

The Process of Construction

PART 1: the problem

This text is not architecture.

This text is not a body.

This text is a tracing: a re/embodiment of another's vision. This text is the flickering of an eye across the object. This tracing is the object translated into thin layer of graphite. Of ink. Of wire. An inexact replication. The object it traces is the body.

This tracing is an architecture. A construction of text, images, marks layered and blended one upon the other. This architecture is built upon the struggle for embodiment. It to engage the hypothesis that “ we no longer dream of structures of thought and knowledge in the way Kant dreamed of them, searching madly for (and failing to find) the bedrock on which to construct a Tribunal of Pure Reason.”¹

The body is to disappear into the structure; the structure is to transmute into the body.

Thus, this document through a series of drawings, sections, and words traces a body; an unheimlich body. A female body. (figure 1) This text refigures the body of the text to trace the body. It is intended to explore Catherine Ingraham's suggestion that: " the interruption of 'linear' writing by drawing, spatiality, volumetrics, may also be a breach that is inevitably sexual (the imprint of the body or shape upon the clean page)." ²

PART 2: the body

I began with a project to literally construct a body. This construction was to embody the Heideggian concept of the *unheimlich* body: “the human being is being in the world and dwelling on the earth –and yet we are never at home in the world, never rooted in the earth.”³ This human body was to be rooted in the idea that our sense of homelessness is defined by the uncanny, which is revealed in our generalized anxiety about being homeless. We are never at home but we don’t know where to find (or build) home in the uncanny. (figure 2) To create architecture must resonate with a longing for home but whose home?

Thus, my problem was to flesh out the uncanny in the figure of the human body, a site that we think we know. But yet, we do not. We are not comfortable in the body. “What is least homelike and most uncanny is that which is always at home: the human body in all its anonymity and imperious power, with all its gravity and in all its levity...”⁴

But how even more alien is it for a woman, who often finds her body in an architecture conceived of as a means to “contain or obliterate her.”⁵ This colonization of the female body can be traced to the Greek concept of the *kosmos*, where the woman’s body must be covered with a new skin in order for her to be seen.

“Chros (skin or color) is the Homeric word for the living body, which was understood as surface and the bearer of visibility, visibility being the guarantor of existence or being... When a woman *kosmese* (adorned) herself, she wrapped her chros in a

second skin or body, in order to bring the living surface-body so clothed to light; to make it appear.”⁶

Has this allowed architecture to become a means by which men “ can hollow out their own interiors and project them outward and then require women as supports for this hollowed space?” This would leave the female body homeless. Grosz argues that when men conceive of themselves as self-made, the body, male and female, is stripped of its wholeness. The body of architecture now is the mental projection outward. Interior spaces, flesh, blood, and bone have been the victim of a “systematic and violent erasure of the contribution of women, femininity, and the maternal,”⁷

However, the ‘containment of women within a dwelling they did not build, nor was even built *for* them,’⁸ constitutes a site of distinct uncanniness. (figure 3) Architecture would inscribe turn the dynamic assemblage of blood, sinew, and muscles into a Euclidean diagram. The question then is what lies beneath that chros.

Perhaps it starts with that basic diagram of architecture: the line. “The geometrical line (that) in particular that cool rigorous line drawn, usually, with fine pen or pencil- (that) spatially defines the shape and relationship between parts and whole.”⁹ Here Ingrahm suggests that the line “ is a primary anatomy ...of architectural spatial structure.”¹⁰ I focus on the term “anatomy.” The scientific study of the parts of the body and their arrangements. The structure of the body. The study of the structure. I think of the seemingly endless lists of body parts that each suggests the whole body. The femur

cannot stand alone. The whole implied by the singular part as the line implies a three-dimensional space. Yet, for the unheimlich body, is there a whole?

This question of what constitutes the female body has been rubbed away, so removed from existence that it has been almost erased. It is clear by scanning any contemporary women's fashion magazine that the body of origin is unsatisfactory. It must be transformed. (figure 4) The body as a holistic entity does not exist. A typical issue of any fashion magazine teaches a woman to reconstruct her body part by part for the whole is ever quite right. In a recent issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, for example, one finds the female body divided into sections that need to be analyzed and corrected. "Beauty" is one important feature, for example, which is then subdivided into the topics of hair, skin, and fitness. Within that section is an article which presents a report of a specific woman's 'lifestyle' including her diet, sleep routine, exercise habits, and skin care. Her body has disappeared. Only her face, in the accompanying headshot, remains. You also learn that you must clothe the body to reveal its existence, but now the cloth must hide the numerous inevitable (interior) flaws. Clothing is indeed a form of architecture. "Alexander McQueen...does precise geometry that rise and swoops over the human form, tracing its contours with the steely precision of a laser and, in the process, magically makes the body look better."¹¹

So, for women, the body itself is now a tracing of fragments. A leg here. A head here. The mind composing a (often distorted) whole before the mirror. We notice a leg passing the mirror. A finger caught in the shiny doorknob. Hair loose falling from a comb. A

rounded shoulder glimpsed in the store window. What body do we women see when we don't have a mirror? How can we move without the relation of a doorway? Frame us without a window frame? This question then of creating space for women is one that can occur only by first constructing the body it will house; this particular construction will remove the chors until all that remains is the space within.

Architecture is often summed up as 'space, ' a place where the human body inserts itself. Carving space, marking space. But this space really doesn't exist. Architecture is the wall, the line itself. The wall/line mirrors or rather, traces the footprint of the body as it transverses space. It is the fundamental marking. The eye flickering over an invisible boundary. Marking itself. Its boundaries, length and shape mark the body. The marking of this line is to imply the (unseen whole) anatomy.

This very act of marking involves a recognition of the self. (figure 5) "The pleasure men take in mimesis is made up of the troubling feeling that comes over them in the face of recognizable strangeness."¹² This sense of homelessness affects us all, male or female. But how more troubling to the one who gives birth to feel, to hear, to know the human body as estranged, as one "whose birth is already alteration" from its self-knowledge.¹³ Seeking shelter is also to seek the human body; to recover it from the uncanny.

This concept of a tracing, a gesture so powerfully meant to recreate birth, generates this female body. Nancy depicts moment by moment the way the hand springs from the head the heart the soul marking through a ' line (that) divides and set out the form: it forms

form.”¹⁴ So, too should this body demonstrate the way the female body, skin, blood, muscles, body is lifted from the confinement of corsets, clothing, make-up, and other forms of domestic bondage.

The female body is the layers of the psyche floating one on top of the other until there is a whispering movement of spaces hovering over encrusting framing imprisoning the body.

Part III. The construction

In my construction, the architecture of body rips itself up around the body. The architecture is a phantom without a context. It escapes between the layers of skin, structure, bones, flesh, body and mind. This is a nomadic body. (figure 6) It is pure subjectivity unconstrained by consciousness, or the unconscious. This is a body that circles outside the en/gendered embodied architecture.

The first knowing of this body was through the metal ribbon of a corset bending altering the actual geographical space of the ribcage into a strict geometric but unreal proportion. Likewise, the domestic space encloses, shapes a woman. Her subjectivity torn inside out and reshaped to the rigid forms of a body determined by a man. For the measure is male.

The tracing on the canvas (the wall, the paper) is but a two-dimensional space but the body as a tracing is an three-dimensional assemblage, which is yet to be reassembled.

With its subjectivity constrained in a girdle of doors, floors, windows, and walls, the body traces. This constructed body is the woman dragging her bedraggled velvet gown down the hall, dwarfed by tall ceilings, the door built just wide enough for her skirts to pass through. The woman who works in the kitchen. Hidden in the bedroom, silent at the dining table. Pours tea in the study. Dusts the library. The window is a frame for her body. The body alters in shape and vision as she moves closer and further from the window frame. Enveloped by curtains, shuttered by blinds, the body is constrained by architecture and clothing. Is the body enclosed still a body? Is the building built upon this body still architecture? This constructed body that begins from the outside moves beyond the simple analogy of the corset as domestic architecture. This body attempts to capture the body's interiority but not to constrain it like the corset binding the woman.

To capture this body is to capture only a phantom. This tracing is the indescribable glimpse between soul and body. This tracing is constructed from the (imaginary) lives of women (figure 7).

A woman crouched along a wall
a woman slung along the wall slung
through a wired brick alley
a thick staircase between each

twisted river run run
running water

thin cold water up through the sink pipes
river running under
north
breaking through the earth a bit going east
twisting itself through tree roots

thin sheets of metal
bursting upward thin rattling sheets
twisting into planes
that area floors
those recognizable elements
of a street
related to a man;
wall, window, floor
but to woman
interspersed within these rivers, mere
rivelets of fury

river river run

she looks over her shoulder
a throng of women

the grid appears

beneath

her feet.

Dancing river river run

Her fingers in her mouth

Her face turned ever so slightly to the north

So slightly

Her nose casting a shadow

A shadow

Shut over her chin.

The grid appears

Disappears (figure 8)

The street edge dissolves

Under her feet

As she steps

Out of her heels

Toes curling on the pavement

Breaking each bit apart

Thin shards under her toes

Shredded as she stumbles

A bit

As the sidewalk

Dissolves all around her

All above her

She floating

Walking on dirt

On water

As river river runs

Beneath her

Her outstretched arms

Loosened above

The sidewalk submerging under the feet of women.

Part IV. The fragments of the body

The body was to be reconstructed from clothing found discarded in street. This would be a body that had shed itself along the street. The body echoes in the mound of distressed sweaters I found on my front stoop. It is composed from the shoe, the plastic sandal, the black sweater with a ragged collar, the yarn dangling loose and trailing into the gutter, all found on the city streets. All these images form a body drifting, turning, convoluted.(figure 9)

The body that first emerges from this heap of clothing is the spine. The simple supple spine translated into a thin metal wire, bearing supporting a wedge of a shell, a shell of a canopy, a roof. The roof that lowers and shelters this ragged bit of corporal bloody bits. Sewn from the bits of discarded clothing, the shell becomes transfigured as it is beaded encrusted with the jewelry of beads and broken glass. The body reflecting without a skin.
(figure 10)

Finding a space

Measuring self against

The narrow width of a sidewalk

Overgrown on one side with holly leaves the light

Pole

With the feet pointed outward the grates exposed

The doorway

Exposed

The length

The breadth pf the woman

Exposed

In pieces

The face peering from the window

As she lifts up dirty glasses to wash.

The shell becomes a girdle, a corset, and the thin bones of ribs: thin silvers of bone transformed into thin metal wire. Twisted and covered with ribbons of beads. They fold, enfold, crack open. It is as if the body is ripped open. The interior made exterior. The dimensions of the body within become measured into the body without.

Part V. The construction: the corset reclaimed

In the grass field

Lands

A tortured mass of fabric bone and skin

Lying quivering on the broken uncut grass

The end was an interweaving of fabric a ripping away of skin over a female form

Dismembered into bits

A leg a hip an arm a shoulder bone

A fragment dressed and embroidered with beads and wire

A body that was nothing but a distorted fragment of jewelry

But how do you calculate the anxiety of being? How to materially build the effect of sensibility torn free from the structure of what is body? What is home? What is homely?

This messy body is just a thin framework wire. A thin spine bent and twisted altogether to form ribs. Instead of a carefully constructed corset, the bones are torn free. The bones

are twisted back and sewn together. The new skin evokes a quilt: a corset layered over the sleeve of a shirt, the quilted jacket front and collar hugging the curve of a hip.

The technique of sewing and weaving, like all techniques of construction, demands an intimate relationship with materials and one's own body. The "feminine art" of sewing really demands hours of crouching and eye straining work. The wire form shifts beneath the gentle shaking of the skin as I sew. The form mutates as wire twists into a form. The needles and wire scratch and stab. The body scars the body.

As the body, a grotesque monster of metal and fabric is constructed, I wonder. (figure 12) Should it be more elegant, with perhaps a swirling of green beaded skirts dancing floating over the sea of grass? Should it be a tower, like a lengthy torso, with a stair and chair, an elegant place to hide and to view the world, and not be viewed? Or is it better to be this, a construction of the roughshod way we gather the bits of the body daily tossed to us, and now woven into the body we feel?

To creep into this skeleton became the ultimate tracing. Inside, I feel dispirited, yet this is almost a relief. It is a memory of uncanniness, this knowing not that we are or were or how we wished to have been. This is the body that we never know, that we dress cover hide shelter away. (Figure 11)

Part VI. Of Buildings between Angels and Monsters

In the year of the Iron Rabbit

On April 114

She witnesses the chance encounter on her sewing table

of an Umbrella

and a Butterfly

folded Angel wings

forgotten lying on the floor like petals

thrown from the fire

she dreams in Bones

splintered eaten roasted and melted dished up for the lost Children

strolling along the boulevard

bleached by the Sun

skinned and splintered into jagged edges

jagged edges bent backward into her fingers

her elbows broken

a shard under the sewing table

(figure 13)

Part VII. This is a body that gives birth to other concepts of body.

Coda:

A repeated silver wire

Silver slit

Through the ear

And round the neck

Around

And around the neck

Shrouded over the neck

And head

Severed say yes roll toward

A naughty child she was a naughty child

Say yes eyes roll toward

A thin silver thread running

Humming through her body

From the top of her head to her fingers

Generating wave after wave

Fingers rolling down necks

And upward through eyes and circling around the neck

Dismember from the neck

Stepping out onto the porch
Held in her hands
Dismembered from the neck
Arms from shoulders
A ragged turtleneck
Twisted around her ankles
Her feet in the cuffs
She turns
Naked to the west. (figure 14)

¹ David Farrell Krell, *Archetecture*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 92.

² Catherine Ingraham, "Initial Properties: Architecture and the Space of the Line," in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 258.

³ Krell, *Archetecture*, p. 94.

⁴ Krell, *Archetecture*, p. 115.

⁵ Ingraham, "Initial Properties," p.

⁶ Indra Kagis McEwen, *Socrates' Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) pp. 43-44.

⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, "Woman, *Chora*, Dwelling," p. 218

⁸ Grosz, p. 219.

⁹ Ingraham, "initial Properties: Architecture and the Space of the Line," p. 248.

¹⁰ Ingraham, p. 249.

¹¹ Lisa Armstrong, "The Diary of a Dress," *Harper's Bazaar*, August 2004, p. 138.

¹² Jean Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, (California: Stanford University Press), p. 70.

¹³ Nancy, p. 70.

¹⁴ Nancy, p. 75.

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