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Unhomely

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by

Catherine Katsafouros

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The objective of this thesis is to examine the ontology of my artwork and contextualize it within the framework of trauma, horror and feminism. My artwork focuses on the effects of internalized violence on cognitive and bodily processes, which manifest as haunting and repetition. In my artistic production, I use the unconscious methodologically, and I rely on pattern emergence and analysis to refine my works conceptually. In this thesis: I relate visual and conceptual aspects of my MFA Thesis Exhibition artworks to the traits of trauma most relevant to my work, namely haunting and repetition; I outline the patterns that emerge from my artworks aesthetically and conceptually; I contextualize my artwork within feminist, gothic and art historical frameworks.

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unhomely

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,

One need not be a house;

The brain has corridors surpassing

Material place.

Emily Dickinson (c. 1863)

Introduction

In her book *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Elizabeth A. Wilson revisits texts which have long been contested from feminist theorists as biologically reductionist, in order to explore the possibilities of valuable knowledge within them, and the “potential to expand our theories of the body in important, innovative, and sometimes exhilarating ways.” She poses questions regarding what new modes of embodiment, for example, can become legible when biological reductionism is tolerated and explored (Wilson 3).

In a methodological approach similar to Wilson’s, I would like to put aside the predominant feminist views on horror, which preclude it from further examination, in order to productively explore the genre of horror as a viable realm for feminist potential, within the context of artistic inquiry, thought and production. I wish to carve a space for further exploration of this genre for possibilities of feminist politics, empowerment, and justice. As Wilson warns: “if we avert our eyes too quickly,” we may “miss out (on something) noteworthy” (Wilson 12).

This thesis expands on the concepts explored within my artwork, as they relate to violence and the interference of internalized trauma on cognitive and bodily processes. I am specifically interested in the internalization of chronic emotional violence that takes place in the domestic sphere, and how the resulting trauma manifests as haunting and repetition. I am using the lens of trauma — its mechanism and manifestations — as a framework for the analysis of my artwork, which I wish to locate at the intersection (or at the interstices) of art, horror and feminism, as a political act.

My graduate work¹ has progressively moved away from preoccupation with the actor of violence, the violent event, and the immediate affective response or condition. In my thesis work, the time and space of my focus is agnostic of the original causal event. I am interested in what has remained: the evidence of the past in the present that interferes with human cognitive and anatomical processes.

The perspective and writing style employed in this thesis reflect the fact that I, the artist, am also an observer and examiner of my work. My methodology for artistic production involves the unconscious in the initial stages of making, followed by a diagnostic process to determine the conceptual foundation of a single piece or of a body of work. Once I locate the conceptual threads of my work, I further refine it in order to align subject matter, aesthetic choices and concept.

This methodological approach flows from the way I perceive my artwork and its genesis. I perceive my unconscious thought as a video sequence — as a series of frames stitched together. I consider the visuals I produce as mental images extracted from that sequence. I interpret my process of image making as analogous to MRI tomography, if it were able to capture distinct instances of unconscious thought. The inability to know the why behind a visualized instance of my unconscious thought requires the methodological operation outlined above.

With the employment of this methodological approach and overall assessment of the evolution of my artwork, I have been able to identify a few key concepts that were consistently present. Others became increasingly absent — an absence which was also informative.

¹ The terms *work* and *artwork* will be used interchangeably.

These concepts, which anchored my thesis research, insistently appeared in trauma theory, in the subgenre of supernatural horror as a feminist act/art, as well as in scientific literature regarding trauma: haunting and repetition, memory, knowing and not knowing, as well as the notions of the uncanny and the interstitial. In the chapters that follow, I have chosen to discuss the subset of these concepts that are most meaningful and relevant to my work.

In Chapter 1, I relate the ontology of my work to the most prominent trauma traits that my work embodies: haunting and repetition. In Chapter 2, I outline the primary ideas and techniques that emerge as unconscious patterns among my works. Throughout this thesis, I isolate specific aspects of the works and relate them to each of these ideas in an effort to clearly draw these relationships, though I consider all of these artworks to be interrelated conceptually and materially. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I contextualize my artistic production within feminist, gothic and art historical frameworks.

For reference, I have included documentation images from the 2015 MFA Thesis Exhibition, as well as of earlier pieces. My MFA Thesis Exhibition works include three untitled video installations and sound delivered via wireless headphones, all of which were completed in 2015. For the purposes of reference and distinction within this paper, I refer to the video installations as *Untitled (drain)*, *Untitled (needle)*, and *Untitled (scissors)*.

Chapter 1: Repetition and Haunting

repetition

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman quotes Richard Rhodes' description on how trauma reappears in his work, as it relates to his survival of severe childhood abuse: "Each of my books felt different to write. Each tells a different story Yet I see that they're all repetitions [...] Repetition is the mute language of the abused child. I'm not surprised to find it expressed in the structure of my work at wavelengths too long to be articulated, like the resonances of a temple drum that aren't heard so much as felt in the heart's cavity." (Herman 110-111) In *Untitled (drain)*, this sort of cavity is depicted at the center of the metallic surface (see fig. 1). This oozing wound of the domestic (or is it an autopsy table?) sink is symbolic of the psychic and of the anatomical core (heart) described by Rhodes.

The oozing repeats and never clears: Freud "wonders at the uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves" (Caruth 1). The resonances of the 'drum' which were originally poured into the human core (drain) are now reversing and repeating that rhythm outwards, in a continuous attempt to expel disease and blood — both somatic (red) and psychic (black). Because "in trauma, the outside has gone inside without any mediation" — that is, the repetition can be understood as the "absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way." (Caruth 59)



Fig. 1 *Untitled (drain)*, video projection, aluminum sheet, 4 x 7.11 feet, 2015.

In Caruth's analysis of Freud, Duras and Lacan, "The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives" emerges "as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter (with death), or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" Freud locates the causes of repetition compulsion in the paradoxical relationship between survival and consciousness. "For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the thread to one's own life. It is because the mind cannot confront the

possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living.” (Caruth 62)

The repetition of the looping video is furthered by the material repetition of the metallic surfaces: the video projections of the sink in *Untitled (drain)* and of the scissors in *Untitled (scissors)* onto their corresponding aluminum sheet and aluminum screens (see fig. 2). Additionally, repetition is used to multiply the effect of light used in these pieces.



Fig. 2 *Untitled (scissors)*, video projection, eight aluminum screens, 6 x 8 feet, 2015.

haunting

The projection luminance combined with the reflectivity of the substrates — aluminum sheet in *Untitled (drain)* and aluminum screens in *Untitled (scissors)* — animate the depicted metallic objects and reinforce the notions of haunting and of the ethereal in the works. The inherent ethereal nature of light and the image it produces through projection that flickers at a discernible frequency, appearing and disappearing within fractions of a second, evokes an apparitional presence. This presence allows for the image to present itself through light that appears as a phantom – a presence that is so volatile it could disappear at any moment — so ephemeral, that when it disappears, there is no evidence of it having been there at all. For this reason, the use of light and reflectivity in these works further implicates the lack of physical evidence of emotional trauma, despite its persistent and hauntingly perpetual presence.

The act of haunting “displaces us in those places where we feel most secure, most notably in our homes, in the domestic scene.” For Wolfreys “haunting is nothing other than the destabilization of the domestic scene, as that place where we apparently confirm our identity, our sense of being, where we feel most at home with ourselves” (Wolfreys 5). My MFA Thesis Exhibition works present objects from the domestic scene (sink, scissors, needle) that relate to domestic tasks assigned to female roles: cleaning, sewing and embroidery (see fig. 3-4).



Fig. 3 *Untitled (needle)*, detail, 2015.

Continuing with the idea of the home as the place of haunting, Wolfreys discusses the Freudian notion of the uncanny, “the slippage of, and within, the German *unheimlich*, meaning literally ‘unhomely’.” He continues to explain that “for Freud, that which is unhomely emerges in the homely. Haunting cannot take place without the possibility of its internal eruption and interruption within and as a condition of a familiar, everyday place and space.” (Wolfreys, 5)

The unhomeliness of the drain, scissors and needle in my video installations also comes from their dual nature not only as practical tools within the home, but also as objects of violence, and more so as convenient objects/markers of violence within the home. They also offer a sense of the uncanny in that the familiar objects and vignettes are unfamiliarly scaled and focused on, creating tension between attraction and repulsion. In addition to the paradox of the familiar minute confronting the viewer from a larger than human scale, the perpetual motion of the images lacking human action and presence adds to the sense of horror. It is this sense of horror, and the highly aestheticized object representations, that add up to an alluring yet repulsive

encounter. Aside from cognitive dissonant moments delivering a sense of the uncanny, my work claims Freud's inclusion of "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" as instances of the uncanny (Freud 132).



Fig. 4 *Untitled (needle)*, video, three 50-inch monitors, 2015.

Chapter 2: Unconscious Patterns

medical influence

My artistic practice and resulting images reflect my interest in the domestic space as a place of violence, and the place of medical autopsy as the functional yet cold setting for examination of this violence and its effects. The drain, scissors and needle appearing in the MFA Thesis Exhibition were chosen as objects from the intersection of the domestic and the medical spaces.

My art making process reminds of a post mortem examination. It is similar to an autopsy: cutting up, slicing, dismembering of the self and the facts, for the purposes of analysis and the unveiling of truth. I am intrigued by the process of examination of what remains once the story is over — by the story told by absence — by the haunting left at the place of the event, whether that place is physical or mental.

In addition to the subject matter relating to medical settings, structural aspects of my MFA Thesis Exhibition works are also referential of the medical space: the suspended, equidistant screens of *Untitled (scissors)* are an abstract representation of MRI brain slices. The tv screens of *Untitled (needle)* are referential of medical monitoring displays, while the background of the depicted moving image resembles an x ray image. Additionally, the cold metal objects and surfaces in all three works materially relate to the cold, sterile, stainless steel surfaces used in medical labs and especially in surgical and autopsy rooms.

In contextualizing my preoccupation with medical spaces and processes, I am including documentation of a representative piece, *Untitled (deconstructed shoe)*, which exemplifies my art process preceding the works of the MFA Thesis Exhibition (see fig. 5). In this 2014 piece, I am motivated by the need to disentangle and itemize, analyze and decode the strands that make up a dysfunctional system. My process of deconstruction is followed by careful organization and display of the pieces, in a form of cataloging. This systematic deconstructive process, combined with the reliving of trauma as a form of death in life, signifies a type of premortem examination.



Fig. 5 *Untitled (deconstructed shoe)*, deconstructed shoe, 4 x 2.5 feet, 2014.

This process is an essential stage for examination, analysis and diagnosis. The experience of reliving trauma, complicated by the entanglement of cognition, emotion and physiology, as well as by the incomprehensible information offered by faded memory, requires intensive analytical process in order to produce answers. These answers are essential for identifying the source of symptoms and potentially expelling their effects. This process also implicates the ‘repetition compulsion’ of victims of trauma, which as described by Freud in his 1914 ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’: the individual “does not remember anything of what [they have] forgotten and repressed, [they act] it out, without, of course, knowing that [they are] repeating it.” (Freud 150) They redefine themselves in a way that their identity and their mind/body system incorporate the traumatic experience. By taking the pieces of the object apart, pinning these to the wall, or lining them up on a table, I also attempt to freeze the pattern of repetition triggered by trauma.

As outlined in the introduction of this study, my artistic process visualizes instances of my unconscious thought, similar to what MRI tomography would offer, if it were able to capture the ethereal. The structural aspects of *Untitled (scissors)* reflect this relationship, as the imaging on the aluminum screens hanging in parallel add up to a physical representation of brain slices, while also emulating the imprints of trauma in the psychic and anatomical dimensions of the brain (see fig. 6). Additionally, the video projection in *Untitled (scissors)* is captured onto the translucent screens as if by supernatural means, reifying the spectral nature of my mental images, and of trauma and memory as my subject.



Fig. 6 *Untitled (scissors)*, video projection, eight aluminum screens, 6 x 8 feet, 2015.

absence of body

While my early works revolved around the human body as an expression of the embodiment of trauma, my recent work has been persistently void of the human body. This absence is important in disassociating both the perpetrator of violence as well as the victim from the work, in an attempt to denote the distant temporality of the work from the violent event, and from the immediate affective response to the event. Furthermore, it is important that the work represents/evokes the internal as an anatomical, psychological and cognitive system, and the

absence of the body supports this reading. This absence also reflects the lack of concrete scientific evidence relating to: the specificity of emotional trauma on the brain, psyche and body; the mind/body entanglement; the perpetuation of trauma within the mind/body system; cases of emotional violence. Lastly, the absence of the human body in these works echoes the notion of haunting which is characteristic of the nature of trauma: “A disappearance is real only when it is apparitional. 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. The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening.” (Gordon 63)

noise

Untitled (needle), displays the pendulum-like swinging movement of a needle on three monitors, with the three instances of the movement lacking synchronization. It emphasizes the passage of time, with the uncanny perpetual motion, repeating, looping, without the intervening presence of an actor. The moving image gives the sense of an internal systemic scene, implying not only the psychologically haunting presence of trauma, but also an anatomical bodily cavity, as seen in an x ray view, haunted by the violence-evoking presence of the swinging needle.

While introducing unsettling/horror elements, this work is not meant to deliver a visceral response in the viewer — it is rather meant to evoke the cold and detached numbness of trauma

of the distant past, failed by memory and by cognitive comprehension. It is meditative and even peaceful — senses into which even the discomfort of anxiety, depression, pain and dysfunction can turn. Pain can not only be experienced as pleasure after extensive exposure, but its constant presence and persistence can fade into a state of being perceived as background noise. As noise, it thus blends in with the operations of mind and body, until their host becomes once again aware of its draining, painfully invasive, parasitic and persistent presence.

The sound component of my MFA Thesis Exhibition is meant to offer a sonic representation of the noise dimensionality of trauma. Composed of abstract recordings of sound thematically related to the visual objects; mixed with sonified imagery from the visual works; and post-processing of these sound elements, the audio is intended to become an additional sensory incarnation of trauma as meditative, yet parasitic, noise — an effect of trauma in the mind/body system. While a psychologically interpretive expression, the audio piece is also meant to evoke sounds of the anatomical internal: it is cyclical, hoarse and rhythmic, fitting to what is visualized in *Untitled (needle)* as the metaphoric chamber in which the sound has been captured.

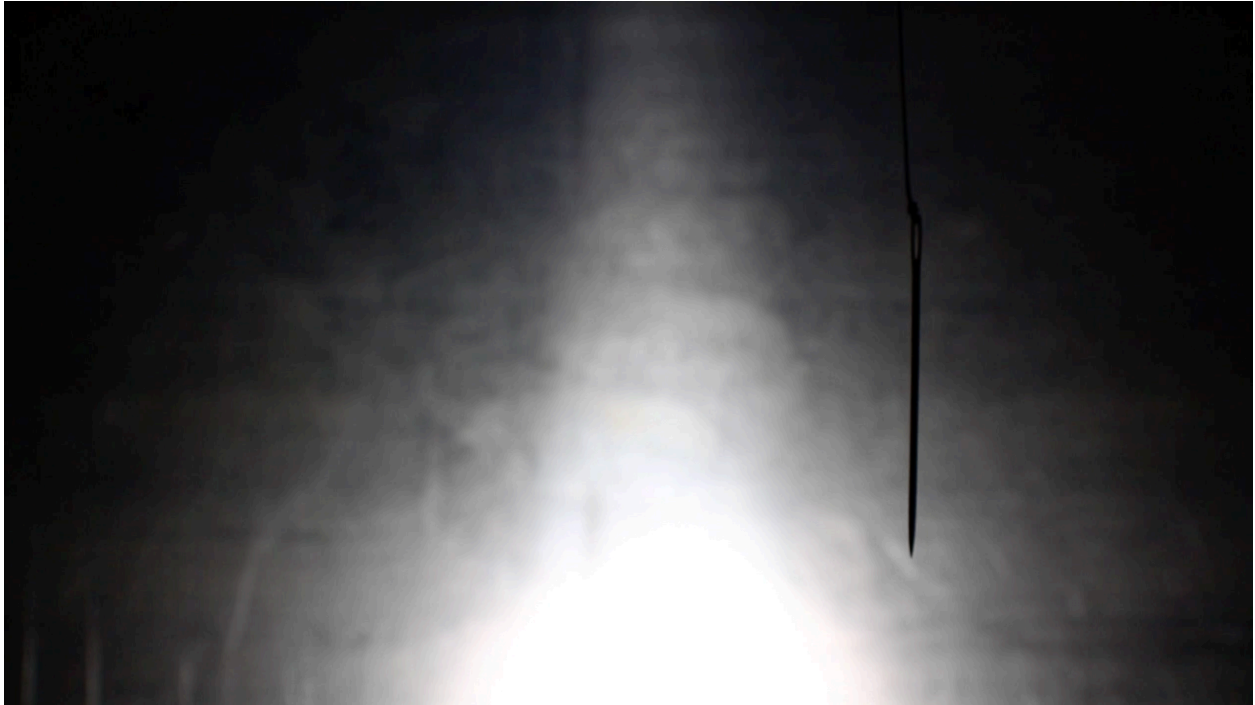


Fig. 7 Video still from *Untitled (needle)*, 2015.

The viewer is encouraged to listen to the sound by wearing wireless headphones while exploring the video installations within the space. The act of wearing headphones isolates the viewer from their surrounding sounds, and brings them to a solitary space. They are intended to take on the role of the examiner, listening and investigating the works, as they attempt to piece a narrative together.

cognitive distortions

Anxiety and depression are prevalent in the symptomatology of victims of trauma. While the focus when discussing these conditions is concentrated on affect, I find their cognitive effects —

cognitive distortions specifically — most compelling, and essential in the analysis of my work. Cognitive distortions are automatic thought patterns, affecting one's processing of external and internal data. As a result, these patterns of thought process result in skewed perceptions of reality. I will specifically focus on two cognitive distortions, which I find pertinent to my process and resulting visuals: Dichotomous/Black-and-White Thinking, and Selective Abstraction.

In dichotomous/black-and-white thinking, one tends to “view all experiences as fitting into one of two categories”, black and white, as opposed to one being able to place them “along a continuum.” (Beck et al., 1979; Burns, 1980, 1989, 1999; Freeman & DeWolf, 1992.) One aspect of my visual vocabulary reflects this distortion literally, as my work is predominantly rendered in black and white color. *Untitled (scissors)* exemplifies this consistent aspect of my visual language, which mimics the operation of this type of distortion: the continuum between the polar extremes of black and white color values are removed, yielding a highly contrasted black and white image.

The second cognitive distortion, selective abstraction, is defined as “The process of exclusively focusing on one negative aspect or detail of a situation, magnifying the importance of that detail, thereby casting the whole situation in a negative context.” (Beck et al., 1979; Burns, 1980, 1989, 1999) *Untitled (drain)* exemplifies how I visually and conceptually frame my subjects: an isolated minute repulsive detail of a domestic setting, has been magnified in importance and carries symbolic significance of violent and traumatizing past narratives.

Cognitive distortions as a result of trauma constitute an important mechanism for the takeover of cognitive processes, shifting and redefining these processes so that the dysfunction becomes part

of the mind/body system, while offering the ground for the repetition of trauma even after the source of violence is no longer present, or even remembered, or known. The repetition is established as distorted thought impacts affect, and affect validates the distorted perception of reality, fueling the continuation of this closed feedback loop. Every iteration of new input being processed yields skewed data as a result of this dysfunction.

mind/body entanglement

While trauma exists as a result of a violent event, as the event becomes more distant in measure of time, it would be a reasonable assumption that its effects would decay proportionally. Yet, the nature of trauma ensures its ongoing presence and function, as it parasitically takes over the operational system of its host.

Dr. Aaron Beck, who laid the scientific and theoretical ground of cognitive behavioral therapy by unveiling the cognitive distortion process as a result of anxiety and depression, remarked that the distinguishing characteristic of depressed patients in his studies is that they consistently showed a “*systematic error; viz, a bias against themselves.*” (Beck) I wish to expand this clause to a ‘systematic and systemic error’ to encapsulate not only that the dysfunction repeats, but that it has become part of the system, cognitive, psychic and bodily: "the nervous system extends well beyond the skull, and as it so travels through the body it takes the psyche with it" (Wilson 47). Due to the lack of physical/scientific evidence of this dysfunction within the mind/body system, despite its persistent presence and perpetual, systematic nature, I wish to mark this as a haunting.

Chapter 3: Context

feminism & the gothic

I can locate the source of my violent past in patriarchal structures that were misogynist, a fact that not only enabled the emotional abuse to take place, but that also disabled my surrounding support system from intervention in this process.

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by the genre of horror, which, while contested by feminists as a patriarchal product, I have interpreted as a means of empowerment. In the process of being subjected to violence daily for years, with the protective figures being either the cause, or the silent witness, there was no other perceived escape than the idea of death. The idea of death as escape offered not only solace and feelings of pleasure — it was a form of justice, freedom and agency.

Through the film *The Ring* (2002), I became aware of the notion of *onryō*, a Japanese folklore term referring to the spirit of wronged women, returning to the world of the living for vengeance. The validation of my personal fantasies through this film, and through Japanese cultural references of *onryō*, was an important moment for my artistic identity and my later definitions as a feminist artist. As a feminist artist, I embrace the fantastical possibilities for justice and agency through death and haunting, as a feminist politics within the realm of art as politics.

To further establish the aspects of horror in my artwork as a feminist act, I will turn to the gothic tradition of 19th and early 20th century literature produced by female writers, as well as the

notion of the interstitial in an analysis of art-horror as it relates to film and in the female gothic. Lastly, I will relate some important aspects of my work with the work of contemporary female artists who operate along similar lines.

In his book *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women*, Jeffrey Weinstock discusses the authorship of supernatural fiction by mostly unacknowledged female writers of the 19th and early 20th century as an essentially feminist tradition. More specifically, he identifies these ghostly conventions in their works as a means for them to ‘interrogate the violence resulting from patriarchal misogyny.’ (Patterson) They tell “stories about women, children, and even animals that are confined, murdered, and abused by fathers, husbands, and presumed protectors—and about restless spirits that mutely testify to these transgressions.” (Weinstock 26)

Andrew Smith briefs Diana Wallace’s argument that “the ghost story enabled women writers” to “offer a more radical critique of male power, violence and predatory sexuality.” (Smith & Wallace 4-5)

Dickerson’s analysis in *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* explains how women writers of the Victorian ghost story used the supernatural as a means to express difference and oppression, emancipation, as well as to investigate “the spaces and tensions between the actual and the possible, the material and the spiritual” (Dickerson 104)

Within his philosophical framework for analyzing horror, Noël Carroll expands on the idea developed by influential anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* regarding the interstitial: “Things that are interstitial, that cross the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture’s conceptual scheme, are impure.” (Carroll 55) With this crossing of

boundaries, the interstitial violate a “culture’s conceptual scheme of nature” and they are “cognitively threatening.”

According to Carroll, blood, hair clippings, nail clippings, pieces of flesh, among others “serve as ready candidates for abhorrence as impure,” as they “figure ambiguously in terms of categorical oppositions such as me/not me, inside/outside, and living/dead.” (Carroll 55) These elements have been subjects in my photographic and video works and also as physical elements within sculptural exhibitions. In his analysis of monsters of the horror genre (including ghosts among others), Carroll explains: they “are interstitial and/or contradictory in terms of being both living and dead.” “They conflate the animate and inanimate” (Carroll 55)

Cynthia A. Freeland in *‘Feminist Frameworks For Horror Films’* elaborates on the notion of the interstitial, by linking women and monsters: “Both may somehow seem to stand outside the patriarchal order” (Freeland 744). And Diana Wallace, in her ‘Uncanny Stories: the ghost story as Female Gothic,’ brings attention to Elizabeth Gaskell’s metaphorical “‘ghosting’ of women within patriarchy” with her portrayal of ‘The Grey Woman’ (Wallace 60). Dickerson also notes the interstitiality of women and their use of horror and supernaturalism to explore it: “Victorian women’s participation in the revival of supernaturalism [...] as writers of ghost stories, constituted both expression and exploration of their own spirituality and their ambiguous status of women as the “other” living in a state of in-betweenness [interstitiality] between the walls of the house, between animal and man, between angel and demon.” (Dickerson 8)

The interstitial is also involved in my artwork as a structural method. My chosen medium of video is itself interstitial, as it resembles — yet it does not belong to — the realm of film and it

relates to — but escapes — the realm of photography due to its temporality. Though video as a visual communication format is ubiquitous, video is still a “ready candidate for abhorrence as impure,” as it “figures ambiguously in terms of categorical oppositions such as” film/photograph, cinema/gallery, a fact supported by its inability to participate in the market as a strong competitor to other art objects. The most inspirational time-based visual works that relate to my work are dream-sequences which appear in film, and title sequences, both of which are also interstitial: they belong and don’t belong, their existence cannot be denied, yet they cannot stand alone as independent entities. Here I would like to draw a parallel between my choice of medium, and my ‘dream-sequence’ approach to video, and the short (ghost) story, as a genre interstitial to the novel, preferred by the Victorian writers for their horror writings: “The lack of critical attention to women’s ghost stories is also to do with a wider neglect of the short story, within which the ghost story (associated with anthologies or magazines and other ephemeral types of publication) has been doubly marginalised.”

Furthermore, it is not only the format of the short story, but also its authors and content that are interstitial: “The short story has long been associated with the marginalized – Irish, black, post-colonial and, especially, women writers – writers who often use it as a vehicle for ‘knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the “story” of dominant culture . . . to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature.’ The ghost story, of course, deals precisely with the return of the repressed: the dead who return.” (Wallace 58) For Wallace “the ghost story functions as the ‘double’ or the ‘unconscious’ of the novel, giving form to what has to be repressed in the longer, more ‘respectable’ form.” (Smith & Wallace 5)

art history

Marina Abramovic's piece *Rhythm 0* operates as a performance evidentiary of the incomprehensible human animosity — this incomprehensibility relating to the violent causes of trauma, as described by Freud. Furthermore, *Rhythm 0* is symbolic of violent behaviors specifically pointed to the female body and psyche within the larger context of cultural, social and political life — as dispensable and unworthy of respect and compassion. With this evidence of violence put forth in Abramovic's work, *Rhythm 0* signifies the precursor of a haunting.

Michal Rovner's preoccupation with history, memory and time, while evoking the sense of the biological — in the chromosomal appearance of her human figure abstractions as well as the medical — in her literal utilization of petri dishes as a canvas for her video projections — is a point of reference for my art practice. Moreover, Rovner's human figures appear as ghostly incarnations in perpetual motion, infinitely repeating a fruitless cycle of struggle, re-telling and re-writing a history. While projected onto stone and paper, their ethereal and ghostly presence leaves no markings or evidence of their passing and struggle. These aspects of her work contextualize my use of video projection, and light more broadly, to mark the haunting effects of trauma.

In Chiharu Shiota's elaborate installations, I locate the symbolic use of visual representations of onryō as they appear in Japanese kabuki theater and in film (*Ringu* and *The Ring*): the long black hair of the female ghost returning for vengeance, hiding her face — her presence dominated by the white long dress and the dark black long hair. This black and white phantom dominates

Shiota's work — in some cases literally involving the empty white dresses hauntingly hanging in the midst of her expansive black string structure, which implicate the female ghost's hair.

In addition to the haunting aspects of Shiota's work, the involvement of elements of horror as an expression of her unresolved trauma is an approach to which my work relates. The elaborate black webs echo the mind/body entanglement as I perceive it and as I have visualized it my studio experiments. The repetitive act of constructing these webs bring about her methodological use of her anxiety. Shiota states: 'Everything visible seems to be woven into a web of anxiety which immobilizes my body. But I become more anxious thinking that I would not be able to create work if this anxiety disappears.' In her paper, "Beyond 'Japanese/Women Artists'" Yoshimoto explains that Shiota's "production is sustained by a desire to contain her own inner perturbation and her often overpowering anxiety" and that "this characterization seems to draw parallels to a kind of 'psychosomatic art' as her predecessor Yayoi Kusama used to describe her own creative process." The turning point for Kusama and Shiota, "[...] the conscious acknowledgement of angst as a propelling force for their artistic creation" (Yoshimoto 74) parallels the defining moment during my MFA career, when my own anxiety would become the focus of my research and artistic process as opposed to a shamefully hidden reality. Instead of struggling to work in spite of it, I made the conscious decision to work through it and use it procedurally.

In the reading of trauma theory literature, there is supporting evidence that trauma is not merely a repetitive phenomenon, but one that haunts: "these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as [...] possession"

(Caruth 2) What we learn from trauma narratives is that “what returns to haunt the victim,” is not only the violence of the event itself, but the impact of its “incomprehensibility” — “the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.” (Caruth 6) Freud indicates that traumatic experience “is not fully assimilated as it occurs.” What is insistent in traumatizing events is not what we can know, but what we cannot precisely grasp, according to Caruth’s reading of Freud: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (Caruth 4) Then, it emerges as “an interruption of the symbolic system and is linked, not to repression, unconsciousness, and symbolization, but rather to a temporal delay, repetition and literal return” (Caruth 135n. 18)

The three video installations and sound I produced for the 2015 MFA Thesis Exhibition intend to experientially communicate the theoretical ideas as outlined above and elaborated on throughout this study. There is a necessity for exploration of these ideas through art, not only because these ideas relate to events and experiences that are incomprehensible to the human mind, but also because: as of this moment there has not been sufficient evolutionary progress in the sociopolitical aspects of human nature to rid of the incomprehensibly violent and animalistic behaviors creating such traumatic experiences; and there has not been sufficient technological and scientific progress to provide methods for unpacking the complexity and effectively treating the effects of trauma on mind and body.

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