

Probing the Skin

*Cultural Representations
of Our Contact Zone*

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VENTRICULUS:
RESIDUE OF SUBJECTIVITY

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The following article describes the process of creating the collaborative video artwork, *Ventriculus*, as a method to conceptually explore the permeable membranes of skin and eye/camera lens. Employing the image of the wound as literal and metaphoric entrance point to explore intersubjectivity is useful and has historic precedent which is especially prevalent in the visual arts. The camera lens can be used as metaphor and tool to underscore the wound image's capacity to instigate empathy.

The video project began with tactile and material investigations in cast glass and handmade paper—two materials that mimic qualities of skin. These surfaces were manipulated to evoke the qualities of a wounded surface. Cast glass objects were used as containers for water and as instruments to project and refract light onto a paper textile, which was then translated via recording through a video camera lens. Using projection as a presentation method and producing the aural soundtrack required these handmade materials to perform their tactility for the camera, introducing a level of ambiguity to the origin of the image.

This ambiguity frees the image from a strictly visual representation, allowing an experience that relies as much on aural, tactile, and movement qualities as it does on visual encounter. Expanding the experience from the limitations of representation that are dictated by both visual image and language invites the viewer to explore an imaginative space that is created through embodied experience. The resulting artwork leads to reflection on the sensual qualities of skin and meditation on skin's relationship to trauma, knowledge, metamorphosis, and residue. Colour stills from the film are included for the reader's reference and are located in the centerfold. The black and white images that accompany this writing are photographic companions to the film project.

Film stills from *Ventriculus*, 2013
JE Baker and Marie Bannerot McInerney
10:18





The Tactile Wound

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire. (Barthes, "Talking" 73)

Skin is the body's largest interface with the material world. Skins protect from pathogens, regulate body temperature, store water, and prevent water evaporation from washing away essential nutrients. The nerve endings contained within skin function to provide sensation and react to temperature and pressure in order to warn us when the physical boundaries of our body are being treated with extreme conditions. Though they are protective in many ways, skins are necessarily permeable. Skins absorb, skins secrete. Skins are used to feel.

Skins hold us together. Skins stretch with growth and with motion. Skins stay wrapped tightly around internal structures. When the skin is cut or torn, it is widened by this tension. There is a break: the wound.

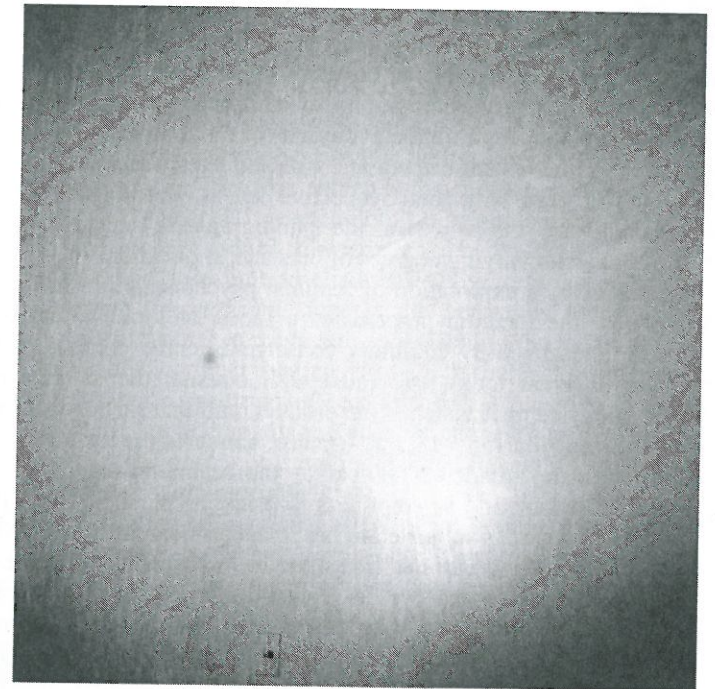


Fig. 1: *Tabula Rasa*, photograph, 2013

A wound is an indicator of trauma, breaching a boundary. It is text on the body, language to be heard. A wound is most remarkable for its ability to transpose suffering with such ease. Artists have exploited the image of the wound for centuries as a means to communicate the collective horror of corporeal puncture. The wound projects inward as well as outward, affecting both the wounded and the onlooker. Some of the most prominent iconography in Western art history is the depiction of Christ's wounds. The five holy wounds of Christ act as *memento mori*, alluding to the transitory nature of mortal existence. The dual directionality of the wound is reflected in the significance of Christ's wounds as fountains of mercy, grace, pity, and comfort as well as representations of suffering and death. Christ's wounds are his most powerful illustration of sacrifice because they offer empathy in addition to horror.

When conjuring the image of a wound, it often appears circular: a pin prick, a puncture, a bullet hole, stigmata. This circular association links the wound to the openings of the eye and the photographic lens. The wound and the eye both allow the world to enter the body through this opening. As the world enters our eye as light, we subjectively apply meaning to what we see. Similarly, the photographer uses the lens to build meaning. The development of photography as an art form has established many sub-genres, from documentary photography to landscape photography, from portraiture to surveillance, from the evolutions of motion picture cinema to the democracy of the instant camera and cell phone camera, all indicating a certain type of gaze with their respective lenses. Since its invention, artists have adopted the voice of the photographer's lens to present moments in time with varying degrees of bias and implication.

In Laura Mulvey's exploration of feminist psychoanalytic film theory she details how the medium perpetuates a mode of looking, based on desire that is determined by culturally contingent gender constructs. She defines three different looks associated with cinema: the camera as it records, the audience as it watches the product, and that of the characters within the screen illusion (18). A (male) gendered spectator's gaze delivers the (female) gendered subject to the realm of objecthood by seeing her as male lack and an emptiness to place his meaning onto (ibid. 6-18). "Woman's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound" (ibid. 6). Mulvey outlines two strategies of viewing pleasure: the first uses the performer as an object of sexual stimulation through sight (scopophilia), and the second comes from identification with the image seen. The latter's projection of narcissistic identification in psychoanalytic terms is linked to language through desire, and therefore linked directly to the trauma of the castration complex. In a cinematic setting, the spectator

projects repressed desires onto the performer through looking, and the pleasure of the look contains an inherent threat (ibid. 10). Cultural gender roles have developed a mode of filmmaking which has, in turn, continued to influence cultural understanding through its prominent status as art and entertainment medium.

According to this theory, the origin of the desire of the gaze is one occupied with ownership. The unequal power relationship between viewer and viewed, by way of the gendered lens, exaggerates the objectifying nature of the gaze. The change from subject to object is defined by the look and amplified by the lens. In his explorations of photography, Roland Barthes describes our notion of being "taken" when we are being photographed, our loss of subjectivity as we become an object in the camera's eye (*Camera Lucida* 9-10). People have long held superstition that the camera will steal one's soul, evidence of the anxiety that emerges during the act of being photographed. With the click of the shutter, the death of the self occurs to offer the camera, and by extension, the viewer of the photograph, a moment that once belonged to the subject of the photograph. The moment becomes distilled, co-authored by the photographer, the subject, and the viewer, presenting a portrait of collective subjectivity rather than individual selfhood.

Still, we are drawn to the photographic image. In his quest to understand why some photographic images are exceptionally personally evocative, Barthes details two terms that define a particular duality present in some photographs. The first, which is the *studium*, denotes the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph based on the imagery provided (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 25-27). The *studium* is informational and does little to elicit an emotive response. The second of Barthes' terms, the *punctum*, denotes the personally touching, possibly wounding detail that takes the breath away (ibid.). The *punctum* provides a means to establish a direct relationship with the subject of the photograph. Barthes describes a spectrum of reactions to the *punctum* in the viewer, from a cathartic act of empathy to a pain that impedes an extended look. In this he reveals the poetry of the photographic image: its ability to offer a private encounter with intersubjectivity.

As it mimics the bidirectional affect of the wound, the *punctum* of the photographic image has heavily influenced a contemporary understanding of memory. In an age when photography has become a universal language, we catalogue, remember, and relate through the captured image. Photography seizes what can be witnessed and preserves moments of vision and perception. Photography naturalizes socially structured meanings

and is inherently indexical. Photographs hold experience and memory the way skins hold scars.

In her treatise on postmemory, Marianne Hirsch cites the photographic image as critical to the phenomenon of postmemory. Hirsch defines postmemory as the powerful relationship a second generation has with traumatic events and experience that preceded their births. This relationship is so resonant that this second generation establishes memories of their own despite not having been first-hand witnesses. It is a contemporary reliance on photography as a means to knowledge that makes the photographic image a primary medium of "transgenerational transmission of trauma" that generates postmemory (Hirsch 107). A photograph is the indexical link that joins an image to its subject. Barthes calls this link the "umbilical cord" made of light. Our connection to the past through the photographic image is not mediated by recall, claims Hirsch, but by the embodied acts of "imaginative investment, projection, and creation." She posits that photography "can appear to solidify the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need, desire, and narrative projection" (ibid. 107). It is this imaginative projection, or the *punctum*, that allows the photographic image to reach out and to touch.

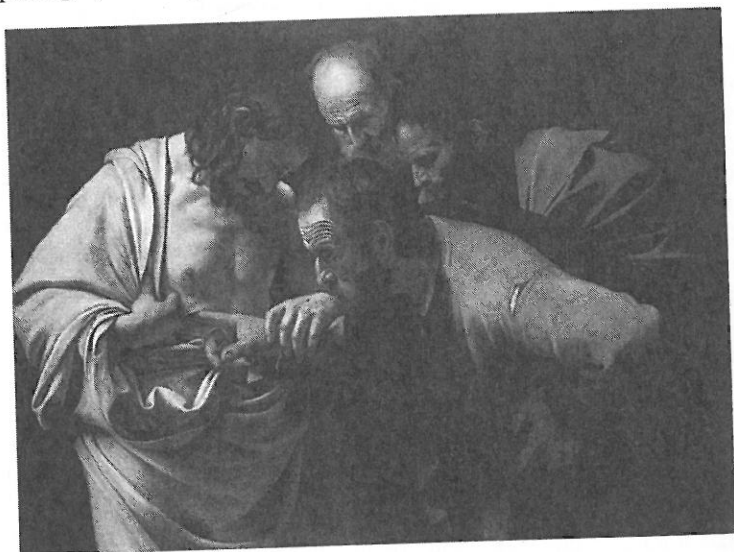


Fig. 2: Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, oil on canvas, 1601-02.

In Christian iconography, St. Thomas cannot accept the truth of resurrection until he can touch Christ's wounds. "But he [Thomas] said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (*King James Bible*, John 20:25). To see is to know, and Thomas's recognition was contingent on seeing Christ's wounds. Further, Thomas needed to touch the wound to be fully convinced. At times it is not enough to only see. Being touched awakens the desire to touch. The desire to touch and be touched is the desire to know and be known. The desire that is incited by the image of the wound might be the desire for a more tactile bodily experience: the desire to empathize and experience the embodiment of another's contemplated pain. Stigmatic empathy might emerge from the fragility of sentience, from being able to feel what we see.

Immaterial Touch

The light of the body is the eye. Therefore, if thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. (*King James Bible*, Matt. 6:22)

Photography is the recording of light. Through the aperture (a wound) light enters the camera and registers an image. A small opening of light offers a greater depth of field, where a larger opening that lets in more light decreases diffraction blur, creating a sharper captured image. More light allows for more clarity. A lens, the permeable membrane that covers the aperture wound, is used to focus this reflected light in order to create a new image. The photographic process mimics the way we see. We see by way of light entering the eye (another permeable membrane). If 'to see is to know' then light is a signifier of knowledge.

Light is also a signifier of time. Light speaks of the passing day, illustrating a simple narrative of morning changing into night. The duration of time is shown through shadows moving across the sundial as the sun moves across the sky. Light affects the body's circadian rhythms, and many rituals that human beings and animals practice are scheduled in concert with how light emerges and disappears.

Time is inherent to the processing of photographic film. A photograph begins as a latent image captured by the camera and transforms into a final image to be viewed as printed or projected. If the undeveloped image is exposed to light, it will disappear. The photographic image has a life cycle, and the structure of its metamorphosis is manipulated by light. When an image is captured by leaving the shutter of the camera open for

long periods of time, points of light become lines. Light allows one to trace a chronology of an instant to an infinity.

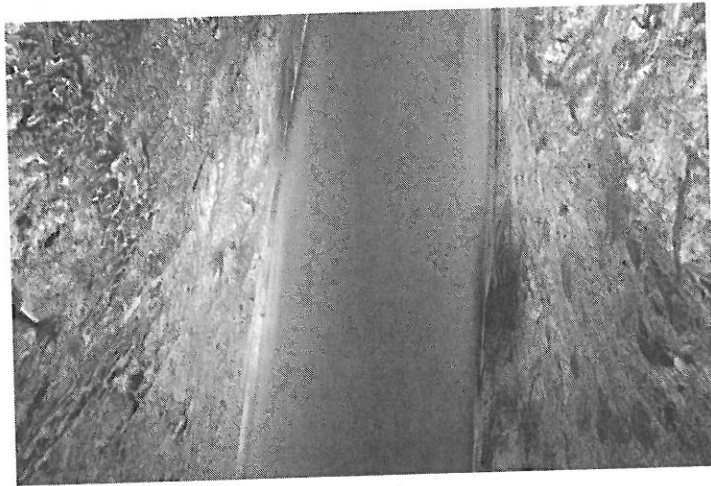


Fig. 3: *Castor and Pollox*, photograph, 2013.

The camera obscura projection device, which mimics human ocular activity, turns a perfectly reproduced image upside down. The projection of light can transpose meaning and redefine origin. The liminality between where light is emitted and where and what light ends up being becomes subject. Like water, light is fugitive. It seeps, seeking to be contained. Light moves, it explores, and it connects. Light creates space.

A series of projected images of light, moving at a particular speed tricks the eye into seeing a continuously moving image. The light of the projected image in a darkened room separates a viewing audience from an image. The darkness separates the audience from each other. Displacing itself from surface to surface, projected light can be mitigated through material. An image can be bent and displaced by projecting onto a moving or uneven surface or by interrupting the projection with all kinds of materials. Light can be strengthened by its own reflection. A new space can be created by projecting a gleam that infringes, ascribes, and imposes its qualities upon a surface of alterity. Light spills, tracing edges and revealing contents. Light touches selectively, leaving shadows behind. The activity of our vision creating boundaries of absence and presence in the shadows and light and the acts of leaking and draining that the projected light performs suggest boundary-crossing. This allows the observer of

light to pass from the semiotic to the symbolic and invites participation in liminal shifts of perception.

Film, as a medium of light, permits one to play with the dimension of time, through narrative, and with the dimension of space, through framing. The language of film allows one to create a gaze, a world, and an object, and to produce an illusion that plays with the narrative of desire (Mulvey 17). By freeing the look of the camera into the materiality of time and space, one can begin to alter the look of the audience and redirect a passive gaze to one that is active in a way that does not possess (ibid. 18). Saint Thomas recognized the limitations of vision/seeing as knowledge. He needed to touch. Looking is what establishes the "I" to what the eye sees. Introducing other means of encounter, through other senses, invites a viewer to experience an image without the same subject/object dichotomy. Engaging other senses keeps the body in contact with the world and makes the body an extension of the world around it. The distancing of the look is eroded and "the non-representation aspect of sound/the acoustic, touch and movement directs attention to what is directly fluid and less alienating (in relation to the external world and to other bodies)" (Venn 154-55).

The evocation of surface through projected light and illusion rather than straightforward tactile representation has the potential to create an empathic response in the viewer that is powerful and wounding. Barthes's "umbilical cord of light" (the connection between subject and image) and his *punctum* (the connection between subject as image and viewer) emphasises the distance between body and desire and how that distance might be filled with light. This mimics skin's own relationship to light in how it demonstrates a transparency that connects the internal to the external. This project asks whether a membrane of light can mediate a metamorphosis and explore the embodied experience of empathy and subjectivity. It explores how one might begin to project the tactility of fibre onto other media, explore the tactility of sound, and translate the experience of a touchable surface using a camera lens.

Methodology

The hollow body is an oubliette. Once there are hooks and crannies where memories and experiences can stick, the wall can become encrusted, filling the hollow neck so that sooner or later it becomes obstructed. The oubliette is thus filled with memories and experiences. (Van Loo 18)

The creation of the film *Ventriculus* is a documentation of a translation from tactile surface to projected illusionary space. The project is a

collaborative examination of containment and boundary using the conceptual framework of skin. It is a multi-platform, interdisciplinary project that was born from discussions of the relationships and limitations of sensual experiences as both maker and audience. This dialogue led to material and process explorations using glass, fibre, light, and sound.

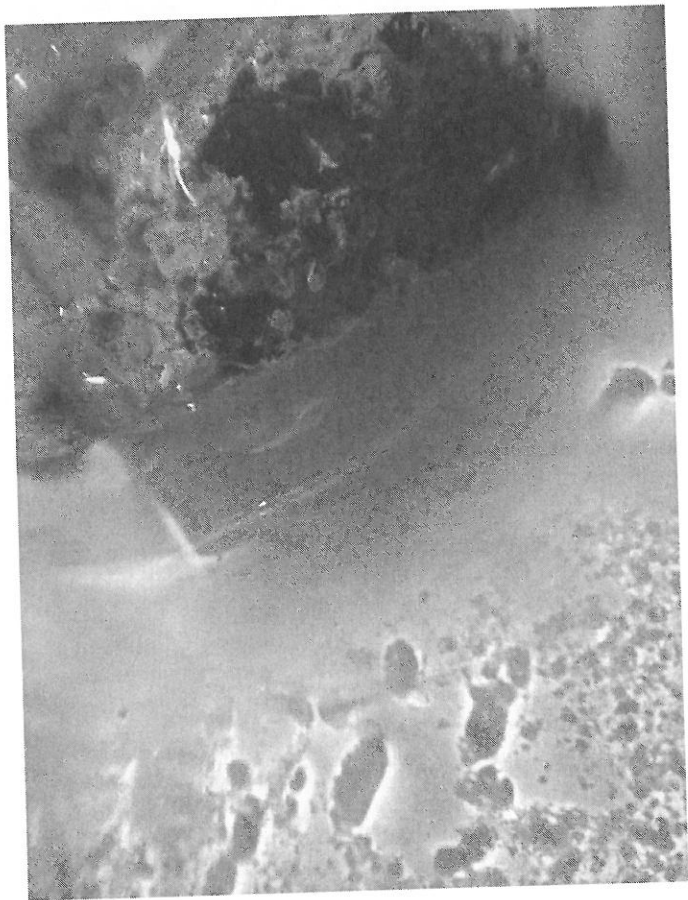


Fig. 4: *Chatoyance*, photograph, 2013.

Engaging cast glasswork with wax, metal, and fibre allowed material production methods to mimic skin and its functions by exploiting temperature and containment. The artists used their own bodies in sand casting by forging impressions in sand to create absences to pour molten

glass into. By melting microcrystalline wax, pouring it into a plaster mould, and rolling the wax around the inside, a slight skin of wax created a form that varied between opaque and translucent. Cutting sheets of glass to cover objects like antler, bone, and limestone and melting it around these objects created strange new forms with dimpled, transparent skins. Employing a high temperature kiln for various methods of structure forming such as slumping, burnout, and crucible drip casting allowed the creation of several types of glass bodies.

The effects of temperature on the materials was observed—most notably, the vibrant cobalt hue that was extracted from teeth after they were fired in the kiln and rendered too fragile to even touch. Water was used to mix inks and dyes to treat the materials and to make a paper textile for a projection surface. A giant sheet of paper (12 feet by 38 feet) was created by building a wooden frame, stretching mosquito netting over the frame, and using a mason hopper to spray paper pulp over the netting. The abaca fibre paper sagged and stretched under the weight of the water in the pulp, drying to shrink in unpredictable ways. The paper tightened, wrinkled, and stretched like skin.



Fig. 5: Filming *Ventriculus*.

These metamorphic processes of creation, destruction, and re-creation guided by surface and temperature, yielded several fragmented, amorphous bodies and skins to explore in terms of presentation. The observation of environmental light passing through the cast glass surfaces prompted the exploration and manipulation of directed and projected light. Cast glass objects, projected light, and paper and plastic surfaces were used in concert to create shadow and movement. The cast shadows that were created by this manipulation are reminiscent of pocked skin and flowing water. The glass surfaces allowed light to pass through, but they also acted as a medium of reflection. Projection invited a transference of tactility.

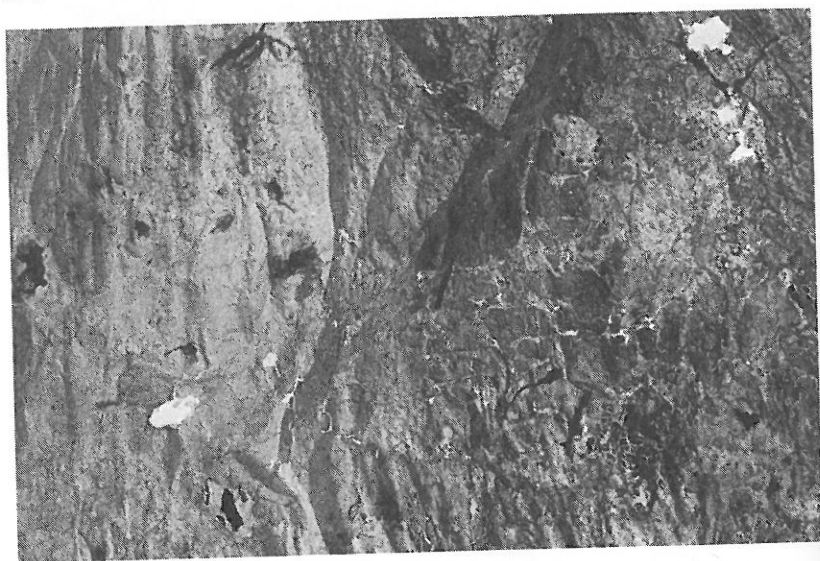


Fig. 6: *Light as Veil as Alluvium*, photograph, 2013.

The vast paper skin was staged as a site for light to permeate and interact with the smaller glass skins. The glass forms and an overhead projector became tools to manipulate the surface of the handmade paper skin, and a video camera captured the theatre. Manipulating scale and framing the different skins allowed for a multitude of understandings of the surface. The intimacy of some surfaces translated into bold landscapes. The landscapes became disorienting presentations of spatial relationships and offered possibilities to generate a soundtrack. The vibrations and tones that the different materials made as they were moved and manipulated were recorded with a small microphone and altered using digital software. The

sound of water against glass and moisture against skin was documented, capturing material interactions with the bodies' exteriors as well as their correspondent interiors.

Sound was used to evoke surface, light was used to touch and to demonstrate the transposition of meaning. Controlling, recording, and presenting the projection of light through materials created surfaces reminiscent of skin to act as conduits for reflection. The interfaces of glass, fibre, projection, lens, and screen in *Ventriculus* became an umbilical cord of light.

Results

Ventriculus is presented as a projection. The video fades from black to an intimate view of a wet, skin-like surface. The surface's origin is not defined, nor is it obviously interior or exterior in nature. Patches of light shimmer atop the ruddy organic form, and rhythmic movements pulsate slowly across (or beneath) the translucent material. The visuals are accompanied by subaqueous sounds consisting of low pops and muffled cracks.

The scene transitions into a brightly lit space and a sanguine, undulating membrane emerges. The membrane is a receptacle housing an unnamed amorphous entity, and the motions alternate between interior and exterior forms. The nature of the motion shifts between individual discrete gestures and movements in tandem. Melodic tones provide an audible backdrop as corporal breath reverberates as if submerged in water. The pock-marked membrane swells and retracts. Intermittently, the form expands to fill the frame, then retreats to the edge of the composition.

A piercing noise interrupts the calm as the form sharply draws upward. Frantic noises mirror agitated movements as the setting's point of view returns to the wet, skin-like surface. The colour is deeper, and the translucent sheen is more defined. The scene quietly evolves, taking a breath. The mood is momentarily still before erratic movement and staccato sounds disrupt the calm. Suddenly, the viewer is thrust back to the sanguine membrane, but the space is now tempered with volatile movement and darker tones. Staccato noises fuse with a cacophony of primordial resonance. The audio and video ultimately climax in a last gasp, and the screen fades into white. There is quiet.

Tintinnabular percussion gently invites the viewer into the final act. A translucent, reflective surface reveals a floating form. Time seems to have shifted. The mood is soft and calm, mirroring subdued tones and empty sounds. Peacefully, the video continues and echoes indicate an enclosed

space. Movement and time endure, disrupted twice by heavy metallic ringing. A dark shadow appears at the top of the frame and very slowly descends downward, encompassing the entire composition. As the screen returns to black the viewer is left with a quivering falsetto hum.

Conclusion

Poetry heals the reason inflicted by wounds. (Place, June 15, 2013)

The experience of viewing *Ventriculus* is one of watching materials perform their tactility for the camera, creating an ambiguous space for the viewer to reflect on their own sensual experience. The viewer is allowed an affective and intuitive encounter with materiality, as their imagination is called upon to conjure the actuality of a tactile experience. The use of texture in the creation of the sound and visual landscape links the viewer's imaginative experience to manifest surface, skin, weight, and gravity. An embodied sound that feels tangible accompanies a moving photographic image that documents a performative object.

For this project's purposes, the performative object is defined using the guidelines set forth by J. L. Austin's form of speech: the performative utterance. Austin describes a *performative utterance* or a *performative* as speech that instigates an action rather than simply reporting on it. For example, "I do" (as in marriage vows), "I promise," or "I bet." The performative is "an utterance that does not 'describe' or 'report' anything at all, the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, and is not 'true or false.' Usually the uttering of the words is an incident in the performance of an act, the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but usually the utterance is not the only thing necessary if the act is deemed performed" (Austin 5).

Performative objects are linked to ritual and metamorphosis. Ritual objects may be figurative or representational; however, their value lies in the actions they conjure rather than in their descriptive qualities. Rituals are acts requiring movement and repetition, not static symbols, and the objects that accompany the ritual act also reject a static representation. These objects indicate the action itself and work to change the state of presence. Ritual acts are ephemeral, existing in time, and, at some point, are over. Once the transmutation of states is completed, the residual objects of the ritual become remnants. Because the performative object's very existence is undeniably attached to a past or future act, the object can never be whole. It functions as a fragment, as residue charged with both presence and absence. The performative object's meaning is intertwined

with action, it introduces temporality and loss, it confuses subject/object relationships, and it is not an accurate representation of wholeness.

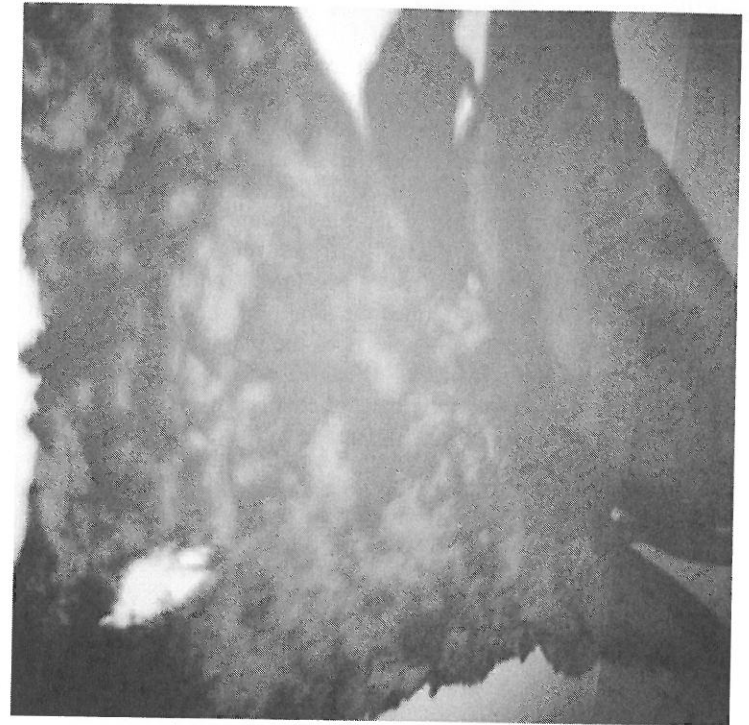


Fig. 7: *Shadow as Silt as Wing*, photograph, 2013.

Like Echo, whose body was obliterated to leave only her voice, the performative object is poetically present in direct opposition to what is absent. The sounds the objects in *Ventriculus* make mimic Echo's voice. They are disembodied calls brought forth by a desire so great it destroys all but a trace of subjectivity, leaving absence where the body once was.

Our connection to objects is rooted in their role as a symbol for our own psychological projection. In the performative object one finds a space to project what is missed, what lies within the distance between experience and memory. By recording the action of performative objects and presenting this photographic image to the viewer, *Ventriculus* makes projection bi-directional and emphasizes the past tense of the object's action and the present tense of the light's action. The photographic image

enables the viewer to undo the finality of the photographic take (Hirsch 115). The image is freed from a picture plane by light, and it advances to envelop the spectator. The revulsion one might experience when faced with the unknown interiority of a wound is mitigated by the lens, the light, and the screen, displacing time to recontextualize the image from a depiction of a wound to a journey by way of the wound.

Though the materials that are performing for the camera are not identifiable, the fact that there are materials in front of the camera is of consequence. Margaret Olin touches on this notion in her examination of Barthes' theory of the *punctum* when she claims that "what matters is displaced" (Olin 112). She posits that the relationship between the photographic image and the viewer is a "performative index" or an "index of identification." The viewer defines the image by their own desire, rather than by identifying the concrete subjects of the image that is taken (*ibid.*). Like Narcissus (the object of Echo's desire) who looks longingly at his reflection in the water rather than at his own skin, the viewer's introspective gaze is projected into the image of these residual materials.

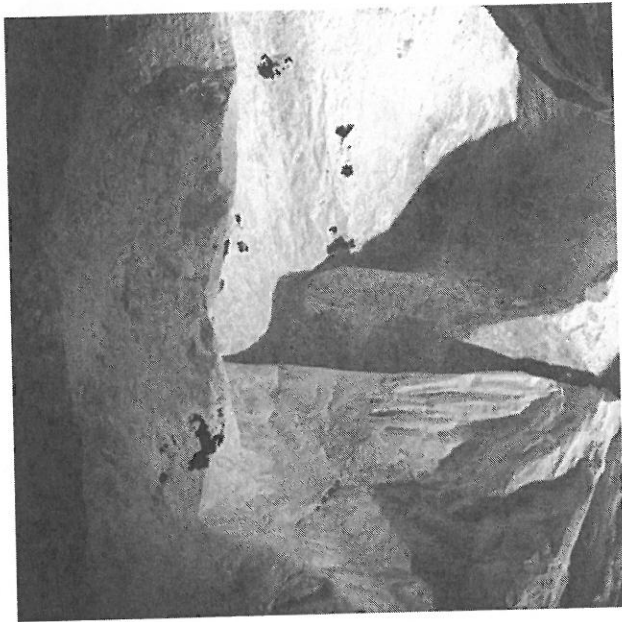


Fig. 8: *Skin as Sound as Loggia*, photograph, 2013.

The glass, fibre, water, light, and sound have become recorded performative objects: things that *have done* rather than things that *are*, and the viewer's role is to complete the cycle of identification through imaginative touch and empathic recognition. As the viewer's eye searches the shapes and chasms created by illuminated materials and cast shadows in *Ventriculus*, they are able to connect the porous boundaries of each material to the ways that our senses render our own bodies borderless and fluid. The ears, the eyes, and the skin allow the boundaries of the body to be punctured with sensual experience. The viewer is enveloped in the visual experience, becomes momentarily disoriented, and relocates in a reflection back to the body through vibration and light. The wave of desire changes direction through the projected image, lingers for a moment in the liminality of the immaterial, and returns to render the desirer as the desired.

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