

**Threadbare:
Upon the Dematerialized Self**
(excerpt*)

by *Valerie Constantino*

A snowy heron in the snow.

Winter grass hidden

Hides itself in its own form. (1)

- Eihei Dogen

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift in lacy jags. (2)

- Walt Whitman

I am noticing as I age that my skin, that is, this lamina that protects and holds within it the corporeal substances of my being, is showing signs of wear. Oh yes, there are many disconcerting oddities taking place. There are endless crops of new and altering markings unlike the spots of certain cats. There are sags and protrusions, and irreparable tears. And deserts, those locations devoid of moisture that will not absorb moisture from any natural or pharmaceutical source. And then there are undesired oases, those areas that retain way more fluid than is necessary, let alone attractive. This layer, which is meant to envelop the functional organs and fluids upon which my living being depends, is wearing out. Like a sock; or better yet (or worse), like cheap panty hose. And I suppose I ought not to upload any portion of the previous text to the *something about me* box on my dating profile.

Accustomed as I am to observances of material phenomena, I find I am more curious than alarmed, although I am well aware of what these events foretell. Death will come, even if I dedicate my last dollar to reparations of the body - to bandages, stitches, insertions, injections and extrusions, resurfacings, recolorings, and transplants, in any attempt to stave off its approach.

My understanding then of this process has much to do with my research of textile and materiality. At one time, *back in the day* as they say, one argument for the omission of textile and fiber art from fine art scholarship, had to do with its supposed lack of durability. Curators of that antediluvian past, before *impermanence* itself became just another post-modern catchphrase, might have declared: *Well you see, your cloth wears out... It is not archival... there are no historical remains. As if, we might have countered under our breaths, everything else lasts? And, I might have added, if anyone would've asked, perhaps then we ought to discuss the nature of time itself.* For as we continue to unearth remarkable fibrous fragments of millennia passed, we witness too, the instantaneous annihilation of metal alloys by the megaton before our very eyes.

Returning to the subject at hand, that is, the disintegration of textile relative to the metaphorical dematerialization and ultimate demise of the self. The physical evidences are clear enough. Organic matter withers as the quilts of our grandmother's unravel and split. And so our bodies too undergo these transformations. And if I pay attention, I may also note that the shroud of personality, this *me* who I have defined myself to be, is as well, coming undone. Here then lies the study of materiality at its most profound.

To be in any form, what is that? (3)

- Walt Whitman

In his notable work, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, Lewis Hyde distinguishes Walt Whitman and his work as *gifted*. The *gifted self*, he states, *is a thing that breathes*. There is no distance between such a self and the objects it encounters. Perception is not mediated by air or skin; rather, contact with the substances of things is instantaneous. *To be born, to take on life in a particular form is to be drawn into a 'knit of identity'...* (4)

Still, the question of how we may live in the awareness of our materiality remains. It lies beyond our experiences of matter on one hand, and transcendence on the other.

As from a start I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything.

I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is that stone.

My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over. (5)

- Sylvia Plath

We are of course separate, and do maintain a separation from other earthly things and beings. Even those most gifted do like the rest experience the crashing in of distinction, the individualness of mortal existence. Although there has been throughout human history extensive discussion regarding a communal universal force, our daily experiences of a knowable or nameable oneness remains elusive, inconsistent and debatable.

Creative artistic practice seems to me an ongoing conversation with oneself in response to these questions. Visual and performative art forms are both literal and

metaphorical investigations of materiality: of the ways substances may behave and may be exploited, of the potential unions with external and internal substances, and also of materiality's opposite - the imaginary.

*In the freezing hall one night in a flimsy robe
I hallucinated gold-threaded cloth.
It hung in the air uselessly. (6)*

- Ikkyu

Works of art that examine the less perceptible aspects of identity, underscore the subject of the dematerialized *threadbare* self. There is no doubt that physical breakdowns occur, despite our attempts to curtail or reverse the processes. And if I look beyond the mirror on the wall into the mirror of my self, it becomes quite clear that the process of disentanglement, disintegration, and dematerialization is not only probable but also quite inevitable. It takes place with or without my willing participation. And I may engage in this process as far as my courage holds firm.

*For thirty years God was my mirror, now I am my own mirror and that
which I was I am no more... Behold, now I say that God is the mirror of myself,
for with my tongue he speaks and I have passed away. (7)*

- Ibn 'Arabi

As saints experience ecstatic visions and even levitate in defiance of supposed limits of body and mind, artists too transform time, space, matter and self. Ambiguities regarding the substances of bodies and the fabrics of identities continue to engage our

inquiries and imaginations. We can locate a philosophical flux between stoical subjectivities on one hand, and psychosomatic, complex and perhaps deviant and grotesque representations on the other.

Succeeding the writings of mystics Ibn 'Arabi, St. Teresa of Avila and Marguerite Porete for example, artists and performers such as Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, Kazuo Ohno and Pina Bausch, explore altered states through their embodiments of the realm of dreams, the erotic sublime, and the awkward, anti-social, afflicted body. The annihilated souls of the mystics are *recontextualized* here, as dissipated individuals, expressing once more what dancer / writer Sondra Fraleigh describes as *the descendant cycling of cosmic substance*, or what I am calling *threadbare*. (8)

It is not art that I aspire to, but love. (9)

- Natsu Nakajima

*May we all be mad for love of Him
who for love of us was called mad.* (10)

- St. Teresa of Avila

There is nothing supernatural about the story I am about to tell. It is not a story of shamanic journey like so many others we have encountered. In recent years, there has been an unprecedented glut of published personal accounts describing the path of the shaman into the nether realm of magic and demons, of shape shifters and uncommon visitations. In the story I am about to tell, nothing extraordinary occurs, really almost nothing.

It is a familiar story of an unplanned encounter, of obsession and self-destruction, and of psychological descent. And in conjunction with these deleterious conditions, the lattice-like layers of identity were revealed and then slowly unraveled.

As is often the way with such charismatic figures, this he of who I write, held himself above us, his devotees, yet just available enough to give the appearance of accessibility. I had considered myself invisible to him. Yet, nothing and no one escaped his gaze. I believed too, that I could remain, as was he, detached. In this way, I would be present and I would learn in the *right* way. I did not admit this conceit, but I believed that through my supposed objectivity, the gift of his attention would eventually be given to me.

After our first meetings and for several subsequent weeks, I experienced daily life in a new way. I felt lighter, not exactly flying, but flitting just lightly above the ground. My morning swim was an effortless course through limitless space. I accomplished in each day all that I set myself to, and I was content. Even with regard to the usual daily irritants: phone calls, appointments, cockroaches, bills, traffic. I simply moved through each detail and I was light, as in brightness as well as in the absence of gravity.

*Although space seems empty, once you develop the energies
you can control it. When that happens you can look right through solid
things and walk in empty space as if it were solid.. (11)*

- H. H. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama

And I saw then the world as it had been, indigenous things, people camping along riverbanks, animals in woods, downed branches alive as living beings, canoes,

birds, ancient stones and bears. And as I affirmed my relationship to these things of the ancient earth, the boundaries of my vision and being extended beyond substance, beyond any prior notions of who or what I was made of. I was free then to be of that essence and nothing more.

To contemplate the illogical and the unanswerable is indeed disorienting. But the trickster is subtler than the *koan*. The *heyhoka*, the coyote spirit, like the *faery* of Celtic lore befriends you, leads you into darkness without a map, and abandons you at its farthest perimeter. In this disquieting terrain one is thrust against the boundaries of one's own underside, those aspects of oneself that have remained well hidden with good reason. The way to a state of relative comfort is possible, but the course is rampant with irony.

In the context of my relationship with this self-styled spiritual teacher, I had suffered the humiliation of my, albeit covert belief that I had been special. My attachment to him, and my desire for attention in general, was as impossible as it was intoxicating, addicting and iconic.

*Sometimes I go about in pity for myself, and all the while
a great wind is bearing me across the sky. (12)*

- Ojibwa motto

*It isn't that we're alone or not alone
Whose voice do you want? Mine? Yours? (13)*

- Ikkyu

I descended then into a realm of mixed metaphors, *a long day's journey into the dark night of the soul*, and so on. The structures upon which my life story depended

were indeed fragile and transparent, but there was no judgment. In solitude I tapped into the well of my will, into the *noiseless operation of my isolated self*, in the words of Whitman. (14) If I prayed or asked for help, it was in my own language, my own reconfigured glyph. My relationship with my surroundings and its inhabitants was private and at hand. And I came to recognize multiple, ambulatory selves existing illogically and concurrently in the spaces of everyday life and in the realms of dreams.

There would be no status quo to which I would return. And as the flow of time and experience continue to shift, only my impressions of inconsistency and insubstantiality endure. The lingering ties to my life in this form are just that, reflections of threads, however bare.

The construction of a life in body and mind embraces its deconstruction just as particles accumulate even as they break down and disperse; a synchronized dreaming. The allegorical self-sandpapering and its attendant relinquishing of personality is the self returning itself to dust and blowing itself away.

Finely spun threads and the textiles created from their twists and crossings, reveal their structures and severances at a glance. As layers of tissue, tendon, bone, blood *and* thoughts slough off, what lies beneath those myriad bits and pieces like a secret code, is nothing more than a tangle of filaments, a solitary loop, and then nothing at all. If we take the essential structure of textile as representative of materiality's coming into being, and I think that we can, we can admit signs of its wear as emblematic of that which prefigures that critical moment. The threadbare event points to the reversible flow of time and being.

A personality is a weaving of learned responses and found fragments of substantive links, as it unravels with age and in time. Where does it go? Perhaps into nothing, or into everything and everyone else? Into democracy, inclusivity, or essence and obscurity?

What if I weren't aware that art was considered more marvelous than life? (15)

- Allan Kaprow

Buddha ancestors' heart and words are Buddha ancestors' everyday tea and rice. (16)

- Eihei Dogen

Of course the intangible aspects of human existence are made quite clear in presentations of art as communal and commonplace activity, preparing and sharing meals, collecting trash, sending postcards, engaging in conversation. In contrast, the well-heeled art object may indeed seem indulgent in these critical times, particularly in the face of the suffering of so many others.

Yet, acts of creativity are often clandestine exhalations, requiring the capacity to sink below the surface of everyday life, and the willingness to reveal those descents to others. This, despite the fact that most others take little notice and give little in return. For these endeavors express phenomenological experiences, not easily described or interpreted, perhaps not unlike the narratives of paradox, irony and antitheses.

The poetry of the ineffable: trance writings of mystics, shamanic rituals, durational performances, stark markings, and precarious arrangements of detritus; the endeavor to give shape to the dematerialized events of body and mind is ever an act of

resistance and courage. Julia Kristeva writes:

*The frivolous ends up deserving its guillotine - that's understood.
But what an extravagant superiority over the leaden real and the burden of a
fixed transcendence to dare to be inessential!* (17)

And again, Lewis Hyde:

*The wandering mendicant makes the spirit of the gift visible to us -
he merely stays alive - the bearer of empty space.* (18)

This threadbare entity that I inhabit even now despite its increasing inefficiencies, feels at times so totally immaterial. So much so, that I am compelled, rather obsessively, to check and double-check its holes and tears against its remaining strengths and manners. What can I do, what have I lost? What might I contribute yet of any consequence, again, I find myself asking?



Valerie Constantino
Holes and Tears 1, photograph, 2011

In the eyes of the dying, there remain however minuscule, pinpoint points of light, illuminating that which is seen. What might I see that remains for my consideration? Might it be enough then, just to stay alive, bearing empty space? A diaphanous thing of negligible substance... and then, the lone filament, flung into the void, *throwing out for love... that it may catch and form a connection...* (19)

Notes

1. Eihei Dogen, from Matthiessen, Peter, **Nine-headed Dragon River**, pg. 168
2. Walt Whitman from Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 17
3. Walt Whitman from Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 171
4. Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 174 - 75
5. Sylvia Plath from Bentheim, Claudia, (trans by Dunlap, Thomas), **Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World**, pg. 123 - 24
6. Ikkyu from Berg, Stephen, **Crow with No Mouth: Ikkyu 15th Century Zen Master**, p. 71
7. Ibn 'Arabi, from Sells, Michael, **The Mystical Languages of Unsayng**, pg. 70
8. Fraleigh, Sandra, **Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion**, pg. 192
9. Natsu Nakajima from Viala, Jean and Masson-Seikine, Nourit, **Butoh: Shades of Darkness**, Shutunotomo Co, Ltd., Tokyo, 1988, pg.132
10. St. Teresa of Avila, **Wounds of Love**, p. 113
11. H. H. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, **Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying**, p. 207
12. Ojibwa motto, from Matthiessen, Peter, **Nine-headed Dragon River**, p. 10
13. Ikkyu from Berg, Stephen, **Crow with No Mouth: Ikkyu 15th C. Zen Master**, p. 26
14. Walt Whitman, from Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 195
15. Kaprow, Allan, *The Real Experiment*, pg. 38
16. Eihei Dogen from Matthiessen, Peter, **Nine-headed Dragon River**, p. 247
17. Kristeva, Julia, **Murder in Byzantium**, pg. 228
18. Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 24
19. Walt Whitman from Hyde, Lewis, **The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property**, pg. 192

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Marina Abramovic

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Kazuo Ohno

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Pina Bausch

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