

# KRISTEVA AND BATAILLE

## ARCHEOLOGIES OF PROHIBITION AND THE EROTICS OF THE UNCANNY

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If I want to realize totality in my consciousness, I have to relate myself to an immense, ludicrous, and painful convulsion of all of humanity.

Georges Bataille

It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

J. Krishnamurti

The greatest sinners makes the greatest saints.

Roger Callois

I spit myself out.

Julia Kristeva

In a democracy where an individual and a collective have equal agency, vulnerability is not “treated” as a threat or a pathology, but as an emancipatory politic. In the West, we do not live in such a democracy. We are allowed to experience and express vulnerability only in private. The private is constructed as ambiguous, deficient, and pathological, requiring unquestioned taxonomies of regulation and normalization. These taxonomies shape the violence of “everyday” representations. Abigail Solomon-Godeau reminds us that: “The most insidious and instrumental forms of domination, subjection, and objectification are produced by mainstream images of women rather than by juridically criminal or obscene ones.”<sup>1</sup>

This daily violence can be characterized by the ways in which we embody constructed desires and fears of our own bodies and of difference. Insidiously, this sanctity of normalcy constitutes a hegemony of representation that colonizes our relationships with our bodies—distrust of our innate corporeal humanity. Consistently, the public/collective manifests itself as that which is contained, easily assimilated, and

reproduced at the lowest common denominator. When the private/individual transgresses his/her own socially-imposed boundaries and surfaces in public, reactionary hegemony uses its power to neutralize difference and make vulnerability palatable to and for the public. This taken-for-granted, “civilizing” neutralization forms the foundation of imperialist psychological tourism<sup>2</sup>—the roots of contemporary US-style democracy. The hegemony of the everyday eventually obliterates vulnerability’s absolute receptivity and openness to violence. The implications of such repressive social disease reach into larger cultural domains that threaten the very foundations of a democracy, making untenable the possibility of a radical citizenship in which individuals can make unadulterated choices.

Paradoxically, vulnerability disrupts and threatens the violence of normalcy and the taken-for-granted. By exploring the contradictory nature of violences enacted by and upon in-



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dividual and social bodies, we can discover the socio-political potency of the sacred in the form of vulnerability. Vulnerability defies the status quo. It exposes one's very humanity and the dangerous, unpredictable arena that that agency invokes. Vulnerability and the sacred co-exist as a fertile uncanny opposition to the hegemonic reductionism of the public sphere. Like Georges Bataille, I am identifying the sacred as a manifestation of art—that which is not taken for granted. In Bataille's philosophy of sacred destruction and excess, we can find a Dionysian opening which allows us to pay explicit attention to the contradictions embedded within our own psyches and bodies. Recognition of and exposure to these ambiguities roots us in the sacred—a paradoxical embodiment of the *both/and* status of the ineffable.

The violence of vulnerability gives birth to one's self through a recognition and embodiment of the contradictions of the uncanny. Violence can be scrutinized in relation to the sacred by examining its paradoxical realms: that of vulnerability on one hand and of normalization on the other. The violence of everyday mediocrity and supposed neutrality exposes the intersection of entertainment, consumerism, and ethnocentrism as a collective violence through which we experience our bodies and consciousnesses.<sup>3</sup> Entertainment (the violence of diminished collective imagination; internalized mediocrity), consumerism (the violence of the culture of convenience—that which is easily identified/categorized and possessed), and ethnocentrism (the violence of assuming the ethnically, sexually, and economically neutral individual body of a Christian, "white," heterosexual, 9 to 5 "productive" worker) invisibly co-exist within the rubric of the ostensibly typical and everyday. When we render these assumptions visible, we rupture the status quo, we embody erotic politics:<sup>4</sup> "To violate is the secret of eroticism. On any scale, eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation [both physical and moral]. . . . Eroticism is born of interdiction, it lives on interdiction."<sup>5</sup> Western cultures have sublimated not only eroticism, but its communal manifestation—the *festival*. When we examine how industrialized society has appropri-

ated eroticism and the *festival* into the everyday, we can more clearly unravel how the illusion of neutrality has given mediocrity, and its subsuming violence, free reign over every aspect of our lives:

when these exhausting and ruinous festivals are abandoned, under the influence of colonization, society loses its bonds and becomes divided. But it seems that in the course of their evolution, societies tend toward indifference, uniformity. . . . It is as if it were . . . absorbed in monotony and regularity. The festival is then succeeded by the vacation. To be sure, it is always a time of free activity, of interruption in the pattern of work, but it is a phase of relaxation, not paroxysm. The values are found to be completely reversed. . . . Vacations (as the very term indicates) appear as a void, or at least an easing of social activity. By the same token, they are powerless to satisfy the individual. . . . One is isolated from the group, instead of entering into communion with it, at time of exuberance and jollity.<sup>6</sup>

Considering its monotony, reductionism, and subsequent violence, Roger Callois, like Bataille, identifies relaxation as a perverse form of entertainment in that there is only "regulated tranquility and obligatory violence."<sup>7</sup> Hygienic compulsions, convenience, and prohibition establish our social structures:

always a question of countering animal disorderliness with the principle of perfect humanity, for which the flesh and animality do not exist. Full social humanity radically excludes the disorder of the senses; it negates its natural principle; it rejects this given. . . . Asexual humanity . . . shelters its values from the violence and dirtiness of passion.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary societies' expression of the *festival* offers no "collective effervescence" as one finds in the erotic release of paroxysm, which requires utter presence, engagement, participation.

Rather than addressing the cultural enormity of advanced capitalism in this context, I am choosing to apply the term consumption, specifically because of the various, precariously contradictory connotations of the act of consuming—particularly in the face of Bataille's interdepen-

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dent concepts of eroticism and global economics which “recalls the etymological sense of consuming, as in a fire that utterly destroys. It is his own concept of fire, sacrificial consumption, with a sense of nobility, as opposed to the bourgeois consumption of production and accumulation.”<sup>9</sup>

Bataille’s “intellectual violence” delivers the possibility of perceiving violent acts whose effects move beyond the realm of good and evil. Violence is an action that has to take place for something else to happen. All transformation is inherently violent. Kristeva prods us: “As everyone knows, every negation is a definition.”<sup>10</sup> The negation-difference dialectic generates the vulnerability of the sacred. We are ourselves only in relation to others, and that relationship is an act of violence in that it disassembles the familiar: “It has been demonstrated that the sacred, in ordinary life, is expressed almost exclusively through taboos.<sup>11</sup> It is defined as ‘the guarded’ or ‘the separate.’ It is . . . protected by restrictions destined to prevent any attack upon the order of the universe, any risk of upsetting it or introducing any source of disturbance into it. It seems essentially negative.”<sup>12</sup> Sacred acts embody the violent: “Violence’ overwhelms us *strangely* . . . what happens is foreign to the received [and perceived] order of things to which this violence each time stands in opposition.”<sup>13</sup>

This dialectic of violence and relational awareness births the violence of separating expectation from the unknown as it undermines the insidiously internalized societal patterns of representable knowledge. “If *all* erotic behavior is by definition transgressive and violent, then there is no such thing as perverted or pathological eroticism, just as there is no normal, nonviolent, loving eroticism.”<sup>14</sup> Like Bataille, Kristeva seeks to dissolve normative hierarchies that attempt to inhibit the excesses of our bodies:

Kristeva, anxious to forge a connection between the somatic and the psychic (and thus ultimately, the symbolic), sees the pulsatile beat of the drives as the bridge between the body’s flexion—the spasmodic movement of the glottal or anal sphincters, for example—and the repetition neces-

sary to language’s fundamental spacing, or articulation. It is from this beat that Kristeva sets up what she calls a “chora.”<sup>15</sup>

Kristeva’s *chora* is inherently subversive—ob-scene (literally, off-stage) in that it exists in a wholly undetermined, unknown field; a chora is lived unrepresentability, the uncategorizable, the unnameable: “All men share an instinctive dread awe of complete darkness. That terror is ‘sacred’, obscure light suggests what is religious. . . . These places are still able to cause an inner distress not at all unlike the anguish connected with sacred rites.”<sup>16</sup> Within the framework of Bataille’s exploration of ancient prohibitions in which “prohibitions [are] opposed to the free satisfaction of animal needs,”<sup>17</sup> “the greatest repugnance has an archaic character.”<sup>18</sup> The chora occupies the space of man/woman as animal, pre-labor, what Bataille defines as the negation of nature: “man, designating the object, has been wrenched out of the world of nameless feeling—of sensibility.”<sup>19</sup> The chora embodies the ineffable obscenity of the mind-body connection, psyche-soma, a messy merging of the somatic with the psychic: “[Men] had to sublize it, withdrawing it from the light and confining it in darkness where it is hidden from notice. The place of filth is in the dark, where looks cannot reach it.”<sup>20</sup>

Layers of *détournement* form and reform the dialectics of society’s reactions to the sacred: “*Human existence* commanded an abhorrence of all sexuality; this abhorrence itself commanded the attractive value of eroticism. . . . For humanity would cease to exist the day it became something other than what it is, entirely made up of violent contrasts.”<sup>21</sup> But the blinding invisibility of the sacred offers the possibility of generating socio-political power for those who consciously choose to re-appropriate it—for example, Fatimah Mernissi’s discussion of the veil as a device of agency and not of oppression.

The elliptical unfurling and enfolding of prohibition—the obscene—the invisible *trialectic*<sup>22</sup> can become an emancipatory socio-erotic ethic for political change. Eroticism is rooted in difference as opposed to US style-democracy, the culture of convenience, which breeds and is bred by homogeneity:

lacking knowledge of [differences] and being unable to discern their precise meaning, we could not know anything about eroticism; we could not even know anything about human specificity. . . . Eroticism is a closed book to us so long as we do not see man's beginning in the repugnance he felt for a nature that was filthy in his eyes. We generally do not see it for the reason that, in our day, nature attracts men supersaturated with a civilization that is nature's complete opposite."<sup>23</sup>



In the name of progress, development, industrialization (humanitarian imperialism)<sup>24</sup>, instinct and “natural” bodily functions are degraded to the point of annihilation: we “obliterate the traces of any natural corruption.”<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the *chora* and the carrefour of the erotics of the uncanny, this repugnance for the animal signifies ethnocentrism. Bataille declares: “We look down on [primitives] from our sanitary installations, and we give ourselves the impression of an unassailable purity”<sup>26</sup>—corporeal, aesthetic, and racial purity. In the context of this essay, ethnocentrism is not affiliation with a nation (ethnos) but an affiliation with race, religion, sexuality, and in particular, a taken-for-granted ethos, a masquerade of morality that supercedes the sacred. This masquerade effectively neutralizes difference: “one strives on all sides to reduce the differences between beings to external difference, separate and apart from an active intention to surpass and destroy animal na-

ture within us. On all sides, one strives to deny human value, because this value is essentially difference—between animals and man or between men; for this reason, one strives to reduce every difference to the insignificance of a material datum.”<sup>27</sup> Bataille’s exploration of sovereignty becomes a critical lens through which we can loosen the invisible grip of ethnocentrism: “Social difference is at the basis of sovereignty, and it is by positing sovereignty that the men of distant times gave differentiation its full scope.”<sup>28</sup> Difference is rooted and thrives in the unknown. “I define unalloyed sovereignty as the miraculous reign of unknowing.”<sup>29</sup>

Within my photographic work, the grotesque or disarrayed body of the other/the unfamiliar/the immigrant/the “monster” is intended to dislocate predetermined categories of identification. How I choreograph and exhibit my work is intended to encourage people to question the everydayness of violence—our invisible, habitual comfort zone deeply ingrained in our psyches. Through his narrator in *L’Histoire de l’Oeil*, Bataille asserts: “To others, the universe seems decent because decent people have gelded eyes. That is why they fear lewdness. In general, people savor the ‘pleasures of the flesh’ only on condition that they be insipid.”<sup>30</sup> Too often, anything outside of the familiar is deemed socially inappropriate, therefore deviant. We use the lowest common denominator of intellectual engagement as a justification for how we regulate the public realm. The tyranny of clarity reifies the violence of transparent representability, easily digestible taxonomies—diminishing the potential for a critical pedagogy rooted in participatory democracy: “Why, groping in these obscure places, must we plant explanations everywhere?”<sup>31</sup> Transparent representation feeds the illusion of neutrality; the violence of mediocrity permeates our everyday interactions and expectations. Like Kristeva’s unnameable *chora*, my images attempt to resist signification, the symbolic, transparent intelligibility.

To be civilized (i.e., the *unsacred* holy trinity of ethnocentrism, entertainment, and consumerism) is to adhere to the violence of representability, pre-determined agendas, and

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reductive reasoning. Again Bataille roars, “the person who protects himself the most anxiously from the various forms of defilement is also the person who enjoys the greatest prestige and who has the advantage over others. . . . He stands morally above the man who is careless about safeguarding himself and who lives like an animal, in filth.”<sup>32</sup> In this context, I am consciously conflating “civilization” with the civilizing/colonizing historical agendas of Christian ideology. The public domain embodies shame—we are taught to live in horror of the stranger within—the “natural defilements”<sup>33</sup> that our own bodies produce (the abject) and are produced by (sex and childbirth)<sup>34</sup>—that which breeds vulnerability. As an archeologist of prohibition, Bataille thrives within a specificity of entangled drives: “the sociologist and historian of religion focus every time upon particular taboos without first reminding themselves that, generally speaking, human life stripped of prohibitions is unthinkable.”<sup>35</sup>

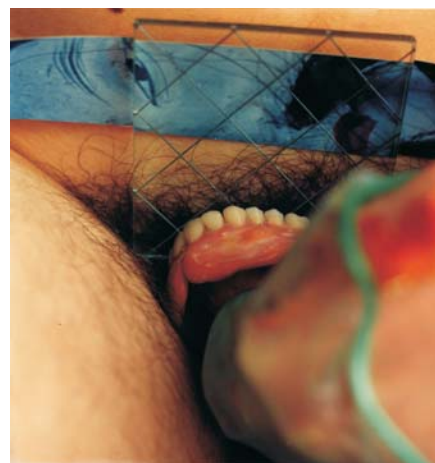
The both/and, the ambiguity of the sacred, as both prohibition and transgression, distinguishes human from animal. It is this process of thriving on contradictions, of allowing ourselves to be filled with awe and fascinated terror that invites the *carrefour*. It is the sacred ambiguous dialectic of prohibition and transgression that renders vulnerability as strength, and not to be overcome or denied. In my yoga teaching, writing, and my photographic process, I amplify vulnerability as a key to moving beyond self-censorship. My intention is always to make the world safe for life-affirming deviance: true play, humor, irony, desire, and pleasure. My body, my words, and my images struggle against the normalization-homogenization that dictates our society’s drive to assimilate, make familiar—what Freud identified as the “double [that] has become an object of terror.”<sup>36</sup>

Interrogated during the latter part of the Inquisition, fifteenth century saint Teresa de Avila’s heritage was one of entangled identities, a disfiguring amalgamation. She was in fact, the daughter of a “New Christian,” a Jew who was forced to convert to the Catholic Church. Inquisitional laws of *limpieza de sangre*, purity of blood, established illusory restrictions—boundaries

within self and between self and other—a desperate attempt to maintain a false integrity, integrity as separation from the other, from that which is contagious and contaminates. The trials to determine *limpieza de sangre* became a community ritual act of separation, of designating the individual as a static known, representable, definable entity. In contrast to the “purifying,” de-ciding rituals of civilization, embodied democracy hinges on the “coherent disorder”<sup>37</sup> of continually “engendering a new self.”<sup>38</sup> This erotics of the uncanny becomes a sacred commitment which ruptures the violence of our taken-for-granted democracy, i.e., civilization. Teresa de Avila, ingests, inhabits, embodies the stranger within:

Drastic fasting, penance, flagellation—often using bouquet nettle on open wounds, convulsions even to the point of epileptic comas which take advantage of neuronal and hormonal states: I’ve only named a few of the sadomasochistic extravagances that mark these on-going ‘exiles of the self’ in Him (to borrow one of Teresa’s expressions) or this transference toward the Other (to use my terms).<sup>39</sup>

Just as Teresa thrived in the inherent strangeness of herself as Christ’s lover, I seek to inhabit the strange, embed myself in the strange without feeling estranged. Bataille insists: “An entire human being is partly a clown, partly God, partly crazy.” Bataille implores, “he is not me but he is more than me: His stomach is the labyrinth in



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which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.”<sup>40</sup> Because the word monster shares its root with the verb to demonstrate, creating a spectacle breaks up pre-determined taxonomies.<sup>41</sup> By “demonstrating” the unnameable, the unknown, the spectacle disavows the neutral, undermining our societies’ masquerade of morality.

My commitment to this disavowal of neutrality compels me to help pry us loose from our societal addiction to the familiar and our fear of the ambiguous nature of interpretation—the monstrous, the spectral, the uncanny, the stranger within. Interpretations of the unspeakable have always been central to my critical and creative work as a Turkish Hispanic Jewish visual artist, political sex activist, and yoga teacher. Hybrid identities straddle both private and public spheres simultaneously. Using the body as a manifestation of identity, my photographs/videos become sites that explore this schizophrenic slippage between violence and the sacred as a terrain for invoking individual and social consciousness. My photographs “figure the unfigurable by disfiguring figures.”<sup>42</sup> This rendering formless through image-making becomes a sacred act. The sacred plays out the inter-relating complexities of the *carrefour* as embodied rhizomatic vulnerabilities<sup>43</sup>—simultaneous multiple, contradictory pathways. The simultaneity and non-binarism of inside/outside, order/disorder, public/private animate the sacred:

The more intense the force, the more promising its efficaciousness. From this derives the temptation to change defilement into benediction, to make the impure an instrument of purification. . . . Horror is changed to trust. . . . The more impure it is, the more potent it is considered . . . the more repugnant and dangerous the remedy, the more efficacious it is. . . . By violating the most sacred of taboos, man acquires the perilous co-operation of supernatural forces, almost like signing a pact with the devil in order to become a sorcerer.<sup>44</sup>

These uncertainties help me explore my own ambiguous desires and fears about my body and its internal and external designated “disorder”—breaking up pre-determined taxonomies. The ab-

ject provokes instincts that are at the root of being: hunger, love, and violence. “Freud insists . . . these instincts cannot be expressed directly but must be misrepresented through a certain disfiguring . . . hallucinatory, violent, monstrous.”<sup>45</sup> My images explore Kristeva’s discussions of the fertile intersections that the abject produces. My images disarticulate our expectations of the body. They are about the physics of touch and the fluidity of perception in our supposedly solid world—objects and bodies (including my own) collide in contradictory spaces that blur the lines that separate them. I play with Bataille’s sacrifice of the self and Kristeva’s pathos, a “monstrous intimacy,” as a process of multi-layered storytelling in which ambiguity no longer signifies a lack of clarity, but presents a multiplicity of clarities. What emerges is a luminescent excess that inhabits both the domestic and the animal.



The abject would thus be this intermediary position—neither subject nor object—for which the psychiatric term “borderline” would prove to be extremely useful. . . . In this, Kristeva’s conception of the abject is curiously congruent with Sartre’s characterization of the *visqueux* (slimy), a condition of matter that is neither liquid nor solid, but somewhere midway between the two.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Kristeva’s *le monstre de carrefour* not only overflows with her own personal polyphony, her linguistic hybridity, but also *le monstre de carrefour* invokes vulnerability, as does Bataille’s festival: the chiasmic potential of the unknown—the sacrifice of the self. While the body becomes the quintessential *carrefour* of vi-

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olence and the sacred, sex pulsates at this bio-political intersection. The shameful acts our bodies commit (defecating, bleeding, sweating, crying, vomiting, intercourse, childbirth, death) coincide with the acts committed on our bodies (rape, media tyranny, internalized self-hatred and/or self-respect). The festival serves as a cathartic function of the sacred as transgression. It is

frenetic and orgiastic. . . . It is understood that the festival, being such a paroxysm of life and cutting so violently into the anxious routine of everyday life, seems to the individual like another world in which he feels sustained and transformed by powers that are beyond him. [Ironically, i]n reality, the festival is often regarded as the dominion of the sacred. . . . Excess constantly accompanies the festival . . . the sole manifestation of the sacred may be in the form of taboos, which protect against anything capable of threatening the cosmic regularity. . . . It is a matter of contradicting the rules. Everything is done in reverse. . . . The festival represents a complex totality. . . . It implies the elimination of the waste-material produced by the functioning of every economy and the defilement associated with the exercise of all power. In addition, one returns to the creative chaos, the *rudis indigestaque moles*, from which the organized universe was born and reborn . . . in its pure form, the festival must be defined as the paroxysm of society, purifying and renewing it simultaneously.<sup>47</sup>

Through continual non-arrival, indeterminate creatures (like woman and her bodily processes), chaos-cosmos cycle, pre-order, pre-laws, pre-separation, the *festival* simultaneously encompasses and manifests the entire process of sex, death, rebirth, and life.<sup>48</sup> Callois's/Bataille's festival projects Kristeva's *carrefour* into the public sphere:

"The festival," Bataille avers, "is the fusion of human life. For the thing and the individual, it is the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life." The heat that transforms difference into identity is generated by transgressive acts that violate the boundaries separating good and evil, "crimes" of violence and eroticism open the realm of divine intimacy. In *Death and Sensuality*:

*A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, Bataille claims that "the final aim of eroticism is fusion, all barriers gone." This fusion is a coincidentia oppositorum in which eros is thanatos and death is life. . . . When life is death and death is life, one passes beyond the limits of reality into the surreality of the sacred. . . . Forever incomprehensible in any system—be it philosophical, religious, or economic—the folly of surrealism is the "non-knowledge" that Bataille associates with the ecstasy of "inner experience." . . . Through the work of art, surrealists seek a return of the agonizing ecstasy that was once present in religious ritual. Art, in other words, re-presents what religion once presented.<sup>49</sup>



My photographs are consciously choreographed *festivals* that resonate with Bataille's declaration: "Death is . . . the wonder-struck cry of life." They demand a dialogic self-sacrifice—not losing oneself to an undifferentiated whole, but detaching from pre-determined agendas.<sup>50</sup> My images dismember expectation from the unknown—they require a death of everything we have learned and internalized as normative behavior:<sup>51</sup> "Dying and coming back was what Bataille thought communication is about."<sup>52</sup>

"The erasure of the individual entails a violence that provokes terror. Violence and the sacred join in sacrifice."<sup>53</sup> This contradiction demands an examination of relationality: "the sacred involves right or wrong action and is imbued with the opposing qualities of pure and im-

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pure, holy and sacrilegious.”<sup>54</sup> This shedding of the illusion of individuality, this self-sacrifice in the sense of release of entitlement and ownership but also as precisely the openness of vulnerability, if used consciously can become an explicit and emancipatory strategy for erotic agency. Within this field of vulnerability, we are embedded in an interdependent rhizomatic dialogue. A dialogic self-sacrifice, inherent in the erotics of the uncanny, becomes a practice of the abject that provokes terror because it shows, demonstrates, monstrifies how we are all connected.<sup>55</sup> This sacrifice invites collaborative citizenship in which one embodies “the experience of oneself as a foreign body.”<sup>56</sup> Kristeva’s analysis of Teresa’s relationship of her devotion to the divine explicitly moves from metaphors to metamorphosis—a change inherent in embracing the unknown, the unfamiliar:

Teresa immerses herself above the barrier of word-signs in the psyche-soma. . . . The prayer which amalgamates the ego and the Other also amalgamates the word and the thing: the speaking subject nearly undergoes . . . a catastrophic mutism the self “loses itself,” “liquefies,” “becomes delirious.” Halfway between these two extremes, a thin membrane rather than a bar separates the word from the thing: they contaminate each other and alternately dissociate. The self loses itself and finds itself again devastated and jubilant, in an impossible space. . . . [An] experience of engendering a new self, nestled in the Other, a self that loves the Other, that this self reabsorbs and that the Other, in turn, absorbs.<sup>57</sup>

Embodying the “psyche-soma”<sup>58</sup> as a self-sacrifice enables the possibility of giving up control—an embodiment which creates a violence of shedding ego and social(ized) expectations. It is this dexamiento, Kristeva’s exploration of Teresa’s state of abandon, that allows us to jump into the unknown, the work of art: “A work of art, a sacrifice . . . every sacrifice has its cause in the quest for a sacred instant that, for an instant, puts to rout the profane time in which prohibitions guarantee the possibility of life.”<sup>59</sup> A collaborative call and response demands the vulnerability inherent in the dis-figuring, the

*écriture* of the abject. Vulnerability becomes a textual jouissance. This dis-figurement offers *le déreglement de tous les sens*—an invocation of Kristeva’s description of *écriture*: “What is unrepresentability? That which, through language, is part of no particular language: rhythm, music, instinctual balm. That which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject.”<sup>60</sup>



The same could be said for erotic politics. Erotic politics unfold as Caribbean-French poet philosopher Edouard Glissant’s “modern form of the sacred.”<sup>61</sup> The uncanny dialogue among our rhizomatic vulnerabilities generates “the possibility of refiguring the sacred by rethinking the interplay of art, ethics, and religion . . . [in order to] revitalize the experience of divinity in a secular world.”<sup>62</sup> Revitalization of both individual and social bodies requires layers of mind-body awareness. There is no hierarchy within these multiple entwinements of body intelligence and body wisdom. The divine cannot be segregated, localized, or categorized; it is inherently messy, relational. *Le carrefour*, Kristeva’s boundary-crossings, is precisely what constitutes art. Similarly, Bataille’s characters’ plurality of impulses help me feel at ease in my own body—dissonant and rich with sensual and political potential. Their “brutal frenzy” and surrender to the “lewd” confirms who I am, who I have always been. Bataille’s lush, precise excesses and his

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fertility of chaos spawn an economy of over-abundance, an erotics of the uncanny, digesting the stranger within—an assimilation of the other which is not about annihilation, but a full body-mind submission to Kristeva's *carrefour*. My body and creative work force me to regurgitate and re-imbibe Teresa de Avila's orality, her haptic disfiguring of her rhizomatic psyche-soma, her erotics of the uncanny. I am forced to recognize what Bataille insisted on in his *Tears of Eros*:

the end of reason, which exceeds reason is not opposed to the overcoming of reason. In the violence of the overcoming, in the disorder of my laughter and my sobbing, in the excess of raptures that shatter me, I seize on the similarity between a horror and a voluptuousness that goes beyond me, between an ultimate pain and an unbearable joy! (20) One does not feel anything, one simply takes pleasure without knowing what one is taking pleasure in" (18:1); "deprived even of feeling" (18:4); "a kind of delirium" (18:13). It is a matter of the positive and negative, of *jouissance* and extreme pain, always the two together or alternating. This concoction crushes and exiles the body in a fainting fit where the psyche is in turn, decimated "outside the self," before the soul is able to trigger the narration of the state of "loss."<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, Thomas Mann's "voluptuousness of doom" invokes the physical and psychological uncertainty of the universe—a co-mingling of Eros and Thanatos.

Nevertheless, I resist the slippage between eroticism and death, so common in French philosophy and psychoanalysis: "Pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moment of climax as a 'little death.'"<sup>64</sup> My resistance honors the sacred violence (violence which implies transformation, implies life) of the body; while in contrast, "Bataille suffers from a strong physical revulsion in the domain of sexuality. 'The body is a thing; it is vile.' He links erotic activity not to reproduction or to pleasure but to pain and death."<sup>65</sup>

In the context of viewing erotic activity through the lens of scarcity, negation in this sense not as relational, but as reactionary, Bataille

weaves eroticism into an emptying out of possibility—a draining of resources, energy, integrity. Instead, I am drawn towards Kristeva's version of eroticism: when we swallow the other we become ourselves. I cling to experiencing the erotic within the context of living life as fully as possible. In my photography, I use this vulnerability, the uncanny, the entanglement, the not knowing one's way as a pedagogical strategy. I thrive in the dissolution of the illusion of autonomy. Just as Kristeva declares, "'I' become myself by swallowing the Other;" Baudelaire "claimed 'to become a reality' (*Paradis artificiels*) [is] not to be like the other but to be the other."<sup>66</sup>

This erotic politics disrupts and reorients our cultural constructs of pleasure and vulnerability, and ultimately who has power and control over our bodies—setting the groundwork for a citizenship that embraces the fertility of the uncanny—the unfamiliar and its accompanying relational tensions.

It is obviously the combination of abhorrence and desire that gives the sacred world a paradoxical character, holding the one who considers it without cheating in a state of anxious fascination. What is sacred undoubtedly corresponds to the object of horror I have spoken of, a fetid, sticky object without boundaries, which teems with life and yet is the sign of death. . . . But would he withdraw if he were not tempted? Would the object nauseate him if it offered him nothing desirable?"<sup>67</sup>

Sacrificing normative homogeneity, my images are flush with the terror provoking abject, the terror provoking loss of individual boundaries.<sup>68</sup> My intention is to disrupt the distinction between the interior and exterior of both psychological and physical experiences—exploring the "psyche-soma" as a membrane between sensuality and restraint, surrender and resistance. They illuminate a call and response between anxiety and beauty: Anxiety in the moment of recognizing the familiar within the unfamiliar—feeling a connection with the other, yet clinging to a separate identification and resisting empathy; beauty in the moment of responsiveness to our undeniable connectedness. Caillois delves into a resonant "sacred dialectic": "Confronted by the di-

vine, Saint Augustine is chilled with horror and transported with love. ‘*Et inhorresco,*’ he writes, ‘*et inardesco.*’ He explains that his horror comes about by his realization of the absolute disparity between his being and that of the sacred, and he explains his ardor by his awareness of their fundamental identity.”<sup>71</sup> The uncanny sacred, as a manifestation of erotic politics, can never be cut/ de-cided in a binary, but must be relational—it demands vulnerability, which requires the ineffable, play, inquiry, dialogue.



Although my images are consciously choreographed, the relationships are born out of an improvisation in which gravity and balance unfold. The quotidian in relation to the sensual spectacle sets up a ritualistic narrative—a collision of strewn bodies and space is simultaneously purposeful and haphazard. The result is a conversation between image, movement, and sound woven together—unraveling the performance of photography and the performance of its viewing. My images inhabit Kristeva’s *carrefour*—hy-

brids of machine and animal that populate dream-like worlds. Through a carnal visual language, polymorphic bodies are engaged in ambiguous ceremonies.

In 2009, in Berlin, I had the opportunity to engage with Kristeva at the Kristeva conference titled “*La Pensée Féconde,*” “Fertile Thinking.” My photographs were projected behind Kristeva as she responded to participating panelists who lectured on a particular aspect of her work. I was gratified to witness my photographs and her words envelop one another: choice and chance co-existing in an elliptical continuum, voice and image animating and digesting one another. Through “promiscuous crossings,” Kristeva as the speaker, myself as the image-maker, and the audience as those who filled in the in-between spaces, formed the quintessential dialectic. This visual improvisation required that each of us give up ownership and entitlement and enter a rhizomatic field of vulnerability, a surrender to dialogic self-sacrifice. Multiple voices and visions (in the haptic sense) contradicted themselves while maintaining their integrity as autonomous objects of speculation. Speculation emerges from specularly, our double shadow side, the unknown. Thus, the nature of interpretation, communication, itself becomes an uncanny act. The uncanny is my political strategy, an erotic ethic, a commitment to aesthetics as multiple and relational. A dialectics of no resolution resounds with my commitment to art as erotic politics—one in which binary codes do not dictate our decision-making process; but rather, how ambiguity, metaphor, aphorisms, the eternal not-yet lead us to the give-take of continual non-arrival.

## NOTES

1. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 237.
2. As an extension of US imperialism, I am referring to imperialist psychological tourism as the ways in which citizen-subjects internalize the violence of the

everyday—a violence that breeds convenience culture. This daily violence can be characterized by how and why we embody constructed desires and fears of our own bodies and of difference. The Other, the immigrant within, is positioned as perpetual outsider, internalizing the illusion that vulnerability is deviant and obscene. Institutionalized constructions of vul-

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- nerability bind the psychological to the physical: we learn that to be accepted we must feel shame. The body has become a *spectacle* of its own invisibility—an alienated, mythified, commodified site of colonization. Our body becomes the stranger within—i.e., we become the spectacle of our own invisibility: “I feel much drawn to [Julia Kristeva’s] evocation of the ‘happy cosmopolitan,’ foreign not only to others but to him or herself, harboring not an essence but a ‘pulverized origin.’” Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 230.
3. See Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the banality of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1963).
  4. Audre Lorde’s phrase identifies how we experience the other within ourselves as a key to provoke social agency.
  5. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 695.
  6. Roger Caillois, “The Sacred as Transgression: Theory of Festival,” in *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 127.
  7. *Ibid.*
  8. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 56.
  9. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. II, III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 431n1.
  10. Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 274.
  11. “Taboo refers to an object, place, person, or action in which ‘holiness and pollution are not yet differentiated.’” Frazer cited in Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 30. Caillois, Bataille’s cohort through “intellectual osmosis;” cohort defines taboo as always and already relational: “taboos are created in order to protect the *ordo mundi*, the universal order of both nature and society” (8).
  12. *Ibid.*, 100.
  13. Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, 32.
  14. Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 241
  15. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 221.
  16. Georges Bataille, *The Great Centuries of Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art* (Switzerland: SKIRA, 1955), 56.
  17. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. I*, 58.
  18. Bataille, *Lascaux*, 28.
  19. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. I*, 62.
  20. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Shekman, 1975).
  21. Caillois, “The Ambiguity of the Sacred,” in *Man and the Sacred*, 18.
  22. What I am identifying here as a tria-lectic is a manifestation of Kristeva’s concept of the *carrefour*—a rhizomatic approach to exploring the body in society. This simultaneity of interwoven contradictory narratives provokes the potential for an emancipatory erotics. Moving beyond the dialectic into a territory of the infinitude of an elliptical continuum, the trialectical chora that emanates these multiple enfoldments can become an emancipatory strategy for political change by reminding us of our responsibility to expand what we think we see: “Obscenity is a relation. . . . This is obscene if some person sees it and says it is; it is not exactly an object, but rather a relation between an object and the mind of a person. . . . These situations are unstable; they always include ill-defined elements, or if they have some stability, this involves a degree of arbitrariness” (Bataille, *The Accursed Share, vol. II*, 54). Obscenity in relation to contradiction/ambiguity and in relation to the vulnerable and its concomitant sacred acts becomes the groundwork in which we can learn to embody the potency of Kristeva’s *carrefour* as the erotics of the uncanny—the stranger within the self.
  23. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. I*, 69.
  24. See Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed, 1991). Although the term humanitarian imperialism is not explicitly used, all the authors in *The Development Dictionary* explore the hierarchical, ethnocentric assumptions rooted in development politics.
  25. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. I*, 63.
  26. *Ibid.*, 66.
  27. *Ibid.*, 69.
  28. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. II, III*, 349.
  29. *Ibid.*, 440n3.
  30. Georges Bataille, *L’Histoire de L’Oeil* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1928), 42.
  31. Bataille, *Lascaux*, 35–36.
  32. *Ibid.*, 67, 68.
  33. *Ibid.*, 66.
  34. For an extended discussion of our society’s contemptuous institutional behavior toward sex in relation to childbirth, see my forthcoming article, “Post-Hu-

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- manism: Vulnerability and the Politics of the Imagination” in *Transformations*.
35. Bataille, *Lascaux*, 31.
  36. Nicholas Royale, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 137.
  37. *Ibid.*, 73.
  38. Keynote Speech, Julia Kristeva, “The Passion According to Teresa de Avila,” Julia Kristeva Colloquium, *La Pensée Féconde*. Institut für Romanistik, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Germany, 2009.
  39. *Ibid.*
  40. Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 237, citing Bataille.
  41. Rather than referring to Debord’s use of the term spectacle as an erasure of consciousness, the ability to distinguish between representation and that which is being represented, but precisely the opposite—Barthes’s use of the term spectacle in “the Other [who] threatens to appear in full view.” Thus, in Barthes’s discussion, the Other cannot be obscene, the chora, the *carrefour*—that explosive enfolding of Otherness cannot be obscene—rather, ethnocentrism and its illusory neutrality literally manifests as the obscene.
  42. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 240.
  43. This recognition becomes a practice of being open to vulnerability—the raw exposure of participating in unknown territory.
  44. Caillois, “The Ambiguity of the Sacred,” 45–48.
  45. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 239.
  46. Krauss, “The Use Value of Formless,” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 237, 238.
  47. Callois, “The Sacred as Transgression,” 98–99, 101, 114, 124–25.
  48. See another variation of embodying the uncanny in Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
  49. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 235.
  50. “Yoga Neighboring Freud,” presented at *Le Pensée Féconde* Kristeva conference in Berlin, 2009.
  51. I am positioning death in a Spinozian (another Sepharic Jew) “productive” context rooted in the possibilities of interpretation. For a detailed discussion of Spinoza in this light, see Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (New York: Random House, 2006).
  52. See Sylvere Lotringer’s Introduction to Georges Bataille’s “On Nietzsche,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, (London: Continuum, 1992), viii.
  53. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 233–34.
  54. Caillois, “The Ambiguity of the Sacred,” 37.
  55. Wounds are an outward expression of the object. Wounds, the inexplicable, the ineffable, the undecidable, the unknowable, become a direct passage between the concealed and the revealed, a dynamic tension between the public and the private. For an in-depth discussion of “de-cidability,” see my doctoral dissertation from the European Graduate School: *Visualizing the Uncanny: Ménage à Trois: ars eritucam ars theoretica, ars politica* (2012).
  56. Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2.
  57. Kristeva, “The Passion According to Teresa of Avila.”
  58. In the context of Teresa’s ecstatic religion, Kristeva invokes D. W. Winnicott’s term “psyche-soma”: “state of *regression* where the thinking individual loses the contours of his/her identity and below the threshold of conscious becomes a ‘psyche-soma.’ . . . Another kind of ‘thought’ results from this, a non-thought, an underwater dive which the term ‘mind’ does not convey as well as ‘sensorial representation’ or the ‘psyche-soma’: as if the reasoning ‘mind’ went from being in the world to an ‘imaginary elaboration’ whose locus is in the entire body, touching-feeling the outside and the inside, both its own physiological functions and the outside world . . . the psyche is body (soma) and the body (soma) is psyche” (Kristeva, “The Passion According to Teresa of Avila”).
  59. Bataille, *Lascaux*, 39.
  60. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 140.
  61. Edouard Glissant conjures a collective “desire to go against the [monolingual] root. . . . The root is not important. Movement is. Center and periphery are equivalent. . . . [This relationship involves] revelatory wanderings: spiral retelling; dialectics of rerouting, asserting . . . political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community’s reason for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, Poetics of Relation.” *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 16.
  62. Taylor, *Disfiguring Art*, 10, 18.
  63. Kristeva, “The Passion According to Teresa de Avila.”
  64. Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, 170.
  65. Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 241.

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66. Kristeva, "The Passion According to Teresa de Avila." Lavater, cited in Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 43.
67. Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. I*, 95.
69. Caillois, "The Ambiguity of the Sacred," 37.
71. "Individuum est ineffabile" (Goethe, in a letter to

European Graduate School (EGS), Saas-Fee, Switzerland