, Marianismo and its dualistic view of femininity underwent a secular reactivation during the more recent periods of political upheaval of the early twenty-first century. Indeed, as Barbara Sutton has shown in her study on the consequences of the 2001 economic crisis on Argentine women, even in progressive centres like Buenos Aires, patriarchal frameworks of female and motherly abnegation came back to the fore, affecting daily aspects of sexual and reproductive politics (Sutton 2010). In her decision to turn into a work and share with an audience her own experience of doubling, Costantino thus contributes to tearing up the veil of 'decency' and respectability thrown over the politics of representation of motherhood in her country.

The "promising monsters" of pregnancy

⁶⁸ For more on the status of women during the Conquest and colonial Argentina, see Barrancos, 2012.

A criticism that may arise regarding Nicola Costantino's take on pregnancy as an uncanny experience of doubling concerns its apparent disregard for the debates that took place in feminist theory and of the latter's influence on artistic production in previous decades. While in the UK works such as *Post-Partum Document* (1976) by Mary Kelly or Susan Hiller's *10 Months* (1976-77) tackled pregnancy from a heavily analytical point of view, drawing respectively from Lacanian theory and Minimalist aesthetics, in the U.S. the collective work carried out by Judy Chicago placed pregnancy and motherhood in a truly collaborative and transcultural framework (*The Birth Project*, 1985). In its references to the vernacular and the biographical, Costantino's work might, by contrast, appear rather candid, if not downright illustrative. There is some undeniable truth to this and my analysis of *Trailer* through the scope of pregnancy as doubling ought not overshadow the work's omissions – a self-reflective outlook into its discipline's history being an obvious one. In what follows, I shall nevertheless suggest that one of the strengths of *Trailer* lies in its ability to bring back the question of the woman's body to the discussion on the maternal – a question made somewhat vacant in the conceptualist precedents of 1970s feminist art.⁶⁹ By doing so, I would suggest that Costantino's exploration of pregnancy as an experience of doubling goes beyond the restricted scope of the artist's own personal experience, raising crucial questions regarding embodied matter and artistic processes.

In his seminal book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that: “as for my own body, I do not observe it itself: in order to do that it would be necessary to have the disposal of a second body which itself would not be observable” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 107). While grounded in a perception-based conception of the body, this comment remains tied to a dualistic tradition regarding the construction of the self as a determined entity whose exhaustive study is achieved through access to an external – and visually observable – platform of self-scrutiny. In art history, an illustration of this conception might be contained in the tradition of

⁶⁹ Rosemary Betterton puts this another way when she writes of her discomfort at having her own affective response to the *Post-Partum Documents* foreclosed by Kelly's reluctance to involve her audience emotionally, relying instead on the analytical tools provided by Lacanian theory to account for her experience of the mother-child bond: “If everyday experiences of the maternal body were culturally repressed and unspoken, then a feminist strategy of non-representation seemed only to reinforce this absence” (Betterton 2010).

the self-portrait, positing an experience of doubling whose function it could be to help the artist further his – as it was often a he – self-knowledge. While *Trailer* might be read as an expanded self-portrait, its conception of the double as other also reflects a certain degree of scepticism regarding the goal of this exercise as one of distancing and objective self-examination.⁷⁰ In *Trailer* some parts of the plaster dummy were achieved by resorting to casting techniques.⁷¹ Contrary to carving, casting erases the analytical distance self-portraitists attempt to introduce. Rather, as Georges Didi-Huberman has shown, casting entails a physical – tactile – imprint, a persistence of the original trace in the copy. To Didi-Huberman, the impossibility to distinguish between original and copy is such that it actually leads him to refer to a very maternal metaphor: “the *reproduction* by imprint turns the result into a “copy” that is the carnal, the tactile *offspring* – rather than an attenuated version – of the ‘model’, or rather of the *parent form*” (Didi-Huberman 2008, 53; my emphasis).⁷² Just as for pregnancy, casting speaks in terms of a matricial interdependence between the original and its replica, the fleshy Costantino and her artifact double that ultimately undermines the traditional iconography of the double as physically autonomous from its original. As Ewa Ziarek argues, what is at stake with pregnancy might in fact be “the imprint of the other *within* the same” (1993, 74).

Steven Connor replaces this discussion in the epidermal field of the skin, noting how it is tactility itself that impedes the phenomenological impulse to draw a definitive separation between the self and its double. Indeed, as the site for the primal sense of touch, skin already presupposes a doubling accommodation: of the skin touching itself, both a giver and a receiver. Its co-presence does not, however, do away with hierarchy in the order of touch, as some parts of the body operate an active touching more readily than other, more passive, ones. “This means”, Connor writes, “that all of us are lop-sided, hemiplegic, carrying around with us a Siamese twin, an intimate stranger, who is and yet is not of our flesh” (1999).

⁷⁰ Iris Marion Young has rightfully argued that while existential phenomenology might have contributed to undo a Platonic, idealist view of the world by bringing the body back into the realm of philosophy, it “did not live up to its promise, and conceived the lived body as a sexless freak, itself a universal” (Young 1985, 25).

⁷¹ Costantino, for instance, anaesthetised her own eyes to obtain a perfect cast that she used on her dummy.

⁷² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French editions are mine.

I have already discussed the pregnant woman's perception of her foetus as a monstrous parasite in my examination of Costantino's animal foeti-casts. It is however important to note how the figure of the monster also readily applies to the pregnant woman's own corporeality. In her aforementioned essay "Mothers, Monsters and Machines", Rosi Braidotti draws a convincing parallel between motherhood and teratology – the 'science' of the monstrous – as she argues that both stand as representatives of the "other-than the established norm, whatever the norm may be" (1997, 64). Even more so, just as with monstrous corporealities, pregnancy's ability to defy one's – society's – established faith in physical integrity and fixed identity represents an abject threat tightly contained and constrained by power. As Rosemary Betterton has argued though, this view of pregnancy as monstrous is not necessarily negative and could actually constitute a "promising" alternative for pregnant embodiment (Betterton 2006). By embracing her "monstrous" corporeality, the pregnant woman sheds herself of external requirements, turning her body into a locus of unfettered becoming for both the maternal and the artistic imaginary.

While the final scene of *Trailer* suggests an incapacity to deal with the emergence of this other inherent to the self, a photographic work produced the same year as *Trailer* and entitled *Nicola artefacta y Aquiles como Venus y Cupido según Velazquez* (2010) shows the post-'accident' plaster double of the video work ultimately redeemed and the triad mother-child-dummy reunited once more in this contemporary re-enactment of Velasquez' famous *Rokeby Venus* (Figure 4.28).⁷³ As the ultimate, if posthumous, redemption of the automaton, this last work testifies to the female protagonist ultimately embracing her monstrous double as an inherent part of herself. Here, Costantino seems to suggest, the precarious yet proud material other of the post-partum body comes to dethrone the idealised, flawless nudity of painting's canonic corporeality. Moreover, it is also worth noting how the damaged materiality of Costantino's dummy as it returns all patched-up and sutured in this final photograph, is not without recalling the slashing of Velasquez' own Venus at

⁷³ The real-flesh Costantino appears in the gilded mirror's reflection. The autobiographical element of this work is further heightened by the presence of Costantino's real son and the mention of his name, Aquiles, in the photograph's title.

the hand of British suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914.⁷⁴ Through a rather long-winded detour via Argentina and the reflections on the economy of representation of post-partum bodies conducted by Costantino, one might even be tempted to interpret Richardson's gesture not so much as an iconoclast impulse and, rather, as an attempt at re-establishing the reality of lines, stretch-marks and other physical evidences of a woman's, fertile body.

5) SCULPTURAL MIDWIFERY

In a text reflecting on the avant-garde artist's relation to his medium, Donald Kuspit argues, examining the writings of Robert Motherwell, that the love-hate ambivalence that constitutes the emotional investment of the artist in his medium is reminiscent of the relation a child maintains to "his" Mother. More particularly, this amorous link to the material constitutes a melancholic longing for a return into the maternal womb, what Kuspit describes as a "primary drive to physical union with another living being initially the mother – [which] is satisfied through incestuous marriage with the medium." (2000, 128). The artist's response to his own medium's responsiveness to his touch is conditioned by this infantile insatiable love for the maternal body and the difficulty the child might have in sustaining frustration. Moreover, in order to regain control over his creative process, the artist conceives his task of giving form as an impregnation of the material matter to which he delegates – and yet, controls – the gestational cycle. In this sense, Kuspit argues, the artist takes on a dual role: that of incestuous child as well as that of assistant to the birth of the form gestated by the medium, leading him to conclude that "[t]he artist is nothing more than a midwife to the medium" (Kuspit 2000, 26). By granting procreative agency to the raw material while maintaining it under the control of his own knowledge, the (male) artist thus reaffirms the image of a uterine labour placed under the vigilance of an external eye. As a proxy to the female womb, medium submits its power to the artist's hand. Referring to Michael Balint's notion of "pre-object", the writer concludes that in its formal achievement, the creative act posits a necessary separation of form from matter, allowing for the finished object to emerge out of the wild, dangerous density

⁷⁴ In March 1914, British suffragette Mary Richardson attacked with a hatchet Velasquez' painting which was on display at the National Gallery, leaving a series of cuts on the parts of the canvas depicting the deity's neck, back and hips.

of raw material. It is certainly not surprising to note that Kuspit himself refers to the alchemic metaphor when articulating this view:

The minimum alchemic act, which in effect gives it an aesthetic aura – its final form – makes it therapeutic. Indeed, the alchemic artist mediates the medium, as symbol of the mother – the primary material of which we are all made – so that it is experienced aesthetically by everyone (...). That is, the aesthetically mediated medium becomes a new beginning, facilitating our growth through its suddenly radiant presence. (Kuspit 2000, 136)

This characterisation of the avant-garde artist as a midwife guiding and disciplining the parturient body of his material is quite telling of the kind of dynamics that have given rise to the image of an artistic production whose aesthetic potential only reaches plenitude via the intervention of an external hand and, more particularly via the mobilisation of organising principles pertaining to the male, conscious mind. At the same time, it also grants visibility to the underlying anxiety of the male artist requiring this affirmation of his own Pygmalionesque strength. Kuspit himself is quite aware of the potential weakness of this view when he writes that this conception of art making as the logical sequencing that runs from impregnation, to uterine monitoring and final midwifery might take on a different light when applied to the work of women artists, even encouraging them to reclaim the intimate bond they maintain with embodied materiality. “Only by reclaiming their body as their own can they [women artists] transcend masculinist preconceptions of their nature and identity” (Kuspit 2000, 145).

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which Galego, Maresca and Costantino strive to achieve such a gesture. At the same time, my analysis of their works has also shown how, more than attempt at re-feminising the disembodied metaphor of creation, the artists have been working at re-situating the living, female womb as the locus of a creative strength that does not require external intervention. Resorting to both lived and metaphorical narratives of pregnancy and gestation, their works, I have argued, depart from the idea of birth as the ultimate separating horizon to be achieved and, rather, have adopted a posture that aims to reclaim the expressive and critical potential of a pregnant interiority. By rejecting this idea of separateness as the required step to achieve form, it is the established codification of

sculpture as autonomous, vertical and self-contained that the artists seem to contest, introducing rather an image of metamorphosis that comes to life in tactile contact. In my general conclusion discussing the media relevance of the artists included in this thesis, I will return to a discussion on the ways in which this type of criticism also anchors itself in a critical redefinition and reconsideration of certain media: sculpture in the case of Galego, Maresca and Costantino.

CONCLUSION:

STAINING THE CANON: FINAL REMARKS ON SKIN, THE FEMININE AND MATERIALITY

In this thesis, I have attempted to trace the articulation of an “epidermal aesthetics” and its deployment in a selection of works by Chilean and Argentine artists. Identifying the skin as the zone where the crisis of embodiment that unfolded in Chile and Argentina during the years of the military dictatorships found its most vivid expression, I have also examined it as a surface used by artists to negotiate and resolve this conflict. Throughout this work, skin has been endowed, then, with both diagnostic and reactive properties. By locating skin as the threshold upon which normative rules and embodied imagination converge, my goal has been to appeal to its manifold properties. As much a motif as a symbol, skin equally appeals to protective and coercive, communicative and isolating, visual and tactile properties materialised in the artistic gesture. Last but not least, the pairing of the visual with the tactile dramatizes the skin as the realm where touch can intervene and counter the domineering and totalizing aspects of the visual dominion, most powerfully of all. I have interpreted artworks that engage in an epidermal aesthetics, as gestures that, while stemming from very personal experiences, also draw the contours of a renewed artistic practice that strive to re-establish contact with others as its driving force. In this sense, the criticism of the optical realm performed by these works is not a function of the kind of phobia of the visual that Martin Jay (1994) diagnosed in the anti-humanist writings of twentieth century continental Europe. Rather, as it seeks to deflate the regime of surveillance and control initially implemented by the military regimes, the reinstatement of tactility opens a path for a return to a more relational approach to art and, consequently to a restored sense of embodiment. In my own analysis, I have also adopted skin as a methodological tool, resorting to its multifarious pliability to place it at the juncture between the topics of territory, gestation and procreation.

It has become apparent in my discussion of each of the artists included in this thesis that most historiographic and curatorial accounts of recent Chilean and Argentine art have not accounted for the full force of these subversive endeavours. When they have examined them, they have tended to adopt an analytical framework that has failed to identify the dialogue at play between the works’ material properties and their subversive potential. In my Introduction to the thesis, I mentioned the articulation and popularity of the

Conceptualist lexicon as one of the culprits for this omission. The success of Conceptualism as a framework to account for Latin American art, especially as it has been articulated and disseminated abroad, is evidenced by the many exhibitions post-dating – and influenced by – the writings of Camnitzer and Ramírez.⁷⁵ Having said this, recent exhibitions such as Liz Munsell’s *Embodied Absence: Chilean Art of the 1970s Now* (2016) at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts have reflected an effort to examine the relevance of materiality and the body in art from the period. Similarly, the forthcoming show *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960-1985* due to open at the Hammer Museum of Los Angeles in September 2017, will also provide a welcome analysis of specifically feminine artistic practices in Latin America.⁷⁶ Within Latin America, intellectual initiatives such as the organisation of the network *Red Conceptualismos del Sur* [Southern Conceptualisms Network] has helped to offer more plural views of artistic practices from the region.⁷⁷ I would however argue that, in general, these curatorial exercises have done little to account for the relevant fields in which the works operate, placing their examination of the body on a post-media horizon.

In these final remarks, I want to reflect on the inter-dependency of materiality and embodiment in some of the practices discussed in this thesis. Examining the discursive strength of the media used by the artists studied here, I do not wish to reproduce the discourse of medium specificity originating in modernism, even in a reconfigured form. Rather, my claim is that by engaging in a critical reflection on the question of embodiment, especially female embodiment, these artists’ practices also come to impact on, to *stain*, established views of the media within which they operate. Looking at the selection of works examined in this thesis, this final discussion on the relevance of media addresses two concerns: on one hand, it offers a reconsideration of the critical valence of material supports deemed obsolete and, as we have seen, possibly complicit with the conservative

⁷⁵ Carlos Basualdo’s exhibition *The Structure of Survival* as part of the 50th Biennale de Venezia (2013) is one example. More recently, the show *Under The Same Sun: Art from Latin American Today* (2016) that recently took place at the South London Gallery under the curatorship of Pablo León de la Barra also belongs to this tendency.

⁷⁶ This exhibition will include works by many artists discussed in this thesis, including Roser Bru, Paz Errázuriz, Diamela Eltit and Liliana Maresca.

⁷⁷ *Red Conceptualismos del Sur* curated the exhibition *Perder La Forma Humana* that opened at Madrid’s Museo Reina Sofia in 2012 and went on tour in Latin America. The main argument offered by the curatorial endeavour deals with the central presence of the body and the human form in 1980s Latin American conceptualist art. It included works by Elías Adasme, *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*, Liliana Maresca, Diamela Eltit and Páz Errázuriz.

repressive order: painting and sculpture in particular that I studied in the two chapters framing the thesis: Chapter 1 and 4, respectively. Meanwhile, a second concern deals with the critical re-examination of media such as photography-based works (Chapter 2) and performance (Chapter 3). Within these genres, the deployment of plastic strategies apparently in tune with the spirit of neo-vanguard and political critique dominant in Chile and Argentina at the time, initially appears to protect the works from the historiographic oblivion that befell some of their contemporary painters and sculptors. Nevertheless, I would also argue in this conclusion that a lack of nuance in the critical reception of these works has also contributed to conceal some of the less obvious – and possibly most subversive– aspects of their intentions.

As I discussed in Chapter 1 dealing with Roser Bru's pictorial practice, the artist continues to occupy an odd position in the history of Chilean contemporary art. An active participant in the events and debates organised by the *Avanzada* in galleries such as *Galería Epoca*, *Galería Cromo*, *TAV* [Taller Artes Visuales] or *Galería CAL*, she also welcomed the works of young artists in the *Galería Sur* that she founded and directed for some time. At the same time, however, Bru has continued to be aligned with a figurative tradition, which, for many, has equated with an anti-vanguard, even academic mode of painting. For the art critic Justo Pastor Mellado, her works remain profoundly antagonistic to the means of expression developed by the young generation composing the *Avanzada* and the theories articulated around them by Nelly Richard. Bru, Mellado argues, tries to resist “with her best weapons to the reductivism to which a textual modernity tries to submit Chilean painting” (1997, 23). While Bru's practice remains firmly anchored in the pictorial field, I have drawn attention to the ways in which her work deploys iconographic and stylistic gestures that seek to depart from such a traditional view of painting. Indeed, by undoing figures, opening frames, skinning the surface of her canvas and by inserting heterogeneous materials such as photographs, Bru operates a radical opening of painting whose stakes run far beyond the more *informel* exercises performed by some of her painting contemporaries. Moreover, by performing the coterminous appearance and disappearance of the female figure, the artist points to the incapacity of painting in its traditional, figurative modality to account for the reality of political disappearance in the country. Bru's work, in its constant resistance to predetermined categories and artistic movements becomes refractory to media purity and to historiographic narratives, which lean toward linear coherency. Her

paintings set in train a radical undoing of the image from within the pictorial medium beyond any official tradition. Bru the winner of the very official Museum of Fine Arts' Graphic Arts competition (1978) and Bru the founder of the avant-garde space *Galería Sur*: these two opposite poles are not necessary antithetical but rather, come to frame the artist's *oeuvre* in all its multifarious complexity. For this reason, the motif of skin as both a porous surface and an opened frame- that is so vivid in her paintings - also comes to represent her own standing within Chilean art history.

While Chapter 1 focused on painting, Chapter 4 examined the radical redefinition of pregnant embodiment that Galego, Maresca and Costantino performed and mediated through the sculptural language. In my reading of Costantino's crafting of a double, I discussed the ways in which her use of casting techniques constitutes a first dent in established ideas regarding the autonomous verticality of sculpture, situating it instead in what we could qualify as the horizontality of the imprint, itself the product of the casting method used by Costantino. Moreover, as Didi-Huberman rightfully notes regarding the technique, by placing tactility at the core of its existence, the imprint rejects the idea that a complete separation could exist between an original and its double or copy. For him, the corrosive strength of this gesture outruns its formal manifestation and has implications for the very principles upon which art history as a discipline emerges. If the imprint suffers a bad name in art history, the author argues, it is because "the shape emanating from the *empreinte* is disqualified, on one hand because of its *excessive adherence to an origin* that is ontologically corporeal, material (the contact with a referent) and, on the other, by its *absence of origin* and of artistic originality (for it is only, at best, a too servile reproduction of its referent)" (2008, 119-120). It is, however, from within its apparent passivity and literariness that the imprint raises crucial questions regarding the historiographical exercise. As such, in its sculptural manifestation, it becomes imbued with what Didi-Huberman calls the "anachronism of art works that have not yet reached the legibility of History" (2008, 13). Through their adoption of the medium of sculpture, I have hinted at the idea that Galego, Maresca and even, to an extent, Costantino also participate in this strategic anachronism. At the same time, by resorting to sculpture as a material assemblage of disparate, precarious and porous materialities, the artists work *with* the critical targeting of sculpture's so-called obsolescence, amplifying it to the point of turning it into a parody of itself. At a time when artists conceived politically charged works

through the language articulated by Conceptualism, Lydia Galego resorted to mundane, feminine materials and to a horizontal approach to sculpture to convey her tales of trans-species gestation. In post-dictatorial Buenos Aires, at a time when the supposedly carefree and voluntarily camp language of *Arte-Light* dominated the art scene, Maresca rejected that show of solace that consisted in sublimating matter in lightness. Instead she located the core of her production in the paucity of base materiality, turning away from alchemical metaphors of material transcendence and, insisting rather on the poetical and libidinous qualities inherent to a gestational (and immanent) form of art making. As for Costantino, I have discussed the critical impact that her adoption of the imprint might have on traditional views of the sculptural language. One would, moreover, add that her parody of the serialisation and hygienic display of the living form – be it female or animal –also directs her critique against a certain trend of Minimalist sculpture.⁷⁸ In these three bodies of work, the resistance to and marginalisation from dominant artistic languages go hand in hand, as we have seen, with an ambition to return to the female body as a fertile and creative agency, precisely that which had been wrestled away from it by the conjoined – if, undoubtedly involuntary - effort of patriarchal discourses and avant-garde strategies. The stakes involved in such a task for embodied surfaces, the skin in particular, are far reaching. As Susan Best has shown, if a phenomenological view of the female body was to some extent successful in attacking the Cartesian, mechanistic discourse in which it was entwined, positing instead the image of the body as a container out of which a new subjectivity could arise, this view still continues to project the image of the body as a solid, fixed entity, oblivious to the physical changes introduced by feminine experiences. Pregnancy is simply one case in point. The contribution made by women artists to this discussion has entailed, Best argues, articulating a liminal take on sculpture in which “the feminine milieu becomes mobile and mutable – it shifts from container to surface, to threshold – it is not clear how one stands in relation to it: in, on, beside, with” (2001, 153). From a material point of view, the work of Galego, Maresca and Costantino also reflect this attempt at undoing the cast of sculpture, turning it into a fluid, embodied surface

⁷⁸ As Paulo Herkenhoff astutely notes, “[i]f Minimalism dares to vindicate its predominance over the concrete and constructive traditions of Latin America, here is its possibility: to be a diagram of the death of local histories under the imperialism of the Minimal” (Herkenhoff 2001, 28)

instead which, consequently come to destabilise expected conceptions of spectatorship.

This critical reconsideration of supports and techniques deemed inadequate to the political urgency of the time finds a complementarity in the arguments advanced in Chapters 2 and 3 dealing not with media obsolescence per se but, rather, with the partial readings that some historiographical accounts of contemporary Chilean and Argentine art make of certain artworks, in particular works whose choice of media would not necessarily banish from neo-vanguard scenes.

In Chapter 3, I have deployed the notion of “skin-maps” in order to account for the cartographic metaphors of embodiment woven in the mixed-media works of Diamela Eltit and Paz Errázuriz, *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* and Catalina Parra. Resorting to techniques such as photography books, photographed performance and collage works, it initially appears that the type of visual strategies deployed by these artists could be interpreted through the prism of rupture and semantic dissonance advocated by Nelly Richard and materialised in the works of the *Avanzada*. Eltit, for instance, in both her personal performances and her collective actions as a member of CADA, undoubtedly partook in some of these neo-vanguard practices of sabotaging the established order defended by Richard.⁷⁹ In the case of *Las Yeguas* and Catalina Parra, their evocative takes on the gesture of the cut fit equally well with the discourses of rupture and interruption favoured by Richard.⁸⁰ While these interpretations undoubtedly resonate with their historical and political context of production, they have also become dominant, to the point of concealing other critical aspects of the works. An examination through the lens of skin has allowed me to go beyond this first reading, giving visibility to semantic aspects of the works that may not sit so well with the existing neo-vanguard frame of reception and the regional

⁷⁹ I am thinking of Eltit's performance *Zona de dolor* (1980), briefly discussed in the chapter, and of CADA's work *¡Ay Sudamérica!* (1981), that consisted in "bombing" the city of Santiago with leaflets thrown from a small airplane rented by the artists for the duration of the performance. For more on Eltit and CADA's actions as forms of sabotage, see Halart (2016). Regarding Eltit's collaborative work with Errázuriz, the treatment of social and psychic marginality in *El infarto del alma* has also be understood as a postmodern disruption of established narratives and “absolute categories” (Medina-Sancho 2005, 223).

⁸⁰ It should, however, be noted, as I did in Chapter 2, that Richard's writings are not monosemantic and she has also powerfully written on both the sacrificial aspect of Eltit's performance and the healing and domestic quality of the suture in Parra's collages. See Richard (2007).

discourse on Conceptualism in which it has become incorporated. In the case of *El infarto del alma*, while the artists' joining of photographs and text does undoubtedly draw a profoundly poetic, and indeed dramatic, portrait of these margins of society rendered invisible by the exclusionary eye of the Pinochet regime and its ideal society, Errázuriz and Eltit also refuse to romanticise the infra-world of Putaendo. What their work reveals, instead, is the ways in which a tactile approach to both subjects and artistic practice entails, more than anything, a question of assessing the right distance – or proximity: an artistic and ethical stand that rejects claims to both absolute objectivity or immersive belonging. In the case of the performance of Las Yeguas, if it is true that the powerful aesthetics of the dancers' bleeding feet and their provocative pairing of neoliberal economy and AIDS as equally damaging US imports, both activate the gesture of the cut as the rallying cry for a dangerous – and contagious – form of art making in a way that would certainly agree with Conceptualism's strategy of "antidiscourses" defended by Mari Carmen Ramírez (2004, 425), it does not stop there. Rather, as I have shown, Las Yeguas' performance also warns us against the lure of excessive deterritorialising strategies of dissent, laying the ground for a reparative re-territorialising exercise that takes the skin as its map, however scarred and ruptured it may be. Finally, Catalina Parra's *Imbunche* series deals with the ambivalent role that the stitching gesture occupies in relation to the Nation-Body. Indeed, on one hand, mending constitutes a foreclosing exercise that impedes the circulation of dialogue and leads to the creation of an autistic body: the unprocessed, inassimilable other to the military's ideal Chilean society. At the same time, suturing allows for the national wound to close and heal, providing a viable support for the weaving of new dialogic forms of exchange. While Parra's ability to combine the feminine and domestic activity of mending with a political call for reconciliation has been rightly noted by critics, as I have shown in Chapter 2, the epidermal angle that I adopt in my examination of her collage works also reveals the complex nature of the scar as the mark of both a suturing of the past wound and a persistence of its existence in the present, combining skin's both healing and mnemonic qualities. A territorial reading of skin in the works of these artists thus opens the way for subtle, yet equally critical, interpretative threads to surface back.

A similar phenomenon occurs with the Argentine movement of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo examined in Chapter 3. As I have shown in that section of my

thesis, the presence of visual and analytical tools borrowing from performance is undeniable in the Madres' definition of the movement and their critical deployment of a specifically maternal status. Building upon their status as *mothers* of the disappeared has, I have argued, constituted a double-edged weapon for the Madres, however. On one hand, this status may have partly managed to shield them from too violent a repression during the years of the dictatorship, and also allowed them to occupy a central place in academic writings arguing for a maternal form of activism. On the other hand however, the religious connotations of the weeping mother, as well as the association's alignment with the populist rhetoric of Kirchnerian discourse has also led to the production of a victimising discourse and the reactivation of a conservative, *marianismo*-imbued type of gender inequality that risks turning the Mothers in disembodied puppets of regimes in need of a more "human" face. Skin, I have shown, allows for a way out of this aporia, returning to the Mothers a force inherent to the gestational and parturient properties of their bodies. Seen in this light, more than just a performance deploying intimate affects to impact on the political, the Madres turn their weekly demonstrations into a performance of childbirth itself, a parturient act that seeks to reveal the extreme porosity of such categories. Here as well, the analytical tools provided by epidermal aesthetics provides an embodied platform for the critical reconsideration and reformulation of established narratives about art, politics and the feminine in Argentina.

Discourses around Conceptualism in a Latin American context have been generally perceived from a gender-indifferent point of view. Although a number of Chilean artists and theorists like Richard were concerned with the question of feminism, the absorption of their works inside the theoretical frame provided by Conceptualism has, to an extent, erased such a legacy. Questioning the subversive possibilities of materiality, as mediated by different art languages, has allowed me to rethink the place occupied by gender in the works studied here, as the embodied core of a critique against patriarchal constructs existing in both the political and the artistic worlds. The representation of female bodies as surfaces negotiating a fraught passage between enclosure and outflows also relates to the ways in which the work's materiality offers a way of thinking critically about linear constructions of art historical development. In this sense, the self-reflexively embodied nature of these

works targets Modernist and high conceptualist understandings of materiality alike. Marcel Duchamp called for “a completely *dry* drawing, a *dry* conception of art” (Schor 1997, 149). In their work, the artists discussed in this thesis undo both Clement Greenberg’s claim for a pure opticality and Duchamp’s proto-conceptual rejection of materiality by offering what writer Mira Schor would call a “wet” art, of viscosity, of “goo” (ibid). In such a realm of viscosity, ground and figure become embodied and the fleshy fluidity of artistic matter stops being seen as a regression into an essentialised view of the feminine. On the other hand, the kind of friction mobilised by what I have called an epidermal aesthetics situates skin as a surface that has the capacity to hold out against total liquidity. By maintaining a dynamic relation between the wet and dry properties inherent to both bodies and materials, skin offers a critical paradigm that makes of elasticity the negotiating agent between surface and depth as co-constitutive elements of embodiment. A wide range of modern and contemporary art shows the existence of similar efforts to rethink the fixity of matter from an embodied point of view, from Louise Bourgeois’ re-instatement of the containing properties of skin in her adoption of weaving as a reparative gesture to Orlan’s embrace of the abject aspect of flesh in her surgical performances. The practices of the artists examined here do not therefore constitute an isolated episode in art history, nor is it confined to the artistic geography of the Southern Cone. The originality of the contribution of the Chilean and Argentine artists I have focused on, however, lies in their ability to combine these two contradictory movements: an undoing of rigid skins as the path toward other embodied forms. Moreover, as I have shown, the dents these artists make in hegemonic discourses encircling Latin American art can also be seen as overcoming older or obsolete views of artistic media: plotting against restrictive disciplines and academic discourses alike. In this sense, the images of locked-up, mummified and gestational skins we have encountered in this thesis open onto a new critical ground of epidermal aesthetics. The theoretical approach developed here has been an attempt to respond to such insistent corporeal and somatic demands, to reveal the gaping wounds, the *fêlures* that embodiment and materiality oppose to the categorizing discourses attached to Conceptualism. The wound that opens is also a space of intersubjectivity, an encounter between interiority and exteriority. The wound “does not kill but it soils”, wrote Georges Bataille, a writer also involved in the undoing of master narratives (in Libertson 1982, 224). By soiling, the stains and ruptures revealed by an epidermal

approach corrodes the smooth surface and helps one to see how, skin, far from being a monolithic term, continually draws attention to forgotten art histories as well as to the possibilities of new forms of art-making.

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