

The Monster Seminar explores questions of art making by focusing on the processes we undertake to “arrive” at final work. What methods do we develop or follow in the studio, and how do these define our artistic work and understanding of art in general? How do we cultivate our process, and what relation does process have to presenting final work? The Seminar draws out these questions in a speculative manner, exploring process as a deeply complex form of “infra-consciousness” – the madness behind every artwork. The Seminar will work through a range of theoretical frameworks, from psychoanalytic theories of desire and depression, fantasy and sublimation, love and guilt, to feminist notions of gestation and labor, in order to engage the artwork as a form of monster: the radical uncanny, or the absolute intruder. This will allow us to question the relation between process and presentation, and in what sense art is never fully what we expect. Considering how we may deepen an approach to process, and the “birthing” of the artwork, we will map out four key methods, including: The Incomplete, The Thing, The Gift, and The Joke. These will be put into play as poetic vocabularies and paths toward collaborating with the monster. The Seminar is organized as four lectures including group discussion and examining particular artistic works.

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Seminar 3 (Nov. 25, 2020): The Gift /

I want to come back to the topic of the inanimate, and how objects and things participate in our creative practices: how, in many ways, they come to life through artistic expressions and processes. This is also one of the key expressions of the monster: the animation or ghosting of matter – these things that suddenly come to life.

*so the monster can be seen to raise the question of life and of death; it stages a confrontation between the living and the non-living, and maybe in doing so, it challenges how we understand these.

I want us to think further about the living and the dead, and how artistic practices can also be seen to upset this distinction; rather, what we understand as animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, living and non-living, seems to become less clear, less stable. If the monster shows us one thing, it is that life is a force – even, an imagination – that can travel through all matter.

*we can return to the classic monster tale of Frankenstein, to appreciate this further. As we know, doctor Frankenstein is obsessed with bringing life to dead matter. Stitching together a range of body parts (stolen from a nearby cemetery), Frankenstein works a sort of “black magic” or “dark science” in crafting a new human form; a being that may scientifically demonstrate the capacity for man to give the gift of life.

In this regard, what I want to consider today is the notion of The Gift: how is the monster related to the gift? In what ways is artistic practice a form of gifting – from the gift of inspiration, which is a kind of “second sight”, to the artistic work as a gift – a special sort of object given to the world: I’m interested to reflect the monster as a possible gift.

*this will lead us to another understanding of subjectivity, one not so much defined by Freud’s and Lacan’s ideas of the incomplete and fragmented self; less about loss and lack. Instead, the gift will allow us to think about subjectivity as always being bound to others; and where our creative gestures contribute to the birthing of life itself.

To unpack these perspectives on the gift of life, there are two psychoanalytic references we need to make: the first, is found in the work of Didier Anzieu and his theories of “the skin ego”.

Anzieu poses the concept of the “skin-ego,” reflecting upon the skin as a complex surface, a membrane, a parchment that shapes one’s (psychic) body. The skin is positioned as a highly sensitive lining, one susceptible to the familial, social, and material conditions that surround and that mark us with their force and bonds;

*in this way, the skin becomes the means by which subjectivity emerges, is drawn out, and continually works through experiences of being situated. As such, the skin-ego acts as a deeply generative arena of envelopes and sacs, punctures and caresses that provocatively align the psyche with the flesh.

The first function of the skin is to be the sac that contains and retains inside itself all the good, full material that has accumulated through breast-feeding, everyday care, and the experience of being bathed in words. It’s second function is to be the interface that marks the border with the external world, which it keeps on the outside, the barrier that protects one against being penetrated by the aggression and greed of others, whether people or objects. The third function of the skin, which it shares with the mouth and carries out at least as much as the mouth does, is to be a site and primary mode of communication with other people, to establish meaningful relations; in addition, it is a surface for registering the traces left by those others.

By way of a series of functions, the skin emerges as a dramatic and extensive mechanism of mediation between interiority and exteriority, facilitating protection and self-preservation, communication and sharing, a way of negotiating the intrusiveness of the outside.

Skin fundamentally *enwraps*, holding in the stuff of the body with its supple lining – this sac that grants one definition. As such, skin is what confronts the world around; it meets the world, to assist in navigating the material and social shape of things, and how those things are made available or not, put in reach of oneself or withdrawn.

Importantly, the skin is a surface stretched amidst other surfaces and it is susceptible to the pressures and textures of contact – it may be caught off-guard, suddenly, under the force of a certain object or action, scarred by the weight of the world, or the greed of others; or it may loosen, to give way to the sensuousness of pleasure and intimacy.

*the skin shivers and puckers, it ages, collects time in its folds and creases, defining the particularity of myself – this skin that is weathered as it lives. It is the literal surface whose colorings and textures, folds and protrusions, presents one as an individual, *this shape and surface I am*.

Accordingly, it may, in fact, be what I give to another, this skin and all that it carries, signifies, performs, in the touch of so many caresses. Skin is what I can offer, in the movement of myself, this movement which ultimately brings the skin to life, drawing it up close, or retreating, animating this surface that I am.

The skin teaches us then about the nature of the world around, and the nature of oneself as a body meeting that world. It is the site by which one receives and gives, acting as an extremely sensitive point of contact, and how we attach or detach from others: what I am able to grasp, hold, and what also pulls at me, or pulls away.

*here, we can understand the skin as a connective matter wrapping itself around not only those one loves or are loved by, but also the spaces of home, neighborhood, work, and all the institutional situations into which one is placed, embodying what Merleau-Ponty terms *the flesh of things*.

Following “the skin ego”, we start to have a different model of subjectivity: one that is in constant contact, a continual touch; A touching that also educates on how one is pulled into or pushed out from forms of community, of being-in-common with others.

*we might think of relationships as the sharing of skin; or the making of a common skin, a common sensation.

This is elaborated in the work of Bracha Ettinger, an artist and psychoanalyst from Israel.

*In her research, Ettinger works to unsettle the ideas inherited from Freud and Lacan that emphasize the formation of subjectivity as being bound to a (masculine) narrative of castration. Instead, Ettinger develops an alternative view based on what she terms “matrixial borderspace.”

*whereas Freud (and Lacan) emphasize the emergence of the subject as a cut from the maternal bond, a severing from the “matrixial” that locates the subject around the symbolic logic (and power) of the phallus (and the narrative of castration) – a persistent and dominating absence or lack, and the desire for a return;

*Ettinger, rather, understands the subject as being bound to the “feminine” – the matrixial, a womb-narrative – and as such, to a potential of “co-emergence” and “inter-connectivity.”

For Ettinger, that which is other – the difference of the mOther – does not fix the subject to a perennial agony, a constant replay of difference as something forever separated, as loss; rather, difference is generative for what she terms “relations-without-relating.”

“Here, the emergence of meaning is not related to *absence* or even to the rhythmic movement of presence and absence, but to shareability and jointedness, and to changes in and of *distance-in-proximity*.” (Ettinger)

Ettinger leads us toward the formation of a subject shaped by the feminine, and that steps outside the phallic logic of Lacan’s theories – *this (object) that I desire but cannot have, this that agonizes me* – producing instead a “border-link” that ties the subject to an array of others.

Shareability and jointedness instead define the matrixial-subject, allowing for another frame of relationality, another economy of desire, that places us within a continuous contact with strangeness, a *being alongside and with* otherness. As Ettinger writes: “A certain awareness of the *borderspace shared with an intimate stranger* and of the co-emergence in difference corresponds to a feminine dimension of subjectivity.”

In capturing this feminine dimension, a positive *being alongside* others, Ettinger opens a productive understanding of the subject as a co-formation, a “trans-subjectivity” where one is driven not by the agony of a continual lack, where the “womb is denied,” but rather is conditioned by “*the impossibility of not-sharing*.”

*Matrixial borderspace as a scene of radical plurality.

Ettinger’s model of subjectivity – this *impossibility of not-sharing* – may help in considering the border less as a scene of capture, of cutting, as a politics of othering, and more as one of co-habitation; whether on the borders of nation-states, or along the edges of one’s own body, subjectivity emerges as a process of encounter, exposure, jointedness. For Ettinger then, borders are spaces in which one enacts one’s humanness; it is precisely at or within the border that we become ourselves as bound to others, to the womb-narrative upon which life is based.

So let’s gather together these different perspectives:

*shifting from Lacan’s mirror stage, as that scene of separation, to that of the skin ego, where our bodies are never so completely separated, but retain a range of contacts: how the skin is a

material that mediates between inside and outside: subjectivity is not a “visual object” but a “sensual fold”; a sensation of being in touch (in seeing myself as separate I do not separate)
*this is extended in Ettinger’s theories of “matrixial subjectivity”: where maternal separation is not a scene of cutting, but rather, leads us to feel ourselves as always part of a greater sharing: where we are defined by the womb, and which we carry with us, in the sharing and giving of life: separating from the mother only allows us to create new families for ourselves – to participate in a world of relations.

Here, we can highlight how the idea of the individual body is less separated, less independent, and more interdependent, more sutured to the flesh of things: this suturing, this extended flesh, this skin-ego that places us within a world of inter-connectivity, can lead us to another image of the monster: the monster as a gift; as what helps us understand that our bodies are never our own – this other that I give birth to;

*the monster in a way may help us appreciate and recognize how we survive through the help of others, and we also help others to survive: how my body is always emerging alongside others;

*the families we make, extended families, families of friends, are built upon an ethics of interdependency, trust, emotional support, a vitality: we might think how we carry our friends with us, and how we are carried by others.

So I’m stretching the monster here: as what actually supports us, as what helps us realize how our bodies are always sutured to others, always contaminated by a range of other matters: and how these things give us life.

Now, it’s important to also consider another view, to recognize how the skin-ego, and the inter-connectivity of borderspace, is also complicated: by living on our skin, by living within such borderspace, we are also vulnerable; the gift here can be thought more as an energy, what we can call a “current of sympathy” that flows across and through our bodies; in this way, the body is powerful and fragile at the same time – in being bound to others, we are also vulnerable to violence and harm: the gift may also be a deadly gift, a poisoned gift;

*within the borderspace, we also need other kinds of weapons; other ways of dancing with the monster.

*one interesting perspective, or way of approaching this, is by following the figure of the shaman as found within Indigenous cultures: these cultures which know very well the interconnectivity of things: how, for instance within Amerindian cosmologies, life is understood as a force passing through all things, bodies, animals, plants;

*we may think more about the soul here, than the body; the soul or the spirit as a force that animates our bodies, but may also move on, that is also always changing; there is a kind of ongoing dynamic, a natural rhythm – the body may become ill, plants may wither, animals may injure us; if everything is held together, then we also have to care for a greater good – we are indebted to world around us.

*the shaman is that figure able to move between the body and the spirit, between material and immaterial worlds; able to change shapes, to speak with animals, to help restore the health of the body; the shaman is a healer, a witch-doctor, a magician, an artist.

What interests us here is how the shaman comes close to the monster: being close to the powers of nature, which are beautiful and terrifying at the same time; in transforming, the shaman becomes a sort of temporary monster, able to redirect the flows of energy passing through our bodies. As with all doctors and healers, the gift of life is something they can touch; they know well the life of the skin, the organs, the heart, the womb; they are the mediators between life

and death, and therefore, are always close to the normal and the abnormal, health and illness: they must travel into the depths of the body, and the depths of nature.

In following the skin-ego, and the ways in which we live in borderspaces, we are brought to an idea of subjectivity that is close to nature, that is close to the womb – a subject that is never separated, never cut off from the mother;

*what kinds of practices do we develop in order to live in borderspaces?

*how do we care for the gift of life – what do we give back?

As artists, we might speculate how we are often strong and fragile at the same time.

*maybe because the artist is a figure who feels too much; who is generally empathic, who is sensitive to that which we cannot quite name;

*and who is often on the side of inclusion: to support a world of inter-connectivity;

*art often reaches out, to include that which has not been included before; it extends connectivity, it builds borderspaces – through a sort of profound material knowledge and performativity, art stretches the skin to relate us to aspects of the world that are often hidden from view;

*the artist also knows very well the fundamental creativity underpinning the gift of life – and that maybe returns that gift, in acts of making, showing, evoking: isn't the artwork a kind of birthing, a labor (if we think of giving birth as labor) that extends us;

*the creative process is a form of gestation, where we nurture and care for this strange creature that is the artwork.

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Artistic examples:

Carolee Schneemann /

“Interior Scroll”

“vulvic space” / “I thought of the vagina in many ways – physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiralled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers. This source of ‘interior knowledge’ would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh ... the source of conceptualising, of interacting with materials, of imagining the world and composing its images.”

“Meat Joy”

Meat Joy embodies Schneemann’s concept of “kinetic theater,” in which performers engage in scored and improvised movements with a range of materials. Eight performers— including Schneemann—covered in paint, paper, and paint brushes crawled and writhed together, playing with raw fish, meat, and poultry. According to the artist, by using the naked body as a material for art she “exposed and confronted a social range of current cultural taboos and repressive conventions.”

first performed at the First Festival of Free Expression in Paris in May of 1964. Two other performances followed later that year in London and New York. The entire performance was highly sensual; there were aspects of feeling, smelling, hearing, seeing, and even tasting. The work was simultaneously erotic, disgusting, comic, choreographed, and spontaneous.

*Meat Joy was a celebration of the flesh that verged on ecstatic ritual.

*an elaboration of the skin; a ritual of sensuality and the power of the body.

Adva Zakai, *How I Ended Up In This Position* (2011)

Dance work, refiguring the body in relation to a table;

School of Love (2016, KASK)

Adva Zakai is a participant in the School of Love, a collective platform initiated in 2016 at KASK, which practices a totally different understanding of what a school can be. It is an invitation to hang out. But to hang out deeply. To practice school as a place of free time – free to study things as they appear, separated from the dependency on the time and space of social order and production.

As in Elke van Campenhout's point of view, Love was not an emotion, it was the state of being displaced, touched by the other. And by the dynamism it creates within the displacement it was an opening up, a creation, growing, expanding, losing something and finding a new thing, a revolution within the self.

*Revolutionary love /

Arkadi Zaides, archive of aggression

Performance works, movements that relate themselves to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the gestures of Israeli soldiers: adopting as one's own.

*Radical Sympathy

Špela Petric's installation *Phytoteratology* (2016)

In *Phytoteratology*, a bit of embryonic tissue is taken from the thale cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*), a common weed, and submitted to my care, compassion, and commitment. Biotechnological protocols and science allow me to nurture the tissue into a myriad of plant embryos, conceived not in a seed but an artificial womb, the incubator. I extract steroids from my urine to assist the embryo development, the molecules speaking to them of my presence, in response to which they alter their epigenetic patterns and grow a unique body morphology. These tiny monsters, coming into being from an impossible love, with intense labor and a yearning of plant parenthood, emerge in a time of environmental, political and social crisis as beings of permeability, harbingers of affective agential intra-action. Making kin with plants, caring for us, hopeful monsters.

*practices of togetherness / human-morethanhuman entanglements

Cecilia Jonsson, *Haem* (2016)

The physical basis of 'Haem' is iron derived from an unexpected source – the human placenta. Although this transitional organ possesses a complex labyrinth of blood vessels, the placenta provides a direct connection between mother and developing child. Iron, plentiful throughout this process of exchange, plays an essential role, moving through this “maze”, guiding oxygen from the mother to the fetus.

To symbolise this directed movement a compass needle made out of metallic iron derived from the blood contained in discarded, postpartum human placentas was created. This object concentrates the labor of dozens of births, of thousands of hours of fluid exchange, at the earliest meeting point between new and existing life. By bridging the fields of art, life sciences and metallurgy, the work shows in an unconventional way the fundamental interconnections between elements of the earth and the human body.