

ARIEL MARTÍNEZ*, LUCIANO NICOLÁS ARÉVALO,
TOMÁS MANUEL GOMARIZ, GUILLERMO SEBASTIÁN SUZZI

The queer potential of the abject

The agency of matter and radical negativity

in Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger*

ABSTRACT: We present our thoughts here on British-Palestinian¹ artist Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger* (1994), a video-installation consisting of endoscopic images of the inside of the artist's own body projected from beneath the glass floor of a cylindrical booth. In a departure from the social constructionist proposal of Judith Butler, who emphasizes the role normative ideals play in the construction of the body by imposing an imaginary morphological ideal (assigning some parts of the body to a position in a hierarchy while dismissing others), this performative work of art is analyzed in the light of an emerging theoretical field known as New Materialism. Using this perspective, a return to materiality is proposed as a counterpoint to hyper-constructionist queer thought, presented here as inadequate for addressing the complexity of the agency of matter and its relation with meaning. Similarly, and in agreement with criticism of that sector of queer theory which revolves around representation and silences or demonizes materiality and its processes, we suggest connections between material agency and antisocial queer negativity, which some theorists link to the death drive. On the basis of these theoretical connections we utilize some non-essentialist viewpoints of the body that enable us to see that Hatoum's video-installation confronts us with a corporal dimension which manifests itself as an eruption of matter outside the limits of linguistic mediation. *Corps étranger* constitutes a potent onto-epistemological resource that brings us closer on the one hand to integrating the agency of matter into the definition of what it is to be human, and on the other, to the recovery of queer theory's potential to make peace with dimensions that cannot be confined to the limits of language.

KEYWORDS: body; abject; matter; presentation; psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION

The present critical study has been conceived as part of the activities of an intellectual group called 'QUIASMO'.² This group has dedicated a great

¹ This article has been edited on July 2021 to correctly qualify Mona Hatoum as British-Palestinian, instead of Lebanese.

² For several years, this group has been dedicated to the study of the body from a point of view articulated on the basis of key ontological and epistemological ideas which owe a great deal to new critical and non-foundationalist materialism. The group is registered in the Centro Interdis-

deal of thought and discussion to the concept of the body in the light of criticism articulated with the advent of psychoanalysis in the early 20th century and further developed with the contributions of different types of ontological materialism in the last several decades. For a variety of reasons, we affirm here that neo-materialism offers powerful theoretical tools for approaching the concept of the body from a novel angle. It is a perspective too which challenges psychoanalysis, post-structural philosophy, and Anglo-American queer theory of the late 20th century. This appears unavoidable given the impact of the corresponding postulates and the relevance they have acquired on the current academic scene, as well as in the construction of some of the most prominent neo-materialistic views. If queer theory has acquired considerable political and theoretical power since the late eighties, it has been able to do so thanks mainly to its criticism of extra-discursive identities. Such a rejection of all essential and natural connotations of the idea of what it is to be human has been strongly connected to the concept that sees our bodies as the result of discursive power relations. It can be traced back to the hyper-constructionist approach that Judith Butler derived from the thinking of Michel Foucault (2008), and which has provided her with analytical vectors that reveal the power of the discursive dimension (BUTLER 1990). In a contrasting opinion, Stacy Alaimo has pointed out that:

the predominant trend in the last few decades of feminist theory has been to diminish the significance of materiality. Predominant paradigms do not deny the material existence of the body, of course, but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter. (2008: 237)

The appearance of Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) on the French academic scene made a significant contribution to the post-modern concept of the body. Towards the end of the 20th century, when the body ceased to connote totality, closure, and an ontological basis, Kristeva called attention to bodily fragments and physical residues as demonstrations of the unrelenting and uncontrollable force of matter. The visual arts in particular have, as Rina Arya (2014) noted later, been interested in Kristeva's

ciplinario de Investigaciones en Género (CInIG) of the Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (IdIHCS, UNLP/CONICET).

contributions regarding the body. While North American post-structuralism understood the body as matter of signification and attempted to subvert the norm on the basis of the norm by means of resignifications in discourse, a wide range of performing artists involved the materiality of their bodies in a variety of extreme experiences. They thus concerned themselves with pushing the body beyond the limits of representation in a search for bodily presentations that could not possibly be contained within normative limits.

In the present proposal we wish to link abjection, performance, and body on the basis of a conception of *queer* that acknowledges the limits of language. In this way, the psychoanalytical root of the concept of abject leads us to rescue from essentialism or biologicism a series of categories that do not fall within the scope of social constructionism. The concept of drive, and the idea of sexuality that is derived from it, presents us with a negative, anti-social force that can serve as a powerful tool for criticism (EDELMAN 2004; BERSANI 2010). Here, we prefer to interpret this radical and anti-social negative manifestation as an expression of the agency of matter and an opportunity to reevaluate the existence of what might well lie beyond stigmatized identities. Thus it is that the scenic character of performance art is particularly suitable for the irruption of this negative force which eludes any possible discursive nomination. In the same way, corporal abjection fails to receive its due in the experiential chronicle.

Neo-materialists have harsh criticism for what they define as an extreme representationalism that is incapable of acknowledging processes specific to matter and emphasize the vitality and agency of matter beyond anthropic action. This emerging perspective implies, in the words of Diana Coole and Samantha Frost:

returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world; it means taking heed of developments in the natural sciences as well as attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment. (2010: 3)

It is relevant in both political and theoretical terms to point out that this view does not pretend to make matter the necessary basis for a given social order, nor does it suggest that it is a primary and essential datum from which a certain order of signification is to be developed, nor does it even

assign matter any relevance beyond its interactive connection with the order of signification. This view does make relevant contributions, however, to our approach to the notion of body, because they permit epistemological insights capable of making room for corporal dimensions that cannot be reduced to representation and language, so that the limits of these can now become the subject of reflection and discussion.

Without doubt, one of the productive groups of society that is open to the implications of neo-materialistic philosophy is that of artists, and as noted by intellectuals who belong to this group (SCHNEIDER 2015; JONES 2015), performance artists in particular. Performance art contains elements that align with certain aspects of neo-materialistic inquiry. In this regard, we should note the interest in the experiential and in the ephemeral and *live* character of the idea of performance, which casts doubt on and even contradicts modern western concepts of art production (ALCÁZAR 2014). This ephemeral character alludes, in short, to the inextricable linking of action and reception. Performance, from this perspective, emphasizes presentation over representation, since it is not intended to be the symbolic translation of something else but that which, by definition, disappears as soon as it is constituted and therefore eludes representational closure (PHELAN 2011).

It is against this background that we propose here to approach the idea of bodily material in the light of psychoanalytic and post-structuralist contributions based on neo-materialistic ideas as they relate to the contemplation of a work of performative art. The work in question is Mona Hatoum's video-installation titled *Corps étranger* (1994)³ and consists of endoscopic images of the inside of the artist's own body projected from beneath the glass floor of a cylindrical booth (ANTONI & HATOUM 1998). Beyond the experience of the viewers/participants of this work – and therefore of the unfolding of the components of performance art that we have pointed out as relevant – interest in the video-installation increases dramatically in response to its peculiar presentation of the body and, at the same time, due to the way in which it fractures the possibility of representational depiction.

³ *Corps étranger* was staged for the first time in 1994 at the Musée National d'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris. There are several websites where one can find images of the piece and fragments of the videos that compose it. For reference, we include the following link: <https://art-contemporain.tv/mobile/27737/video-de-loeuvre-de-loeuvre-corps-etrange-de-mona-hatoum.html> (available on June 6th 2020)

I

The body has been the subject of analysis of a considerable range of queer thinkers whose ideas revolve around post-structuralist principles. These thinkers offer, far from any essentialism, considerations for regarding body morphology as an effect of the regulative power of normative schemes (MARTÍNEZ 2018). The body, then, is a complex construction in which highly intertwined but distinct social, political, normative, and material forces intervene. Similarly, Lacanian formulations regarding the mirror stage (LACAN 2009) are taken into account such that it is possible to understand body image and Self as being configured in the same movement based on identification with a reflected image that imposes unity on an experience characterized by partiality, fragmentation, and the lack of coordination. Specular reflection returns to the *infans* a borrowed, orthopedic totality that retroactively produces the fantasy of a dismembered body, meaning that “this operation not only prospectively inaugurates the unicity of the body that the image in the mirror reflects... but also retroactively initiates a body in pieces” (MARTÍNEZ 2018: 29). For Lacan, the mirror stage is when typification of the constitution of the Self takes place as a primordial identification, fundamental for any identifications to come. It is on the basis of this identification with a specular image that the Self is constituted as a unity that permits the suturing of a collection of body fragments. The Self appears, then, as an “illusion of unity [...] [which] entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started” (LACAN 1953: 15). Fragmentation instituted retroactively from the specular operation threatens the Self configured in that same movement with its return.

As is well known, Butler (2010) states that every body is articulated and becomes intelligible constrained by the violence of a normative ideal of unicity established by modern ontology. The complex process that Lacan refers to is not conceivable, then, as being outside a social dimension that imposes unity as a normative formal ideal. The subject is constituted from the identification with a specular image that is normatively composed. The subject acquires self-awareness in the same process which configures that identity whose borders coincide with the limits of the superficial body. For Butler (1989, 1993) the body acquires existence – comes to be intelligible – from the imposition of a normative morphology that outlines its limits. The normative ideals of modernity form the body, hierarchically organizing some areas and

suppressing others, and ensure the exaltation of the sphere of representation and the demonization of materiality and its processes. In this regard, we can recover the contributions of Kaja Silverman (1988), who suggested that the entry to the symbolic has as a consequence the loss of certain parts that are affirmed beyond the normatively delineated body image and that in turn make up the field of the abject, the unintelligible, the inhuman.

The performance effected through Hatoum's video-installation, entitled *Corps étranger*, experientially invokes the force of the rejected we are alluding to: the force which manifests itself within the interstices of linguistic representation. *Corps étranger* stages aspects that cannot be entirely integrated into the image of an intelligible body as such, normatively indicated by totality and unification. This allows us to reflect upon the horror – in Cavarero's terms (2009) – that Hatoum's work is capable of triggering, as it exposes us to the uncanny alien quality of an interior that is presumed to be absolutely personal and private. Her video-installation orients us towards the inversion implicit in a body presented as pure fragmentation, towards the *chaos* that threatens the unicity, totality and integrity and that “offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses” (CAVARERO 2009: 25). Hatoum's performance confronts us with a bodily dimension that cannot be reduced to the scope of representation of a narrative. This dimension, far from being deep within, constitutes radical otherness, a foreign quality that is affirmed beyond all representation, a true *foreign body*.⁴

Hatoum makes us spectators of a series of endoscopic images, and the more these images differ from conventional representations of the body, the greater the strength becomes of that dimension beyond the normative representation of the body, that dimension of pure negativity which cannot be positivized, conceived of, or integrated into language, one that is identified with a figure of the conceivable. It is, in short, a collection of raw images resistant to the hegemonic mediation of sense, and while they do not cease to be in some way symbolic themselves, they present a negativity

⁴ It should be noted that whereas the term *étranger* is mainly translated from French as *foreign*, referring to something or someone that comes from a country different from one's own, the compound form *corps étranger* alludes, as a medical term, to a body or particle of biological or inert origin introduced voluntarily or involuntarily into a part of an organism that it does not belong to (Royal Academy of Medicine of Spain 2012). Furthermore, another possible definition of the term *étranger* is unusual or unfamiliar; difficult to comprehend or peculiar. Thus, the name of the work allows for multiple interpretations and can be translated as foreign body, strange body, or alien body.

that threatens to cripple any all-encompassing pretensions (MARTÍNEZ Y MORA 2020).

II

The performative video-staging of this artwork can be described as a circular space between two semicircular partitions with two openings in each one. The floor is a circular glass plate through which close-up video images of several internal characteristics of Hatoum's body are projected upwards while the viewers stand and look at them, which are at a distance equivalent to the height of the beholder's own body. These images are cast from immediately below the feet and invade the eyes and ears; one might say that the feet provide tactile contact with the images.

The most disturbing images in *Corps étranger* are those of the visceras. These have been captured with optic instruments (endoscope and colonoscope) used to examine segments of the digestive system. Hatoum presents a journey through a visual sequence complemented by an ultrasound recording of the deep echo of the heartbeat in different parts of the body together with the sounds of Hatoum's body fluids and breathing. Like deep and dark catacombs, remote from the rational light of the modern western logos, the cavities of the body are explored by camera in a labyrinthine quest for orifices. In this descent into deep places, the visceral tunnels do not lead anywhere anymore. As in a scene from a horror film, the observer finds himself in a dark room, wandering by means of the camera until running repeatedly into living, viscous, and vibrating walls that have a tendency to rumble truculently at the slightest provocation. The end of this wandering seems to be the return to a luminous and oxygenated exterior that is very reassuring, but the feeling of relief turns into one of terror when we realize that we have travelled through the interior of the artist's body.

Hatoum's performative installation is not interested in representing the body. It rather reveals a bodily aspect that in its presentation pierces us with the rawness of a dimension that does not admit of symbolic mediation. At the same time, the experience of this visceral descent puts us in the place of a swallowed, and potentially disposed of, object. In this way, it generates conditions of identification not with an idealized and totalizing image, but with that which it is necessary to expel if there is to be any idealization. This absorption into the deep darkness of the cavities of the body is a descent towards a nether region in which the normative force of

cultural ideals of the body seems to lose its power to assign limits. We are talking here about a pure type of materiality that, far from lending itself to discursive exposition, defies reduction to absolute symbolic taxonomies. And while discursive mediations impede our appreciating the resonance of this materiality when we only see the illuminated surfaces of our bodies, the depths of Hatoum's body remind us of how terrifying and upsetting it can be when the presumption of representation and its ability to assign and distribute agency are discredited.

Hatoum's video-installation can be described as an experiential call to recognize the existence of the force of the negative to which we have alluded: the one that acts within the interstices of linguistic representation. Following this line of discourse, we mean to refer to the (re)presentation⁵ of that bodily materiality which is not susceptible to control within the sphere of representation. Some reflections expressed in performance studies have shown interest in the live character of performance art, insofar as it cannot be reproduced or re-presented. The performative experience takes place by virtue of its being live, the display of the live and ephemeral character of the lived experience and present-time action. This non-permanence, at least in the view of Peggy Phelan (2011), compels the performance arts to disappear as they are constituted. In the author's words, "performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded,

⁵ The psychoanalysis of linking configurations – engendered and consolidated within our local setting – offers the notion of *presence*. Confronted with the problem of the annulment and reduction of the otherness to the intrapsychic, it has become relevant to affirm the extraterritoriality of the Other with regard to the representational structure that organizes the mental sphere (FRIEDLER 1998). Among Argentinian authors, we single out Isidoro Berenstein (2001), who moves away from object relations psychoanalysis, which he considers objects since they are internal re-presentations of external Others, and emphasizes the presentation of the Other as an external and autonomous center of activity. The first case refers to an object whose externality depends on representational production; the second, to the alienness that cannot be incorporated into signification. On the basis of these considerations, otherness cannot be completely subsumed under re-presentation. The alien, Berenstein states, cannot be symbolized, it is immune to representational modeling and inherent to the presence of otherness. We can go a step further: with the word "(re)presentation" we wish to call attention to the unavoidable tension between the impossibility of avoiding representational mediation when it comes to signifying experience and making it intelligible to the world, and the attempt to allude to the portrayal of an insistent presence that only the scenic is able to contain. We speculatively bet on the existence of this presentation articulated within representation although inarticulable under its terms. This presence has ontological interest, given that it withdraws omnipotence from language when it comes to configuring reality; and it has political interest, because it permits the conception of a critical dimension that does not recycle normative terms.

documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (PHELAN 2011:146).

To the mind of Eleonora Fabião (2019), the potency of performance lies in its permanent movement. For this reason, the ontological precariousness of performance refers to the precariousness of existence as well as to the experience of precariousness, in which it is possible to know what a body can do by dismantling and creating. There is a certain inadequacy of hermeneutics and semiotics as disciplines from which to approach performance, since they both center on the interpretation of signs, the understanding of meanings and the deciphering of ideas. Performance favors experience realized in the presence of both the performer and the audience. This perspective draws us away from the idea of presence “as something necessarily rhetorical that always depends on representation, which is to say that it depends on other meanings and, therefore, remains within the sphere of what is already constructed” (BLEEKER 2019: 72). We can find in performance a politically active ontology that “resists [...] reproduction as a heteronormative dogma” (FABIÃO 2019: 46).

In tune with these perspectives, Hatoum reveals a bodily presence which in representational terms is unacknowledged. The power of *Corps étranger* lies in its staging of that process through which Otherness is constructed as a way to confront the threat of the representational empire of the Self. Like this, the Other, the other body that is impossible to capture with sex and gender categories, is conveniently placed in the dark depths of representation, a place, which, paradoxically, is out of place. When we become aware of the agency of the body, over which we have no control, we realize there has been a change in the terms on which we must approach this body that is beyond image, without image, and that acts independently of discursive closure. What must we do when we find ourselves before a body in control of itself, beyond any identities we may have assigned to it?

As mentioned above, Butler (1990, 1993) states that the body is the materialization of a norm. The body is the stabilization, the normative sedimentation resulting from acts. In a few words, it is a construction that refers to an ideal, a construction that we are obliged to sustain performatively over time so as to preserve identities that make us exist as subjects. Hatoum invokes the material power of the body, matter that cannot be reduced to normative materialization, matter that is excluded from and lies outside

the representational sphere. Matter paradoxically located in the heart of the subject though relegated to the Otherness of what is not subjective. Hatoum shows us that, beyond the limits of representation, the body acts at times in unforeseeable ways. In such a deviation of the body from representation we realize how matter is capable of disrupting the norm. It is here where we see this disruption that negativity is born of corporal matter and abjection resides and grows.

What Jack Halberstam (2018) calls the queer art of failure can perhaps be interpreted as an act performed by corporal matter. Failure, mortality, catastrophe, noise, unpredictability, loss of control, and contingency turn into bodily components that play a role in the production of the anti-social. This idea is further developed by Leo Bersani in his article *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, where he examines cultural representations of HIV and AIDS which portray it as the result of promiscuity. He says that this portrayal makes homosexual identities abject, so they are accordingly held up as agents of unlimited hedonism carried to the reprehensible extreme of anal pleasure.⁶ This social image contributes greatly to the idea of the anus as a grave, inasmuch as it threatens contagion and consequent biological death. This, however, is not the only way Bersani interprets the word *grave*. He goes on to say that homosexual arousal triggers identification with the oppressor, and that anal sex plays out the destruction of the interior masculine ideal that is found at the core of homosexual desire. Thus, the anus is a body site which offers the possibility of access to unlimited pleasure, one where the loss of control and the abdication of power promise dissolution of the phallic ideal. To Bersani, the nature of this devastating sexual orientation is apparent in its “anticonmunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” character (BERSANI 2010: 22). As such, sexuality has the potential to plunge its subjects into a “self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*” (BERSANI 2010: 30). It is in the gay rectum where the internalized phallic

⁶ The presence of a material substratum that cannot be subsumed into representation is revealed at the precise moment it goes out of control with the disease. The organic disease shows the agency of the body since it is a process of materiality that does not lend itself to channels of representation. The disease, insofar as it is a bodily activity that is the opposite of the representational ideal, confronts us with dimensions of the body that reveal its autonomy when it pierces our fantasies of symbolic control (BREU 2014). The denomination of disease by means of the operative medical diagnosis constitutes an attempt to keep its otherness, which irrupts from a material level into the symbolic, within the limits of the language. It is immediately evident that representational mediation of the disease, normatively permeated with hegemonic health criteria, is helpless against the intransigence of bodily matter.

ideal is sacrificed and pulverized, because this is where a drive liberated from all identification is played out without regard to societal priorities.

Several thinkers have pointed out that the linguistic monism that supports post-structuralism has implied a silencing of matter and they posit that, beyond the margins of representation, the agency of matter is ubiquitous. The Freudian idea of drive, in which the queer concept of sexuality has a strong anti-social bias, (HALBERSTAM 2008; BERNINI 2015), allows us to suspect links between the potency of a radical negativity that does not acknowledge social objectives and the agency of matter – both of which are considerations labeled as *essentialism* and dismissed by queer post-structuralism. *Corps étranger* leads us to the way in which Freud accounted for the elasticity and plasticity of matter in his notion of the death drive. Catherine Malabou (2018) detects the power of Freudian allusions to plasticity. Freud explains the nature of drives as “tendencies inherent in living substance towards restoring an earlier state of things [...] of a conservative nature and, as it were, the expression of an inertia or elasticity present in what is organic” (FREUD 1920: 254). He also says

In what way is the drive connected with the compulsion to repeat? At this point the idea is forced upon us that we have stumbled onto the track of a general and hitherto not clearly recognized – or at least not expressly emphasized – characteristic of drive, perhaps of all organic life. According to this, a drive would be a tendency innate in living organic matter [...] a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the manifestation of inertia in organic life. (1920: 36)

The compulsion to repeat, a sort of demonic rhythm that does not lend itself to symbolization within the psychic framework of representation, is an expression of the conservative character of the death drive and, moreover, reveals itself as nothing less than the pulse of life. To Malabou, this rhythm is the agency by means of which matter evolves to become productive and creative.

The ties between drive and bodily life are explicit in Freud’s work. But to what kind of bodily life could Freud have been referring to? His concern with differentiating drive from instinct makes it clear that this unrelenting acephalous force in pursuit of satisfaction does not respond to physiological stimuli that disappear when it encounters its natural object. Malabou suggests that the intrusion of drive into psychic life is testimony to the presence

of the activity and pulse of matter. It is misguided to suspect the presence of determinisms or essentialisms behind compulsion that cannot be reduced to representation. Its characterization in terms of the plasticity of matter allows us, Malabou states, to think about the way in which the emergence and explosion of its presence coincide. In Malabou, plasticity expresses both the formation of the figure and the explosion of all form. Thus, the adjective *plastic* refers as much to the ability to change form as to the possibility of creating and preserving it. The author focuses on the Freudian characterization of drive as an internal tension from which there is no escape. She states:

The impossibility of flight at those moments when extreme tension [...] pushes towards an outside that does not exist. [...] What is and what can be a way out, right there where there is no outside, no other place? It is not about escaping confinement but about escaping within the enclosure itself. It is precisely in these terms that Freud describes drive, that strange arousal that cannot be discharged outside the psyche and that is [...] impossible to end by fleeing [...] The only possible way out of the impossibility of fleeing is transformation. [...] This structure of the formation of a path as an escape in the absence of a way out corresponds precisely to the logic or the economy of plasticity. (MALABOU 2018: 7-8)

Catherine Malabou (2004) confronts us with new ontological coordinates for contemplating the presence of bodily matter. The concept of plasticity revolves around a Hegelian perspective from which she interprets the power of the bodily and (non-essentialist) biological matter to generate alterity where the other is completely absent. Drive indicates that bodily matter, far from being an inert substrate, is active, and therefore its dialectical behavior produces alterity where there is no transcendence. Notwithstanding some subtle shades of difference, Catherine Malabou's ontological perspective appears to converge substantially with the thought of Slavoj Žižek (2006) and Adrian Johnston (2014), whose speculative views affirm the dialectical and immanent productivity of matter and thus allow us to detect the radical nature of queer potency. Here we prefer to interpret Hatoum's scenic staging from the standpoint of this new materialism inasmuch as it promises powerful tools for undermining the normative principles which are the basis for the construction of the subject. Hatoum scenically condenses the power of what, to our way of thinking, is an initiative that is more radical than the deconstructionist queer proposals that derive their strength from post-structuralism.

Hatoum's performative experience turns out to be uncanny, since it shows us the way in which the strange irrupts into the familiar (FREUD 1919). A mix of terror and fascination that ends up drawing the spectator into the silent and vibrant interior of matter. Luce Irigaray (2007) called attention, a number of decades ago, to the tendency to demonize matter in order to exalt abstract, disembodied, phallogocentric rationality. The western metaphysical tradition excludes danger from any conception of active matter capable of reducing the hegemony of symbolic order that sustains the normative efficacy of language.

Hatoum locates material difference and otherness *inside* us. She thus invokes matter into the center of subjectivity. The irruption of the strange – the force of matter – into the familiar – the representation and the image of the body symbolically and normatively mediated – alludes to what Freud (1919) called *the uncanny*: a situation in which something that should have remained hidden comes to light. In these situations, the repressed comes back and, in this way, Hatoum shows us how her scenic montage erases the line between matter and language. We might say that the notion of the unconscious, as articulated in Freudian psychoanalysis, implies the introduction of the Other into the Self (FREUD 1915). Kristeva analyzes this as follows:

On the basis of an erotic, death-bearing unconscious, the uncanny strangeness [...] sets the difference within us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being with others [...] By recognizing our uncanny strangeness, we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreign is within me, hence we are all foreigners. (1991: 192)

The radical nature of Hatoum's proposal is not reduced to a phenomenological approximation through which we contemplate the body's viscera as something we are not especially conscious of, and which we exercise little control over as long as it remains under the skin. It is rather an experience that leads us recognize the activity of the matter of which our bodies are composed. This experience undermines an entire ontological matrix that tends to support our symbolic and subjective order: the metaphysics of substance or presence that makes matter a passive substrate onto which the symbolic is inscribed.

Hatoum's performative installation makes use of medical equipment designed for the diagnosis of disease. Disease is something that could well

be understood as bodily behavior which cannot be foreseen on the basis of symbolically constructed knowledge. Endoscopies and colonoscopies are medical procedures that are done when the body has become strange, queer, or dysfunctional in the eyes of medicine. Thus, the strange, queer body is not simply reduced to viscera that we are not particularly conscious of, but rather, it brings to the foreground agency or vitality that, to the extent that it does not contradict the corollaries of symbolic mediations, usually remains invisible. And thus, the queer immediacy of the visceral body – that does not conform to any normative scheme – becomes profoundly threatening. A queer body is revealed as alien to that subjective context which has been delineated on the basis of an internalization of the social norms, alien, in other words, to what we generally refer to as identity.

Since the body's materiality is immanent, we could say it lacks nothing. It is symbolic mediation that imposes a transcendent conception under which we posit the existence of deficiencies, failure, or loss of control. This failure is a direct result of material agency deviating from the norm. Therefore, the potential of Hatoum's staging does not lie in the abject use of rare images of the body and their potential for a recategorization of the body. It lies rather in its persistent and disturbing intimation of a realm outside of or beyond categorization. And if we find it impossible to suspend the categories we rely on, we must at least admit their failure when it comes to dealing with and controlling the force inherent in the agency of matter. Far from being interested in the discovery of a new body, we are interested in the *intra-active*⁷ (BARAD 2007) and *chiasmatic*⁸ (BUTLER 1997)

⁷ Karen Barad points out: "Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated" (BARAD 2007: 152).

⁸ Butler offers the idea of *chiasmus* (VACCAREZZA 2011; CAMPAGNOLI 2013). It is a postulate of a complex connection between materiality and signification, where no dimension causally precedes nor becomes the basis for the other. It is a tension that forces us to rethink the links that Western thought has posited between these components, even questioning the ontological distinction between them. Although the explicit problematization of the tension between materiality and language is in all of Butler's early work, it does not explore its ontological and epistemological potential in depth. However, it opens a promising path of analysis when it comes to thinking about the way in which materiality, in general, and the body, in particular, are significant in the production of the subject outside the deterministic and foundationalist character in which we tend to think about them.

emergence that imprints a radical onto-epistemological turn onto the way we tend to separate the fields of matter and representation. We propose an affirmation of the entanglement of both, notwithstanding the strength of representation which, to the detriment of matter, has the support of the entire occidental metaphysical tradition. Under this light, Kristeva's notion of the abject, and the way in which it attacks symbolic representation, is a tool towards a first deconstructive moment. Only by exposing the ruins of representation can we build a queer order where matter and signification are integrated into something like a promise, with no fear of ruin or failure.

III

Hatoum does not utilize her body as a means of expression, or as a canvas or a platform for a work of art. Like many other artists from the 80s and 90s of the last century, she has been characterized by her use of video-installations and other technologies. Her concern is with the presentation of the real body as opposed to the represented body. We the authors of this study find these performances, grounded on the irruption of the presentation of the body, powerful because they distance us from modern issues that revolve around representation. Susan Stryker (2006) has pointed out that representation is organized around a mirror epistemology. In this construct, representation legitimizes itself as a reflection of the original found in reality. This duplicity generates problems, not only because of its ability to withdraw agency from matter and concentrate it in representation, but also because of the consolidation of a natural and foundational environment that serves to produce legitimate and illegitimate subjects. In the face of the normative force of any representational specter that is obligated to produce degraded otherness, Hatoum commits to a search for a force capable of dismantling symbolic mediations. For this purpose she resorts to penetrating the external surface, the skin, a body part largely subjected to normative frameworks, as Lacan shows by pointing out that identification with the external image of the body is that which inaugurates the identity and the normatively correlative representation of the body.

Corps étranger was staged for an exposition in 1994 at the *Musée national d'art moderne* of the *Centre Georges Pompidou* (Paris). In the contribution *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, Kristeva explicitly tied Hatoum's work with her concept of the abject – something which even resonates in the title of the performance. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on*

Abjection, Kristeva points out that the abject is anything that induces us to retch or have a strong emotional desire to throw something away, wipe something off or get rid of it in any other way. She states:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated [...] that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. (1988: 7)

As examples of the abject, she refers to excretion and vomiting. Kristeva portrays the abject as a bodily reaction of “spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause the forehead and hands to perspire” (KRISTEVA 1988: 9).

Kristeva articulates a series of aspects of the abject, including the abjection of the corpse, concerning which she writes:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. [...] In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. (1988: 10, 11)

In the first quote, we see that the abject is a visceral experience, not logical or linguistic. In the second quote, the focus is on the abject nature of the human body. In the naked flesh of the interior of the body, the abject resonates. Abjection is an attempt to positively give form to that which is dismissed by representation, that which disturbs identity. Kristeva defines it as the reaction of horror to the threat or collapse of meaning: the loss of the limit between oneself and the other. Like the corpse – the lifeless body – it causes horror as it threatens the meaning of life; the liver tones of our bodies’ interior and the abysses that resonate and grow at the margins of our body image attack representation in the purely material dynamic of bodies.

The raw surface of visceral tissue coated in fluids becomes an object resistant to symbolic mediation. Moreover, Hatoum’s performance shows us how this material support is in our interior as a condition for our handle on the

world. It forces us to face a disturbing identification with the abject and thus interrupts the incessant process through which we try to dismiss from our representation of the body that which is primarily a source of horror: we are, in the final analysis, dirt, feces, blood, an open wound and unavoidably subject to the contingencies of the behavior of the matter that constitutes us.

Kristeva states that the corpse evokes the greatest abjection. She argues that the feeling of abjection takes root very early on in our development as subjects, before our initiation into the world of language. It coils around the experience of individuation, in which the child starts to become conscious of being an independent agent. Individualization is initiated through the abjection of the mother. In Kristeva's conception there is a universally experienced period (prior to Lacan's mirror stage) in which the child rejects the body of the mother as abject and redefines the Self in terms of his *own body*. The body of the mother is the object of desire in the Freudian concept, to which Kristeva subscribes, but at the same time, the rejection of that body must take place first so that the subject can exist as such.

Reading Lacan we might think that the Self is constituted on the basis of an identification with the mirror image of the body. This genesis is laid out in affirmative terms and, for this reason, the Self is articulated when it finds a place in language. But for Kristeva this is only one side of the coin; there is also the side that the subject wants to do away with. To explain this, Kristeva articulates the concept of the abject. She theorizes that this negative operation takes place prior to the delimitation of the subject as unified and whole. The structuring function of the mirror image is produced through a positivity that defines a place for identification. But such a place is always precarious due to the negativity that precedes the initial identification.

Is purification of the abject one of the functions of art? Hatoum's performance does anything but this. It does not attempt to name the abject, to open up a slot for it in the chain of signifiers. It does not reveal any intention of elevating the abject character of the body to the level of a normative ideal demanded by a framework of intelligibility that defines legitimate forms. It divorces the body from pure abstraction and faces us with a material and mundane body. The abjection of the visceral within the body is discussed in *Powers of Horror*, where Kristeva explains the way in which the abject (re)presents a contaminating danger to any bodily identity clearly included within the domain of discourse. The body turns into carnal matter whose processes resist being integrated into a normatively outlined representation.

In Kristeva, abjection evokes a fascination that lies beneath the skin. Because it is here where we feel the terror of the possibility of the restitution of a constitutive loss, a threatening restitution that indicates that impossible region which is as tempting as it is damned and (re)presented as the irruption of a terrifying dimension that shatters the appearance of unity created by the normatively saturated image of the body. The abject lies in that outlying bodily matter which the image of the body cannot absorb; its exclusion is the key to attaining the idealization of unicity and totality that the body requires. Hatoum, far from expelling or rejecting raw materiality, has brought it to the forefront, liberating it from symbolic mediation and from the abstract and rational delineation favored by the demonization of matter. She confronts us with a process of disgregation and restitution that evokes the abject force that undermines the presumption of totality.

The notion of the abject marks a process linked to what Kristeva denominates semiotic *chora*, a totality that comprises infant drives connected to the body of the mother (KRISTEVA 1984). If Lacan's mirror stage allows us to think about the appearance of an identity that has the potential to be rearticulated over time, Kristeva postulates the process of abjection to explain the indispensable separation of the baby from the body of its mother. Here, abjection means rejection or expulsion, a prior requirement for the subject to assume a position in the imaginary register during the mirror stage and, subsequently, in symbolic language.

In summary, the abject refers to a strong aversion, to a separation, distancing or rejection of something as Other, an exile to the periphery of conscience in an attempt to keep it at a distance, an attempt to attain a sense of self-control with the instauration of borders or limits. The naturalization of the image of the body – which, strictly speaking, is highly normative – is the primary operation for establishing the limits that throw the abject into the realm of the Other. Abjection is not, however, a synonym of repression – a process that relegates something experienced as traumatic and unbearable to the unconscious. No, the abject is not precisely unconscious, it rather occupies an ambiguous place within a marginal realm between the somatic and the emotional. As the Other embedded in the heart of identity, the abject torments the subject.

The abject comprises a part of reality, that materiality which is tied to language. As such, it connects with the semiotic, that is, with a distinctive means of signification. Before entering the symbolic realm of language

(where meaning parcels out the identities that the subject internalizes by identifying itself with the idealized image of the body in the mirror), the subject already finds itself immersed in a meaningful exchange through tactile sensations and movements. These experiences have a semiotic meaning that is intrinsic to the rhythms of matter, and they prepare the subject to enter the symbolic.

Once the entry of the subject into the symbolic order has taken place, the semiotic continues its work in superposition with the symbolic. Rooted in the energy of drive, which goes beyond the symbolic, the semiotic has the potential to transgress the symbolic order. Hatoum confronts us with that abject area where the semiotic potential to disturb the symbolic and idealized image of the body dwells. Entering the semiotic and abject experience of going deep into the body, the performer semiotically induces instability in that identity which becomes complete and coherent as it is conveniently incorporated into a body normatively outlined as a totality and never entirely carnal. Semiotic subversion destabilizes the symbolic and the symbolic mediations of the body and exposes the material power of the abject so that the foundations of our identities, previously stable, become intermittent and shaky. Like a scalpel, the abject opens the symbolic covering of the body and leaves the flesh and its pulsation, incapable of being expressed in language, exposed. Thus it is that Hatoum's artistic proposal has the potential to breach, rupture, twist, and at the very least to interrupt the disincarnated forms by means of which the symbolic order elevates the body beyond the material assemblages of which it is constituted.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Mona Hatoum's body is not a static entity immortalized by representation. Nor does her presentation of her own body come close to capturing any ideal of totality and unicity. Instead it constitutes a fragmentary irruption that includes the potential decomposition of its living matter and, finally, just as Freud anticipated (1920), admits dissolution into the destiny of inorganic matter. This body is no longer just the seat of a sexual identity; it is rather rhythmic pulsation with a negative current that dissolves any attempt to subsume the flesh under a meaning. As drive and as seen under the presumption of unification implicit in any norm, Hatoum's body is damaged and broken. Exactly as anticipated by Melanie Klein in her concern over the incidence of viscera in psychic life, the body falls, continuously, to pieces.

Hatoum is interested in *trans-corporeality*⁹ in the sense of Karen Barad's agential realism: a body whose materiality comes into being performatively. The experience of the abject comes from these somber regions of matter. In the ontologically absent heart of the subject we struggle with the acephalous character of drive. A necessary condition for representation is the rejection of this negative force, rendered allegorical above all by bodily fluids, excrement, filth, cadavers, and putrefaction. Mona Hatoum locates the abject in the last place we could wish to find it: in our bodily matter. Just as Karen Barad (2007) has noted, the strength of Foucauldian-Butlerian queer theory contributes to the representationalism that holds sway in academics and which is the reason why all material substrate that cannot be reduced to the performative potency of language becomes essentialistic and leads us again to biological determinism. However, not all conceptions of matter should be tied to the metaphysics of substance and much less to biological determinism. Neo-materialism has not disregarded the terms of debate on which "representationalism," rests, but they have congregated around a strong criticism of its onto-epistemological assumptions and, fundamentally, of its idea of inert, passive materiality that has no agency outside of that created by productive or interpretive linguistic meanings. In contrast with this inanimate characterization of matter, neomaterialists imbue matter with agency (BARAD 2007; BENNETT 2009). They affirm not only the existence of a vitality and agency in matter that challenges the hegemony of language, but also of a force distributed among multiple bodies in different degrees, far from the anthropocentric way in which we conventionally understand the capacity of a conscious and unitary subject.

The contributions of neo-materialist philosophy confront us with a dimension of reality that raises questions about representationalist premises. If we admit that it is not possible to directly access the reality of material vitality, but that it is only through symbolic mediations that we may recognize it, it necessarily becomes the topic of speculative exercise. After

⁹ By *trans-corporeality* we mean the idea of a material body that is performatively realized. The materiality that we refer to here, in spite of being considered resistant to any dilution of signification, in no way implies a point zero, or primary or foundational data. It is a performatively produced materiality. Stacy Alaimo points out that "one of the most unfortunate legacies of poststructuralist and postmodern feminism has been the accelerated 'flight from nature' fueled by rigid commitments to social constructionism and the determination to rout out all vestiges of essentialism. Nature, charged as an accessory to essentialism, has served as feminism's abject – that which, by being expelled from the 'I', serves to define the 'I'" (ALAIMO 2008: 237).

all, “the remaining problem, once objectivist realism has been toppled, is the difficulty of affirming, and negating, with certainty an exterior reality, independent of the subject.” (PALACIO 2018: 15). In this way, the performative work discussed here invites us to reflect speculatively on a bodily dimension that defies expression through symbols and language while mocking any idea of control by a rational subject over the body or living matter. This video-installation places us before a dimension of the bodily that is manifested as an immediate irruption of matter, that is, one not mediated by representation and not entirely influenced by normative frames. If we admit to the proposal developed here, this bodily interior comprises a force that is capable of piercing the mediations of representation and impacting other aspects, thus enabling us to form a vague impression of the functioning of matter. Hatoum’s work, then, is an epistemologically powerful tool for facilitating recognition of the limits of language.

Even so, the power of identity, or that of linguistic taxonomies, appears to have defeated the unrelentingly critical position of queer theory. Our hope is that the concern for the agency of matter allows us to recover a queer view that is capable of abandoning identity and recover the radical negativity that undermines the pretension to closure, be this symbolic or subjective. Could anything be more queer than this?

Ariel Martínez

amartinez@psico.unlp.edu.ar
Universidad Nacional de La Plata

Luciano Nicolás Arévalo

lucianonicolasarevalo@gmail.com
Universidad Nacional de La Plata

Tomás Manuel Gomariz

gomariztomas@gmail.com
Universidad Nacional de La Plata

Guillermo Sebastián Suzzi

guillermosuzzi@gmail.com
Universidad Nacional de La Plata

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