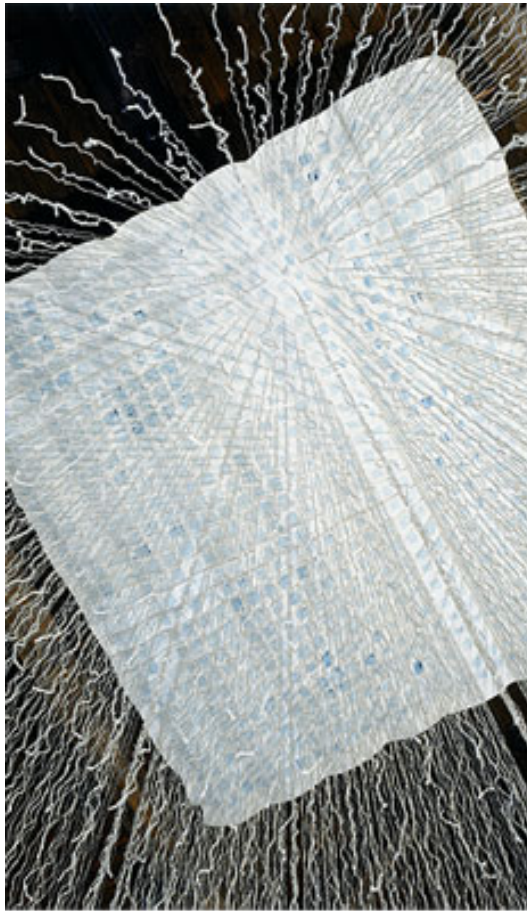


**My Liquid Self:
The Performative Textile**

by
Valerie Constantino



*All is water, for the rain that
falls from heaven cannot be divided or
separated from the water of the river. (1)*

- St. Teresa of Avila

Lenore Tawney, *Cloud Series V*, 1978
©Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

*I dwell in a permeable state.
My body is mostly of water.
A few threads of nerve and vein,
A bag of skin filled with liquids
I flow through life,
washed in circumstance.
The shape of life dissolves
in a shower of fluid implication.*

- VC, journal

The material of our being like textile is alterable and ephemeral. The textile, a surrogate, penetrable skin like the body, reveals variant qualities of substances and selves. Through intimate contact with fibrous and viscous matter, live and lifeless parts, leftovers and waste, I experience myself as an ally of time, change and impermanence. The twists and casings of our mortal selves evolve indeed from the ooze of watery births.

*My liquid self...
an undetermined concept ... between the fixed and the congealed. (2)*

- Luce Irigaray

Yet, we do wrestle with our somatic selves; a discomfort with the spaces, substances and sounds of the body; a discord often endorsed by speculative or devout paradigms. In contrast, the stories of private life may help balance these internalized tensions, as daily activity points up the less containable aspects of self. Domestic culture, including the work of textile, centers around the body, its comfort and adornment, its needs and its inner workings too. The textile is a trope for the mantle of a self, a weaving then, of the fluid aspects of bodies, minds and souls.



El Greco, *St. Veronica Holds the Veil*, 1580-82
Public Domain

*I got up at four in the morning and quilted,
sewing and sewing and sewing, tears in my eyes.*

Some of those tears on the quilt. (3)

- Ollie Nepesni

Like a Catholic saint, a Bodhisattva, an enlightened spirit in the traditions of Buddhism, absorbs the tears of humankind while abiding in a state of self-contained grace. Like Hindu goddesses Ishtar and Shakti, they require no external activation in order to cast their positive influence.

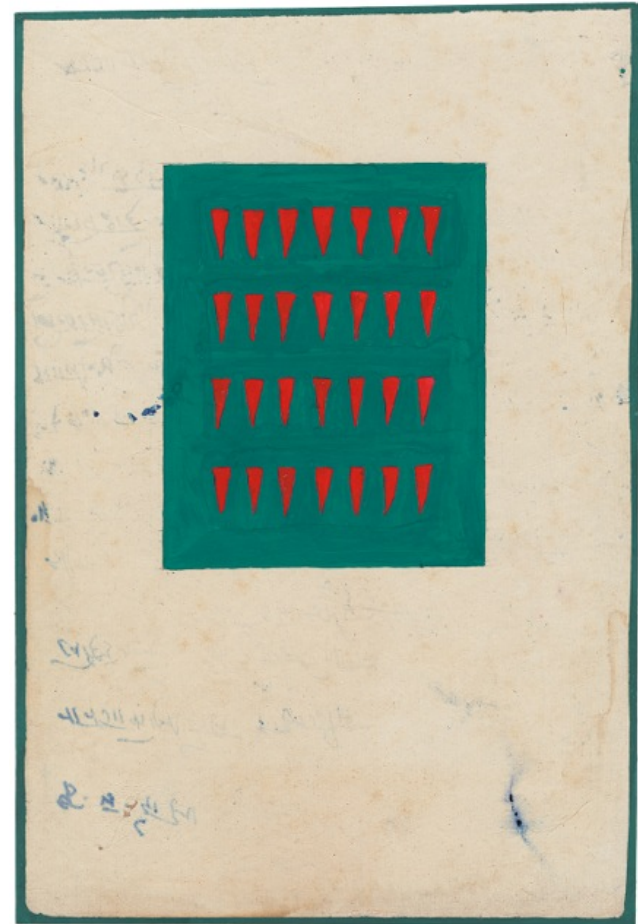
The *Yogini*, or *Mother Tantras* of Tibet describe *women's experiences, embodiments and sexuality from a woman's point of view.* (4) The yoginis who wrote and practiced these canons were not dependent upon others for their senses of self or spirituality. In their tradition, relationships between the sexes took place for the mutual enrichment of both persons, never for the gratification of one. These texts recount the adoration of the body and present sexuality as spiritual enlightenment. Their central figure, the *Great Bliss Queen*, also called *Dechen Gyalmo*, is equal to *Guru Padmasambhava*, the embodiment

of *Buddha*. (5) Free from dualistic notions of body and mind, self and other merge into her resplendent form: she is fluid and alone; not solid, yet formidable.

Post-modern, feminist discourse contends that gender, like other aspects of identity, is a cultural construction. One is female or male beyond one's physical attributes to the extent that one may admit and perform such traits as considered the gender-specific norm within one's social milieu. Judith Lorber notes: *Gender boundaries are breachable ...*, affirming the fluid qualities of all aspects of identity, even as surgical and pharmaceutical advances may alter gendered distinctions of individual bodies. (6)

Buddhism highlights the illusion of permanence and aims to deconstruct the ego-identified self, whether prescribed or reinvented, in order to strengthen one's connection to a universal life force. Feminism cautions against such evaporations, seeking instead to fortify whatever strengths an individual woman can claim within the bounds of patriarchal society.

Once, as the story goes, Zen Master Dogen invited a cook in a Chinese monastery to sit with him in meditation. The cook declined, stating: *You who have traveled from a far land do not know the meaning of Buddhist practice*. It was, as far as the cook was concerned, himself, as one who performed the tasks of everyday life, who understood the true nature of



Twenty-eight Dazzling Tongues of Kali
Rajasthan, 17th cent.
courtesy of Siglio Press

Buddhist practice. Years later Dogen met this very same cook, and asked: *What is wholehearted practice?* The cook replied: *Nothing in the entire universe is hidden.* (7)

The story underscores the blurred boundary between the mundane and the mystical, inviting as well, a feminist reading. As one practitioner of *zazen*, a stay-at-home mom explains: *I am personally reluctant to open this matter up to patriarchal advice. What would Dogen Zenji, who never married, never had a child, never had a 'job' possibly know about the difficulties that come with these situations?* (8) Her question underscores our impermanent, alterable nature as it is intimately linked to the circumstances and toil of daily life as it is lived.

*Although we respect the skills passed on to us, they stink of poverty.
It is impossible to pretend that those objects were 'good works' or art.
In those days your work was used, trodden on, or worn right out, like you yourself.* (9)

- Agnes and Kate Walker

Housework, frequently regarded as women's work, has yet to offer those who perform its tedium, much by way of worldly status or remuneration. As a remnant of such attitudes, the association of textiles with domestic labor along with its more ephemeral quality is sometimes cited as justification for its low rather than high art status. As a result, makers themselves have often discounted the value their artistry.

Still, even as textiles provide a backdrop for everyday life, they are possessed of a highly specialized aesthetic vocabulary. From within a culture of use and reuse, textiles piece together facsimiles of the lives of those whose work is at once passive and active. Through an extensive range of materiality and design, printed yardage and fashion, blankets, rugs, draperies and banners, textiles provide comfort and cover while signaling issues of class, race, and gender among other layers of discrimination.



*She successfully dominated her environment
through the very medium that was
expected to still and silence women. (10)*

- Elizabeth Gaskell

Alice Paul Sewing Suffrage Flag, c. 1920
Library of Congress, Public Domain

Perhaps too, it is the very intentionality of these activities that generates meaning, as hyper-aware stitches and turns of the hook slow and hone our perceptual powers. From within the secluded realm of our most private spaces, our lives evolve as fluctuating compositions of temporal events. Our interactions with material agents, perishable and malleable substances, food, liquid and cloth, bind us to the cycles of form and formlessness, life and death. As cooking hastens the breakdown of matter, what then could be more provisional than a meal prepared, served and eaten?

Home is also a performative space, where repetitive, pedestrian gestures occur. And it is from just this sort of meticulousness that our nurturing and beatific environments arise; those rarefied utopias that form and sustain a cultural landscape.



Mary Cassatt, *The Cup of Tea*, 1880-81
Public Domain

*I give space to things that were never, almost never,
shown in this way. If you chose to show a woman's gestures
so precisely, it is because you love them. (11)*

- Chantal Akerman

The domestic realm is a familiar and at times, constrained place. Its rooms are comfortable and comforting even as they are claustrophobic. Yet shelters such as these are particular and animated too. Home is where we attend to the details of color, texture and design, to the nuance in decor and to the intricacies of our most intimate relationships too.

Personal havens generally revolve around the more ordinary and solitary aspects of domesticity such as food preparation, sewing, and washing up. In contrast, yet perhaps not unrelated to these insularities, our private spaces also

reveal the multi-layered terrain of dreams, childhood play, and metamorphic activity. This realm accepts the fluid simultaneity of the experiences and sensibilities of our interior worlds and selves. Like a surrealist recipe, this otherworldly landscape probes the symbiotic nature of space, time and matter, reframing domestic space as an alchemical art-kitchen-laboratory, as it spins a mystical web of magic and art.

*...a kilo of strong roots, three white hens, a head of garlic, four kilos of honey,
a mirror, two calves livers, a brick, two clothespins, a corset with stays,
two false mustaches, and hats to taste.. Put on the corset and make it quite tight.* (12)

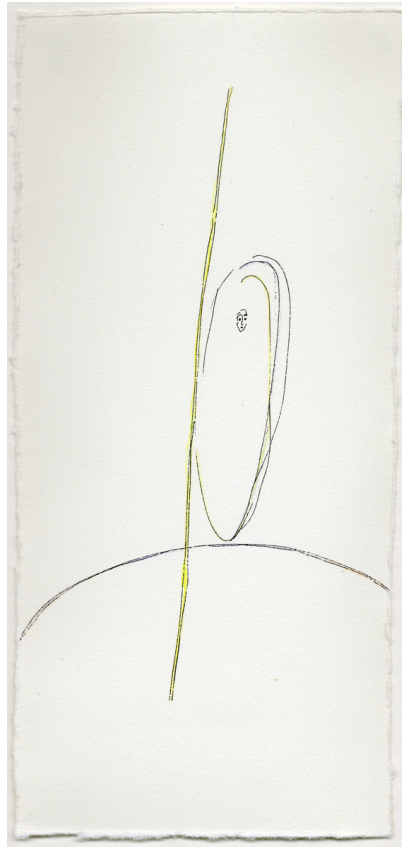
- Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington

When my father passed away I became heir to all of his accumulated belongings. During the ensuing year, I attended to these worldly goods, sorting, arranging, placing, replacing, disposing, dispensing, saving and / or transforming all that remained of his material life. I was consumed by what art historian Eleanor Munro describes as *retrieving what otherwise would be irrevocably lost and fixing it in a form.* (13) Touching and repurposing each thing evolved in performance, as unfamiliar selves emerged, appropriating each task, intuiting the fluidity of time, space and matter.

When I die my effects too will morph into giveaways and trash, perhaps a few keepsakes; nothing more than the residue of things retained. Someone will come and empty the closets and drawers, transforming time, place and meaning. Resolutions such as these expand the definition of creativity beyond the production of things or the completion of duties. The gesture, the decision to preserve folds the past into the present, and points towards the eternal. The gesture also flows inward, towards a more private and profound arrangement of surface, substance and sign.

Slippages of time, space and matter call the *tangled hierarchy* to mind, a phrase drawn from the field of scientific inquiry. Besides its poetical reference to fibrous matter, a snarl of hair retrieved from a hairbrush say, the concept describes a

more flexible and eclectic approach in theoretical research. (14) Traditional systems of information gathering tend to be based on a hierarchy between elevated knowers and subordinate knowns. Contemporary researchers in physics and other branches of science have come to understand that linear forms of inquiry are not as objective as was once assumed. Rather, our interpretation of that which we study is often influenced by self-referential and hierarchical suppositions.



My liquid self...
implies reversible transformations
imagines an indifference to time. (15)
- Luce Irigaray

Tamara Ralis
Elliptical Being, 1998
courtesy of the artist

The *tangled hierarchy* challenges our static determinations by admitting complex, diverse and reciprocal observations. It presents a more holistic, dynamic understanding of events, materials and ways of working. It is an apt metaphor, where boundaries of space, time, self and other are migratory and fluid. The *tangled hierarchy* imagines an intricate network of visceral and spiritual selves, of fluids and fragile organs within, and of fugitive personalities, including persistent, arcane aspects of being.

*I am concerned with that point of contact between the unreal
and the real, where the unreal manifests itself in reality.* (16)

- Maya Deren

Filmmakers and artists since the inception of moving imagery ascertained the medium's capacity for fluid arrangements of time, space and matter. Film (and by extension, video) extends the potential for malleable narrative environments that alter our sense of linear time. Through shifting frames of reference, individuals are perceived as both active subjects and observable objects. The materiality of film – the interplay of celluloid and particles of light, augmented now digitally where electronic bits replace chemical luminescence -- alludes to textile's interlocking configurations. All this internal commingling speaks of liquid.

The crossings of veiled and evanescent elements tell and retell stories of transformation and transience. The fluid quality of textile infiltrates folds of clothing and bodies, underscoring the ambiguity of self-identity. A system of semiotic signs, clothing and costume signify class, race, gender, and tribe. Artists, performers, and public personalities manipulate these systems, deliberately projecting at once recognizable *and* coded selves.

Who hath bound the waters in a garment? (17)

- Proverbs 30:4



Portrait of Gertrude Stein, 1953
Original Image, Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress
public domain

The representation of a self as a conglomeration of selves, the alterations in characters, costumes, and props, challenges the distinctions between identity and the object of the body. Many a radical writer and artist escaped the constraints of socially defined femininity by appropriating clothing intended for males. Their masquerades revealed the complexity and instability of their female identities, ushering in performance art of the 1960's. By interjecting gender-confounding personae into mainstream settings, future generations of artists, pushed the interruptive aspects of female-as-male further, in order to among other covert intentions, continue the exorcism of gender specifications.



Adrian Piper
I Am the Locus, (#2 in a series of five images), 1975
courtesy of the artist

What is in excess with respect to form... the feminine sex... that entity that has been struck dumb, but that is eloquent in its silence: the real... It speaks 'fluid.' (18)

- Luce Irigaray



V. Constantino, *Baby Girl*, 1991

There was another day, rattling around in my father's house alone after he died, when I took up the task of sorting through his extensive professional and gentlemanly wardrobe. It was, as was his way, all of the best quality in fabric and design. And it seemed the most natural thing to have done, to try on all of those elegant suits, including the classic grey three-piece linen and silk blend. The phone rang then and I answered it, dressed in just this way. The voice on the other end of the line belonged to one of several lawyers with whom I'd been interacting since my father's passing. Until then, practical aspects of my life were mostly precarious, as a single mother and artist, in other words, from hand to mouth as the saying so accurately goes. Only in that moment and during that telephone exchange, in my newly acquired garments, I noted just a slight shift in my countenance. As the voice on the line continued to dictate the terms of our business, I began to advocate for myself with startling authority. It was as though along with my father's belongings, I'd inherited a persona that included a previously absent bravado. It was that suit! A tailor's construction of an alpha male, along with my father himself, an upstanding man of manners and means, contained within its folds and creases, that now permeated the quality of my stance.

- VC, journal



Kiki Smith, *Pee Body*, 1990
courtesy of the artist

*It's like the body's porous; there is a point where it is very
difficult to tell the inside from the outside. (19)*

- Kiki Smith

Audacious performances of the 1960's and 70's exposed a new ownership of self while referring to the somatic and permeable body. Beyond the authorship of bodies and selves, these works and many others since, point up the very nature of materiality, as well as its limits. We have now embraced the notion that the simultaneous habitation of self within the three-dimensional casing of that same and other selves, is finally nothing if not fluid. And it is just then, precisely in relation to this flux of substantive and insubstantial layers of selves that we come to recognize the complex of being as malleable; matter that mind can transcend.

*Milk, luminous flow, acoustic waves...
not to mention the gasses inhaled, emitted,
variously perfumed, of urine, saliva, blood,
even plasma, and so on. (20)*

- Luce Irigaray



Amanda Coogan, *Yellow*, 2008
courtesy of the artist

Performance art offers a singular potential to press the question regarding just how far our psychological and physical boundaries may extend. Out of this historical trajectory and into the present, performance artists orchestrate conditions that are visually compelling, even as they push their bodies beyond duration, distress, and fear.

Here, perhaps in its abject state, the physical boundaries of the body in conjunction with the peripheries of the self are transgressed. The abject body is one that dissolves, where body is less a palpable substance and more a matter of consciousness. The action of performance metaphorizes the body politic: the artist's wounds are ours. Performance is dynamic and transmissible; the performer is she who illuminates the transubstantial manuscript.



Abigail O'Brien, *Salt*, 2013
courtesy of the artist

*I diffuse myself,
which doesn't happen
without causing some
turbulence. (21)*
- Luce Irigaray

We are therefore of liquid, of light and spider silk, born of breath and mire, dispersed amid the same and similar substances. I comprehend my liquid self through metaphors of materiality, in performance of the everyday and the ultimate extreme. Within my liquid self abides the potential for minute and monumental transformations, for seepages, coagulations, evaporations, purifications.

In personal and communal spheres, in territories yet secret and strange, the self that is liquid spills over and floods itself and others in liters of luminous rain.

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14. Goswami, Amrit, **The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World**, pg. 220-21
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17. Proverbs, 30:4, **Holy Bible**, King James Edition, pg. 759
18. Irigaray, Luce, **This Sex Which is Not One**, pg. 110-111
19. Smith, Kiki, from **Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper**, pg. 145
20. Irigaray, Luce, op cit, pg. 113
21. Irigaray, Luce, *The Mechanics of Fluid*, **This Sex Which is Not One**, pg. 106 (paraphrased in performance text, *My Liquid Self*, 1999).

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9. Valerie Constantino, *Baby Girl*, self-portrait in three-piece suit, 1991. Personal Collection.
10. Kiki Smith, *Pee Body*, sculpture, 1990. Courtesy of Kiki Smith
11. Amanda Coogan, *Yellow*, performance, 2008. Courtesy of AmandaCoogan
12. Abigail O'Brien, *Salt*, 2013. Courtesy of Abigail O'Brien.