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White Body: animating feminine pleasure

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Abstract

Following Luce Irigaray's perspective that femininity 'may be recovered only in secret, in hiding' (1985a: 30), my paper investigates the relationship between the moving image screen, feminine pleasure and the body, through critical reflection as an artist film-maker on the plasticine animation *White Body* (2009): in this practice-as-research film, I manipulate modeling clay, sugar and dust with my fingers under the animation rostrum camera to explore my early childhood memories of secret, transgressive play; seeking to liberate a cascading feminine sensibility through the creative process of working 'intuitively' frame-by-frame with materiality and digital technologies.

Introduction: there is a thread

One strand of my practice as an artist film-maker connects to my childhood. For the film *Nuclear Family* (1990) I collaborated with my mother on writing a script from her story of my imaginary friends, and sought to recover memories of my own; another film *As Yet Unseen* (1994) was based on the dreams of my mother and my maternal grandmother. More recent research experiments, such as *Heirloom* (2008), seek to explore my memories of childhood play and the process of creating animation 'as (a) woman' in order to question a system of representation that negates/effaces feminine voices.

In the following text I reflect on the film *White Body* (2009) created through a series of 'finger performances' that were filmed one frame at a time. The movements of my hands in making the film are not recorded: what remains is a chronological animated account which depicts the figure of a small white doll that grows from a ball of modeling clay, is cut and sewn shut, then buried and 'reborn' amongst a nest of white sugar and the dark stain of 'slut's wool' - the fluffy dust that collects under furniture and along skirting boards. Play performed alone and in secret was the source of much delight to me when I was a child: in making *White Body* I enter the silence of that 'play space' as an artist, to connect with the past, and give form to feminine pleasure.

The rhythm of my fingers whilst performing stop-motion animation is an outward expression of my embodied psychic rhythm, a gentle *jouissance* that overflows to fill the silence. *Jouissance* is attributed to feminine language by Luce Irigaray: the word embodies rapturous sexual pleasure and blissful and diffuse fluidity 'within the intimacy of that silent, multiple, diffuse touch' (1985a: 29). As my hands interact with the clay, my fingers communicate with each other through their contact with the material, which has no differentiated 'skin': its interior is the same substance as

the exterior, the outer layer of the form exists in direct contact to the world/space beyond its boundary.

In this article I am thinking through my practice with the aid of two texts by Irigaray: principally *This Sex Which Is Not One*, and *Speculum of the Other Woman*. I am drawing particularly on her discussion of the key term *jouissance*, and of possible connections between female sexuality and writing. As an artist I'm positioning myself with feminine mark-making, which I understand as a form of 'writing'. I see my animation practice as *écriture féminine*: a writing of the feminine that I associate with my white modeling clay. Irigaray uses the term *parler femme* (in French, 'to speak (as) woman') whilst Hélène Cixous refers to *écriture féminine* ('feminine writing'): both are concerned with experimental process and 'writing the body's language', and both agree that this is a body-centred practice. Cixous says that a woman speaks through 'writing' with 'white ink', a 'physical materialisation' of 'her thought', expressed through the 'little of that good mother's milk' which is 'always within her' (1975: 251). Moulding the white modeling clay I manipulate the solidified, but still malleable maternal milky essence of Cixous' 'white ink', giving form and substance to 'writing the body', that is by its nature transgressive and continually in a process of transition, of metamorphosis, of 'becoming'. The digital animation *White Body* remains as a residue of performance, a chronological trace of the play of my silent and invisible fingers.

Making *White Body*: moving into the silence

The technical set up is a digital video camera attached to the rostrum in my studio that was once an upstairs bedroom. The camera connects to a laptop with a FireWire cable; iStopMotion software enables me to record individual frames and playback the sequence as the animation builds up. The camera looks down onto a sheet of white paper and is set to film in colour: in the RGB system red, green and blue light combine in equal intensity to yield white light. I fix a single soft light to the back of the rostrum so that there is a slight shadow that falls away to the left, giving an impression of three dimensionality to the screen image. At this stage my mind is blank. I create a space for absence, a silent place in my mind where the film will be, projected onto the rostrum stage under the camera. The blank whiteness of the paper waits to be inscribed with 'feminine writing', a space that is doubly bounded: once by its edge, but also upon the screen by the framing of the camera.

Over the next two weeks I complete seven sessions on the rostrum, animating in silence on my own without a break for sixty to ninety minutes each time. I perform the animation standing up, poised over the set I have created on the rostrum: the area in view to the camera fits into a circle made by my outstretched middle fingers and thumbs. Working at such a small scale requires an intense focus of concentration: as my fingers push and pull and tweak and stroke, I need to control my breathing so as not to disturb the fragile artwork.

In the practice of stop-motion animation I am led by the sense of touch: my fingers move my material into incremental positions, which I record as a single photograph

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in my computer. These still images build up when played back, and are seen on the screen to create an animated gestural visual language of feminine pleasure. For Irigaray, female pleasure and language grow 'indefinitely' through their 'passage in and through the other' (1985a: 31).

In stop-motion the inanimate appears to possess agency, a thing becomes a being, an object lives as a subject: there is intense pleasure in this magical transformation, which is multiplied when the material being manipulated has plasticity, and can be moulded and sculpted and made to appear to shift from one shape into another.

The animation technique originates in the 'trick films' created by professional stage magician Georges Méliès in the early days of cinema. In stop-motion animation an illusion of moving image is created through stitching together successive frames or still photographs that have been recorded of a view of the three dimensional 'real world'. Méliès recreated his illusionist stage acts for cinema and translated the sleight of hand, illusion or 'trick' of the live stage performance - in which the magician manipulates the audience's attention and directs us to see what we believe we see - by filming one frame at a time: on the screen we only see the 'finished' moments of the performance of the animator's hands.

I have to film at night because it is summer and my curtains let in too much light during the day. Although the scenes are created on different days, my animation-in-process lies untouched on the rostrum in between filming sessions so that each sequence follows on from the one before. I do not watch what I have filmed in between: during these pauses in production the animation exists in my mind as I move from making (touch) to being a spectator (seeing). I remember the magic transformations I have effected, which are intensely pleasurable for me, and I imagine the people who will experience the embodied visuality of the film on the screen, once it is made, and the pleasure that will be affected.

In my animation work I choose to seclude myself in my studio and place myself voluntarily 'in hiding'. This is in contrast to my imprisonment as a five year old, when silence was imposed upon me in the piano room by the authority of a childminder, an adult whose word was law. For me the absence of sound is the place of nothing, an erasure, a space between words, a silent place between my body and language: when 'two lips' touch, there is at first silence. Irigaray emphasises the *voluntary* state of silence, which she considers to be a gesture that must be 'safeguarded' in order for a woman to find her language and express her identity (2002: 103).

Memories: finger exercises

I am five years old and we live on the other side of the country near Wisbech in the East Anglian Fens; our flat is part of a large old house. My mother now works the night shift as a nurse at the local hospital. In the school holidays a childminder comes to look after me during the day while my mum sleeps. After lunch I am put in a room on my own for an hour to 'be quiet and not move'.

My play is set by the piano, an upright instrument made of polished wood that sits on four small wheels. After carefully pushing aside the wooden stool with its prickly seat, I sit on the floor, my legs apart, under the overhanging bosom of the shuttered keyboard, next to its pedals. The two pedals are smooth brass feet, cool and slightly pitted: piano and forte, one softens the note, the other amplifies; quiet and loud. Bending slightly, I slide my hands under the piano, and retrieve the collection of plasticine I have hidden: it has been moulded many times and is now marbled grey-purple, a combination of several colours, and furred with dust.

Once a week I visit a crotchety music teacher for an hour's piano lesson. She sits hunched by my side and raps my knuckles with a ruler if the backs of my hands aren't horizontal and level with my wrists and forearms: I am not allowed to look at my hands while I am playing, but am taught to stare ahead and fix my eyes on the sheet of music. The ivory keys are yellowing, some are mottled with grey, like old people's teeth. The long black keys are smooth chocolate fingers that rest between the flat off-white keys. In between my weekly lessons, I practise for an hour every day after my mother has woken up: my fingers feeling their way up and down the keyboard through scales and my first music exercises.

While playing, I try to focus my vision on my music book and not look down, but I have to keep checking that the backs of my hands are flat. It is a strange experience to look at black notes on a stave printed on white paper whilst my hands perform and create sounds that together make something that is music. I cannot reach the pedals whilst playing the piano as my five year old legs aren't long enough.

During my hour of enforced rest after lunch I am told by the childminder to be silent and still. I sit alone on the floor downstairs at the piano's feet whilst my fingers perform. The body of my mother lies breathing in her bed upstairs. I hear the waves of a distant ocean beating in slow motion and the rhythmic breeze of my breath, and the tiny noises made by cold plasticine as I squeeze and warm the clay between my hands: these sounds are accompanied by the almost imperceptible vibrations of the piano's body, as it hums and sings along to my secret play.

Sequence 1

The first ingredient I choose to make the film white body is a corrugated strip of white plasticine, left over from a commissioned animation. To start the film I slice off a third of the modeling clay with a surgical scalpel fitted with a 10A blade. I roll the pliable material between my fingers and sculpt a rudimentary human figure, which I curl inward on itself and place in the approximate centre of the sheet of paper. A soft white lumpy shape appears on the screen: it could be a hand that is made of dough or the mulberry-like cluster of cells known as a *morula* that is the early human embryo.

There is no referent by which the scale of the image may be judged, but the clump has slight irregularities in its surface that reveal the imprint of fingers, and so the

sense is of something small and round that can be cupped in the palm. The object's appearance of three dimensional roundness conveys the sense that the mass is resting upon the 'ground', and that we are looking down and in close-up. I record a frame, and another, and another... the shape opens out and reveals itself to be the figure of a white doll, and there is also the sense that it is 'standing' upright within the frame.

Immediately a cut appears slashed from groin to chin and stainless steel darning needle cuts through its body from right to left several times, leaving a fringe of white threads on either side of the torso; the crack is sealed, the legs close, and are sewn shut by the needle and thread. These closely spaced parallel rows of running stitches are used to fill or reinforce worn areas of a textile; the thread is 'woven' in rows along the grain of the fabric.

The shallow incision that runs up from between the legs of the doll suggests the vulval groove of a young girl's body where her 'two lips' meet. The dough-like softness of the small body and its virginal whiteness reinforce our perception of its vulnerability as the sharp needle pierces laterally through the plasticine flesh on either side of the cleft, and it heals over. I recall Irigaray's description of the women's genitals within the scopic paradigm of patriarchy as being 'simply absent, masked, sewn back inside their 'crack'' (1985a: 26).

When the body is sutured for non-medical reasons, it is an action of control and of transgression that crosses boundaries of acceptable behaviour and mutilates the inviolate human body. Examples include infibulation, sewing up a girl's vagina to 'protect' her virginity and ensure purity, undertaken for cultural, social or religious reasons, in order to ensure that (vaginal) sexual intercourse cannot take place until the threads are cut (World Health Organization, 2011); and sewing the lips around the mouth together; an extreme strategy practiced by both women and men, as a last resort, often in desperation, to draw attention to inhumane treatment by the law and as an appeal for their (silenced) voices to be heard (Mail Online, 2011).

The suturing of the doll's pudendum (in Latin, literally 'a shameful thing') to conceal its presence and protect its value as a commodity to be exchanged within patriarchy merely creates a second vulva, one that is larger, hairy, more delineated, bolder. The doll becomes a vulval body with vestigial wings and a clitoral head, whose form and animation convey the sense of something alive. The suturing control that closes the female body is metamorphosed into an autonomous, joyous plurality of defiance that Irigaray describes as 'always in the process of weaving itself' (1985a: 29).

Sequence 2

The fringe of cilia around the torso and fused-together legs flutter to and fro in rhythmic beats. More hairs grow out of the creature's head, and sway as if moved by underwater currents. At this point I feel a desire for my fingers to work with white granulated sugar, so I walk to local Co-op store and buy some. The waving of the threads becomes more agitated; grains of crystalline white emanate from the head,

cover the white body and then fill the whole screen with a gentling rippling ocean floor of fine white sand.

As I work on alone into the night, I flick the cotton threads and manipulate the sugar grains repeatedly with my fingers that they will appear to move; and I can taste the scent of candyfloss: moving the sugar around with my hands releases small particles of sugar into the air.

In this sequence the animation of the threads and the grains of sugar that 'little girls are made of' goes 'off in all directions', a characteristic of the *jouissance* Irigaray attributes to feminine language (1985a: 29). As a child I was intoxicated by my knowledge of my corporeal body and my affect upon the secret world I inhabited, a phenomenological domain of *jouissance* that was multi-layered, interactive and continually 'flooding' between modes of experience (Irigaray, 1985b: 229).

Sequence 3

I make a depression with my finger in the middle of the smooth white crystals, the whole surface becomes alive with dimples, and the hairy white figure excavates itself, its body crazed with sugar grains that I have pressed into the plasticine. The threads waft backwards and forwards, the figure flattens and is covered in sugar once again.

In retrospect I see this has a lot to do with Deleuze and Guattari's 'Body without Organs' (BwO), an egg, a multidimensional Earth-being that allows all 'flows' to pass freely through it. Modeling clay is a vegetable form, a rhizome-like BwO that is capable of assuming any form, and all parts are interchangeable: it possesses infinite possibilities and is in a continual state of becoming. All the same: matter in a constant state of becoming through the touch of my fingers, its poetic sensibility overflows with *jouissance*. The white body is a dough creature, a doll-familiar created by kneading and squeezing. Yeasty, soft and unbaked, unfixed in form, the material is moist and pliable: it responds to my touch, becomes warm. A living substance, it embodies the kneaded maternal breast plumped with milk that writes my body, and becomes me.

Sequence 4

Ripples of movement spread out from the white threads that are clear of the sprinkling of sugar over the figure. During a series of seismic pulses created by the edges of both my hands, more of the threads are revealed, curving around a circular depression.

Sequence 5

I harvest fluffy grey dust known as slut's wool from the corridor outside the room, and apply a fingerful to the centre of the image where the squashed body is just visible. A stain appears, then a slit, which I sculpt into the folded edges of a seam while the threads wave magically in front. The fleshy material folds back on itself, bending into itself so that outside and inside are proximate and visible at the same time. A vulval opening has been created, which swells and disgorges hanks of fluffy

grey woollen dust as the now slightly grubby threads wave to and fro. Dirty materiality spills from the pure white plasticine, made from the finest China clay 'newly born' from the earth. My hands smooth a layer of white sugar across so that no features are visible, just the protrusion of a pubic mound.

Sequence 6

I cut another third off the plasticine strip and chop this up into small chunks, which I roll into balls: these swirl around the screen in a spiral and line up in two vertical rows running from the top of the frame to the bottom. A muscular spasm: a line of dust splits the screen down the middle forming a wound. The needle reappears and sews across from right to left in a series of stitches, leaving a trail of threads behind. A larger white ball or egg appears in the centre, more balls become visible; some are encrusted with sugar and appear bound with threads. The bundle of eggs and woven threads expands in a series of pulsing waves, expelling more and more slut's wool. This is the second iteration of sewing, a suturing that does not close, which evokes Irigaray's statement that feminine pleasure flows from 'the non-suture of her lips' (1985a: 30).

Sequence 7

The mass of crunchy white eggs in their nest of sugar and dust continues to erupt. I use a paintbrush with hog's hair bristles to sweep away an oval area in the middle of the screen: a slit appears, which I mould with my fingers to create a vulval crevice, nestled by a ring of threads and dirty fluff.

I make five balls from the modeling clay, that gradually increase in size from a dried pea to a small button mushroom. I place the smallest ball in the approximate centre of the orifice and record a frame, I replace this ball with the next in size and record a frame, and so on until a white egg appears to inflate like a balloon or blister and then suddenly becomes the curled body seen in the first sequence, unfurling as a white figure with rudimentary arms, legs and head which I have formed from the last third of the plasticine strip. More and more dust is ingrained on the white body until it is completely covered in fur, and the screen fades to white.

Writing White Body

In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray counters Freud's view of the female child as a little man, with her clitoris a rudimentary penis (Freud, 1991: 151). Instead she focuses on a woman's two sets of lips as a metaphor, making a connection between the labia/lips that embrace the orifice of speech, the mouth, and the labia/lips that embrace the vulval opening. Irigaray states that woman is 'already two – but not divisible into ones' (1985a: 24).

The seven animation sequences joined together create a film that lasts for just over a minute. After its first public exhibition the film was screened as a loop that continuously cycled through the sequences in an endless cycle. Projected onto the gallery floor the white clay figure as long as my thumb was enlarged to human scale. After this initial presentation, a title and credits were added, along with an audio

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track of ambient watery sounds so that the film can be shown either on a monitor or projected in a range of exhibition contexts.

The audio recording that accompanies the animated images was chosen to suggest interior sounds of the body and liquidity. Water is associated with 'woman', a feminine element that ripples and trickles and is in continual flux of form. The title *White Body* is descriptive of its principal character, the clay doll. In fact the body is a multiple, as the second white body is, essentially, 'born' from the body of the first figure which is buried in the nest beneath it and which metamorphoses into the labia and vulval orifice.

The completed animation recalls the deep archaeological excavation that Sigmund Freud suggested is necessary to uncover the long-forgotten nature of woman's sexuality. We cannot see 'behind' the modeling clay and dust figure on the screen at the end that conceals the first vulval-doll buried within: what lies beneath is invisible, hidden. What occurred is in our memory: the succession of still images, moments viewed at 25 frames each second that combine to create an illusion of movement, as they pour through the present and spin off into the past.

As a child I infiltrated the space of pristine silence with small clumps of dirty plasticine, secreted below the radar of the controlling gaze of the 'minder'. A prison became a delight, a rebellion, as I undermined the law and entered willingly into the silence. I embraced the hushed absence and found myself through the circular discourse of my lived experience within my body and the evolution and expression of my 'body's language' through gesture and images, 'invented' - to use Irigaray's word - through transgressive play and silence (1985a: 214).

When I animate, the action of my fingers performs letters and words, gestural traces of an 'other' alphabet, writing the body. The voice emerges from deep within the body, given ephemeral form through breath, sound waves travelling away and rippling back, vibrating the body. Oral music of the lips, electromagnetic energy experienced aurally and in the body, passing through the membrane of the skin into and beyond the humid dark interior: writing the body.

Biography

Kayla is an artist film-maker who explores subjectivity and sense of place in her practice using animation, photography, sound, film, performance, found objects, drawing, writing, and digital technologies. She is interested in embodied experience, and the intersection between the natural world and urban environments, in particular liminal spaces such as the industrial outskirts of the city. Her work is screened worldwide across public, gallery and online spaces, and in festivals and touring programmes. She has shown in recent exhibitions at Tate Modern, and at the Nunnery, Whitechapel and Saatchi galleries. Kayla is a lecturer in media arts with Plymouth University.

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