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“I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which  
I claim to establish myself.”

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*<sup>1</sup>

*Fleshy lumps squeezed in moist strokes. Fetching wet and clingy mucus. Clods of sticky gestures. Dragging slimy lesions in mucky splashes. Stroking dollops of mushy blush over magnetic broken faeces. Drizzling touch in sore scratches. Dirty madid plashy spills of rush. Forcing broken symptoms stuck to wounded crimson.*

*The studio is a mess and I am slipping around in waste. Stepping on a blotch of liquid; sliding over the gloppy floor. The skin is sticky, and the sensation spreads; hands and nails and hair and ears and nose and chin.*

the subject, burst from filth

The abject is described by philosopher Julia Kristeva as a breakdown in the distinction between self and other; a breakdown of one’s corporeal reality. Once, the abject was seen as part of oneself and one’s identity, but since then it has been rejected. Rejected in order to define the borders of the self; in order to establish an “I.” The abject is the unwanted that is being pushed away, forcefully kept outside. It is the embodiment of what resides in a liminal, ambiguous space between self and other, inside and outside. An undefinable fluctuating in-between—pushed away from the self, but not yet distanced enough to become other. The abject is that which is lurking on the border of the self, threatening to blur it. The unease caused by sensing something undefinable on the skin, not knowing if it is coming from the inside, or if it is trying to enter.

Abjection is a forceful release. It is the rejection of a part of oneself, due to feeling disgust over keeping it close. The process establishes the boundaries of the body—the contours of the subject—by expelling what does not belong. Abjection is linked to vomit and excrement, secretions and waste; to ejecting, rejecting, and expelling from the body. What has been expelled is deemed filthy; a threat to the subject, its cleanliness and wholeness. The release of bodily fluids is a protection and preservation, as well as an ejection, of the self. In this sense, abjection is related to birth. The abject confronts us with our earliest attempts to release our hold on the maternal entity before existing as our own—through the autonomy of language. It is a violent breaking away with constant risk of being dragged back.

*“I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“As in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.”<sup>3</sup>*

Abjection is tied to the sublime. According to Kristeva, the sublime is what keeps abjection under control.<sup>4</sup> The two are similarly experiences of doubling: of being here and beyond in a single moment. The sublime allows us to view past borders and become aware of their existence. The abject is the breakdown of this border, while the sublime is the imposition of it. Neither has an object; they are experiences of something beyond definition. Both result in unease and horror.

The entering of the sublime into the body is by Kristeva named the symptom. This is “a language that gives up, a structure of the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire.”<sup>5</sup> Turning to psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, a symptom is considered the physical result of a compromise between drive and repression, undergone to maintain order and control. Repression is the essence of abjection; what must be repressed or abjected is that which blurs internal boundaries of right and wrong, exclusion and taboo. It is an otherness that, despite being repeatedly rejected, threatens to return. A menace: to system, order, and control. The abject is at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion.<sup>6</sup> It neither gives up nor assumes



Image courtesy of the artist

Rebecca Lindsmyr, Installation view from *Every Earlier Stage Persists Alongside the Later Which Has Arisen from It*, MFA Exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2021

prohibition, rule, or law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them and takes advantage of them.<sup>7</sup>

***Nasty. Scruffy. Coarse. The paint, partly with its own life. Now it makes an unexpected turn, and I feel convulsions in my throat. A disgust; by paint; the painting; myself; by being the maker of the thing. Sickness, creeping close to the skin. I have the urge to shuffle it away. Claustrophobic. And yet, it pulls me in.***

Gender theorist Judith Butler incorporates abjection within performativity: repeated acts that form our identities. Performativity is—for example, in her famous book *Gender Trouble*—positioned in relation to sex and gender. Butler argues that neither gender nor sex are fixed but rather

formed through performed acts. She questions a general treatment of the body as an empty surface and clean scene for cultural inscription, upon which gender is assumed to be acted out. Instead, she claims both sex and gender to be linguistic constructions—one assuming the other.<sup>8</sup> Acts, gestures, and enactments are performative in the sense that the identity they purport to express are “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”<sup>9</sup> That the body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status that can be separated from the acts that constitute it. This concerns not only sex and gender but everything that together constitutes our identities and bodily beings. Through the acts we perform, we—intentionally as well as unintentionally—exist in a constant process of incorporation and rejection.

As within the process of abjection, performativity requires acts that are repeated; the repetitions with their similarities and differences are what form and define the subject. In Butler's words: "This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation."<sup>10</sup> This makes performativity a sustained and repeated corporeal project; a corporealisation of time.

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Art historian and critic Isabelle Graw argues that painting suggests a physical connection to its absent author, by what she calls "indexical signs."<sup>11</sup> Through material traces, the absent author becomes somewhat physically present in the work. In this way, the painting becomes saturated with the person of the artist. Graw refers to artist and architect Leon Battista Alberti, who in the fifteenth century believed the mission of painting was "to create life and to make absent men present."<sup>12</sup> What he had in mind was the depicted person; however, Graw argues this to be true also for the painter himself. Through the inscriptions of the author's gestures, the work attains subjectivity: "This is why a painting can be potentially experienced as being intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be."<sup>13</sup>

the fingerprints on the edges,  
from being held with stained fingers

**Ina Gerken.** A mishmash of lines: crossing, overlapping, tangling, winding, and intertwining. Applied lines, scratched lines, straight lines, and curvy lines. One single painting can consist of a full spectrum of brightly coloured lines, united into a pulsating surface that seems deep enough to step into. An opening into a world built up of threads; left behind as traces of someone's path. On my mind is *Untitled (After Laughter)* from 2019; its white grid in the foreground, reminiscent of a window. Behind it—enclosed—are layers building up, on top of each other; together shaping and defining its material being. The painting is saturated with indexical signs, produced by the movements of the artist. A performative—and transformative—sequence of events has taken place. What I encounter, as a viewer, is the material traces of this performative event; all there at once—a corporealisation of time. Art critic Carina Bukuts has described Gerken's pieces as being "constructed like a library of movements."<sup>14</sup> This is a quote I keep coming back to since my first encounter with her essay "A Library of Movements," included in a monograph on Gerken's work. The title of the essay pulled me in and twisted my thinking. The movements in the works are small and scribbly, large and gestural, sharp and itchy, thin and squared. They invite me as a viewer to come close; to follow the physical movement of another. To read their body.



Image courtesy of the artist

***Pushing. Pulling. Forcing. Dragging. Bending. Jumping. Scratching. Smearing. Wiping. Rubbing. Violently erasing.***

*“An immobile canvas could suggest a change of place, just as a shooting star’s track on my retina suggests a transition, a motion not contained in it. The painting itself would then offer to my eyes almost the same thing offered them by real movements: a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses along with, if a living thing is involved, attitudes unstably suspended between a before and an after—in short, the externals of a change of place which the spectator would read from the imprint it leaves.”<sup>15</sup>*

***I am in my studio, staring at lines left from the night before. Long gentle strokes, vaguely sharp in their turns, petering out; merging with the fast and harsh. I follow their path; read the unreadable.***

Eighteenth-century art critic Denis Diderot declared paint to be where “a man’s character and temperament” comes to the fore.<sup>16</sup> Much like how scribbling down something in a rush affects your handwriting, the painter reveals a hint of themselves through the work, by the expression of what is inscribed.

**Cy Twombly.** In “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,” philosopher Roland Barthes describes how, when confronted with the works of the artist, we are asked to conceive not the product but rather the movement behind it.<sup>17</sup> How Twombly’s work is not derived from a concept (mark) but from an activity (marking).<sup>18</sup> Complex in their simplicity, his lines can be traced back to the body’s movement; the hand’s movement. As Barthes nicely puts it, as a viewer you place yourself “in the hand’s footsteps”<sup>19</sup>—a painterly quote bringing light to the bodily encounter with a surface. In Twombly’s work, we encounter a scribbling—sometimes shy, sometimes careless—hand, as well as the energetic violence and physical struggle in works like the *Bacchus* series (2003–08). His style of painting is often closely related to writing. However, it is a writing we are unable to read; at least in the way writing is commonly read. Twombly pushed and challenged his line in different ways: towards the gesture behind the writing, rather than its form or usage. Barthes describes how Twombly tried to defeat the trained language of his hand by drawing at night with the lights out. Through this act, he impeded and slowed down his graphic skills, forcing his painting to approach a stage before written language. This tactic of Twombly’s has, by the art historian Kirk Varnedoe, been referred to as “blind”:

The “blind” practice contributed to the scrawling cursiveness and the looping, elongated proportions that are the hallmark of the Augusta drawings, and the nocturnal, uncensored manner of rendering may also account for the more candid opening of the imagery onto a psychosexual subconscious.<sup>20</sup>

The blindness in artistic mark making is also discussed by philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind*. He presents the idea of drawing as being made in partial

blindness; not in the sense of literally not seeing, but rather drawing as acted out from inner images and memories.<sup>21</sup> The line is therefore ambiguous: you draw without the eyes, in blindness. The blindness in the acts of painting and drawing emphasises their origin in the body. The hand rushes ahead of the head, and in place of the head.

The above-mentioned examples could be seen as ways—through painting or drawing—of moving to a place before language; before the symbolic order and the symbolic world of linguistic communication. As children, we are drawn into entering language out of a wish to be understood, but, according to Kristeva, there is the possibility of returning to a place before language. This place she calls the semiotic. According to Kristeva, signification is composed of two elements: the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic is the accumulation of language and shared cultural meaning. The symbolic allows the child to become a speaking subject and to develop an identity, separate from the mother. The semiotic is before language and the symbolic—it is tied to instincts and emotions, what lacks structure and meaning. The semiotic is a sign of the body entering language. The process of separating from the mother into the symbolic is the process of abjection. According to Kristeva, the subject continues to oscillate between the semiotic and the symbolic even after entering the symbolic; this stands in contrast to the thinking of psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, who believes this entering to be fixed. For Kristeva, the subject is permanently in process.

In the book *Faux Pas*, painter Amy Sillman points to a lack of discussion and analysis on shape in painting, commenting, “Maybe shape is just too vast to talk about, or resistant to language.”<sup>22</sup>

***If I haven’t been painting in weeks, I feel empty and filled, half and new, torn and naked. Painting is a release. It fills me, and it empties me.***

In Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, the anal stage is the second stage—out of five—leading up to the symbolic. This stage lasts from the age of eighteen months to three years. It is the stage when toilet training starts, which brings about the child’s fascination with the erogenous zone of the anus. The anal stage is related to control of the bowel and bladder. This stage is ostensibly about toilet training, but it is also about controlling behaviours and urges. According to Freud, issues in any stage of development will lead to fixation, and a potentially unhealthy personality. Issues developed at this stage are called “anal fixation,” and Freud describes it as leading to a personality that either grasps for control or rejects it. Holding on to this stage involves a refusal to enter into language. Similar to the process of abjection, here lies a refusal: neither wanting nor being able to become integrated into the symbolic system—one reacts, one abreacts, one objects.<sup>23</sup>

The anal stage is centred around pleasure in the anal—to enjoy smearing around in one’s own excrements and finding ways to control them. This deep interest not

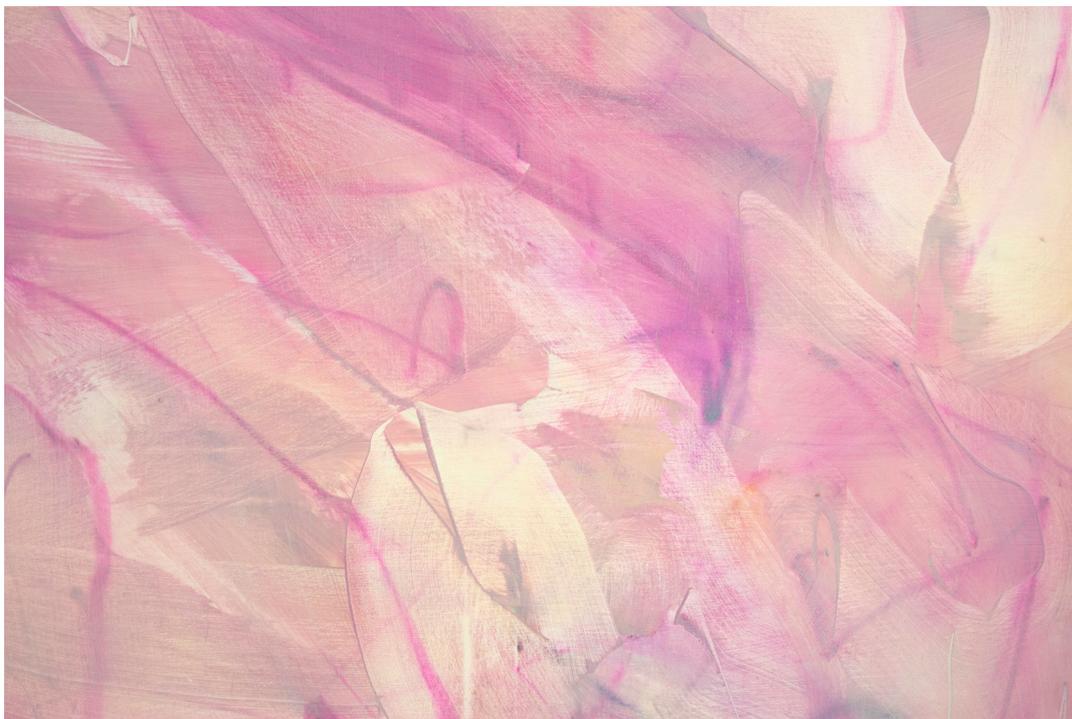


Image courtesy of the artist

Rebecca Lindsmyr, *the hand, arm, a blur; between being and its semblance*, 2020–21. Detail. Oil on canvas, 5 parts, 120 x 205 cm each

infrequently connects the anal stage with narcissism, as well as with perversion. In a similar manner as the abject connects to potential perversions through the ambiguity of something deviating from what is considered normal, so does the anal stage. Philosopher and writer Georges Bataille even claims abjection to be rooted in anal eroticism.<sup>24</sup> It is all a mishmash of in-between muck, alluding to bodiliness, through which we are expected to define and find the borders of our selves.

Due to the anal stage sharing common traits with the act of painting—namely, being grounded in the pleasure of controlling liquids through smearing, dribbling, and squeezing—as well as the similarities between the actual medium of painting and excretion, connections can be, and have been, made between painting and the anal stage. For example, in Paul McCarthy’s work *Painter* (1995), where the artist takes on the role of an abstract painter who, with his gigantic phallic brushes and tubes, smears what is labelled as “SHIT” over large canvases while mumbling to himself. Other earlier examples include the abstract paintings that Marcel Duchamp made with his semen in the late 1940s, Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit* from 1961, and Andy Warhol’s late 1970s *Oxidation Paintings*, made by urinating onto copper plates. Most artists who could be seen as explicitly dealing with paint as excretion are men—which likely connects to a higher tolerance, on a societal level, to men approaching something that could so easily be labelled “madness.” Not to mention the different conceptions of whatever comes out of a non-male body.

**Francis Bacon.** A violent deformation of the body. The contours dissolving; breaking down to what Graw poignantly describes as “a crouching mass of flesh and color.”<sup>25</sup> The depictions are abject for sure: the inner and outer merging into an undefined carnal lump; sometimes suffering, sometimes tender, sometimes both. Bacon refers to all his paintings as being accidents:

I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I use very large brushes, and in the way I work I don’t in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do.<sup>26</sup>

The paint is leading him; he is dragged down into this crouching mass of flesh and colour; panting for air in this huddled dough. The borders of his subjects dissolve, but, likewise, so do the borders between himself and that which is depicted. Bacon describes the distortions he performed on the faces of his subjects as “injuries.” He preferred to work from photographs so he could “practice the injury in private.”<sup>27</sup> There is a sadomasochistic trait to his work and his approach to painting; in finding pleasure in this injuring. The paint leads him to injure—himself, as well as his subjects—but he enjoys the process. The paint allows for this violent process to take place. Allows for a subject to become a piece of ambiguous meat.

**Willem de Kooning.** De Kooning's famous statement "Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented" equally suits his own work and that of Bacon.<sup>28</sup> The two artists share an interest in carnal representation, as well as the violent treatment of flesh, and of the paint itself. Over the years, de Kooning moved more and more into the abstract, but the paint kept on carrying a sense of fleshiness; of fragmented body parts; of a violent process of abjection.

Poet and critic Edwin Denby described de Kooning's process in 1943, whereby the artist would break down his paintings from an initial beauty to a puzzled surface.<sup>29</sup> A series of rejected pictures would build up on top of each other, after which, one day, the accumulated paint would be sandpapered down, leaving the ghostly presence of the undercoats. On top of this, de Kooning would then start building up the surface again. Act, rejection, and erasure overlaid; repeated.

In the lecture "The Renaissance and Order," de Kooning explained how painters paint themselves into their works through an implied point of view: the perspective of the artist.<sup>30</sup> In relation to the work of the impressionist Paul Cézanne, de Kooning expressed that every brushstroke has its own perspective, its own point of view.<sup>31</sup>

The above-mentioned approach to painting stands in close relation to themes explored by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Here he elaborates on our bodies as our points of view upon the world.<sup>32</sup> How the position of our eyes is what decides the view from these eyes. To have another perspective, our physical being needs to spatially move; and when it does, the first perspective is left behind. The body's spatial perspective, as well as temporal, is shifted.

According to Merleau-Ponty, in his writings on the phenomenology of the body, our bodies are the core of our view upon the world—everything is filtered through it. Every past event, every external categorisation and felt belonging, every sentiment and memory: all is stored within this moving lump of flesh. Merleau-Ponty explains:

There is no single movement in a living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychical intentions and no single psychical act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions.<sup>33</sup>

What is the basis for mixing a colour, or picking up a certain crayon? And what makes the movement inscribed with this material take on the shape that it does? This course of events is a formative interaction between self and other. The very first touch of a blank surface arises from a reaction to this entity—its position in relation to my body and what this relation triggers, at this very moment. The movements to follow are based on the same principle: one builds on the next. Two entities having a formative dialogue. The scale of a canvas will affect the relationship between the two. A large format activates the physicality of this encounter. Interaction with it in its entirety becomes impossible without physical endeavour. With physical activation comes what is triggered in the bodily container.

**Maria Lassnig.** The painted figure—elongated, shortened, twisted, squared, pushed, and torn. In Lassnig's work, the figure moves beyond its own depiction. It is a self-portraiture deformed through reflection on physical and psychological sensations. In her practice, the body is the site of action. Hardly any backgrounds or surroundings are to be seen: the focus is directed towards the internal



Image courtesy of the artist

Rebecca Lindsmyr, Installation view from *Every Earlier Stage Persists Alongside the Later Which Has Arisen from It*, MFA Exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2021

space of the body. The artist deforms the contours of the body, pushing them to take on different forms. In some of her paintings, the canvas in its full surface is pushed to act as a body; the body's contours equated with the contours of the frame. Often, the canvas is suggested as mirror. The body mirrored, or a mirroring of the mirroring process itself. Lassnig transforms her body as if altered in a fun-house mirror, but the alteration is sincere, with presence and with care.

Lassnig describes herself as highly sensitive and attentive to herself and her surroundings. In her very last diary entry, from 2003, she remarks how she is without skin: "All people here are sewn into thick quilted eiderdowns, there they do not hear how the world is doing, how it howls with pain, cold and hunger, is blind with rage. But I have no skin."<sup>34</sup>

Her practice, and how it is described from an outside perspective, returns again and again to the skin. In a monograph from 2016, her work is described as follows: "The canvas absorbs her bodily feelings like a skin, and the brush is the tool that transfers them. Perhaps the skin and the canvas are not so much borders as intersections between two different but interlinked forms of being."<sup>35</sup> In these two statements, the skin is described as a border between the artist and her surroundings; both how she is without this border—how her self merges with its surroundings— and how the skin and the canvas intertwine and become one.

*"The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its 'own and clean self.'"*<sup>36</sup>

***The painting tears out all emotions. Increases their volume. I hide them under coatings; integuments; skins. Transparent layers. Creating distance. It is soothing to come back and bring down the intensity of what belongs to the past. Physically transform something to past tense. Play down. Dissolve. Hide. Then start all over.***

human skin flattened out is about 2 m<sup>2</sup>

At the age of twenty-two, I went to Oxford, England, to see a Jenny Saville exhibition. I was deeply touched and spent hours walking around the show. Saville was certainly important for me at an early stage of my practice, and some of her influence probably lingers still. Looking back now, I understand that she showed me paint as narrative flesh; how paint can feel like a truer flesh than flesh itself. The large scale allowed the figures to disappear by moving closer. To see the different layers of paint, of actions. The figures became secondary; what mattered was the flesh, what was lying behind, and imbedded in, it.

During that same period, I was working in a supermarket. From behind the cash register, I could shamelessly look at

people's skins from up close, decoding stories of time passed in their skin. Fleishy wrinkles. Lines and bruises. Shades and veins. Hairs and scars. A life of smoking. A lifetime of repressed feelings.

*"There is something about the way the cloth is stretched tightly over the frame that gives them a bizarre solidity, like skin on a face."*<sup>37</sup>

I mostly build the stretchers for my paintings myself. Because I want them physically and visually heavier than prefabricated ones. The thickness of the painting gives it a physical presence; a sense of bodily being. It brings subjectivity to the work—a presence that, by Graw, is described as its "vitalistic potential."<sup>38</sup> The canvases' physical properties give the paintings a presence not as pictures, but as physical entities. They exist in the studio as objects I have to relate and adjust to. The width of the stretchers allows the paintings to stand rather stably straight on the ground; for us to relate equally to each other. I install them low, so they relate to the body and its proportions.

*"Every earlier stage of development persists alongside the later stage which has arisen from it."*<sup>39</sup>

In *The Ontology of the Accident*, philosopher Catherine Malabou explores the concept of "plasticity." Plasticity characterises the relationship between matter and form in psychic life. Malabou refers to it as a concept commonly used by Freud in regard to the fluidity of the libido.<sup>40</sup> In this idea lies what is assumed in psychoanalysis; namely, that nothing experienced is forgotten—that the trace is indestructible. It can be modified, deformed, and reformed, but not obliterated. Plasticity provides the opportunity for transformation without destruction. The deforming perspective of time—what literally dissolves the form. The passing of time and hence the reshaping of one's being.<sup>41</sup> As with everything persisting at once within ourselves, the same is true within painting. Paint is added or scraped off, leaving an imprint and reshaping its surface through laboured time. As expressed by de Kooning, "You can't start over again with the canvas like it was before you put that first stroke down."<sup>42</sup> Every act is stored in its skin.

*"One of the marvels of modern painting is that this tension between marking and storing time remains present on its surface, since its constituent marks, which are laid down over time, are always simultaneously available to vision."*<sup>43</sup>

**Dorothea Tanning.** I have long loved Tanning's *Insomnias* (1957): a work with the presence of passing time—of looking back; like dreaming—and suggestions of figures that unfold as one continues to look. The movement; the colours; the hazy transparent feel to the work. The transparent appeals to me: gestures building up while simultaneously being individually visible. Making its marks possible to read: to sort out the gestures; to follow a line; to unfold. Like standing in front of a mirror and looking a bit too intensely at yourself; seeing a scar or a wrinkle, reminding you of something from long ago.



Image courtesy of the artist

Rebecca Lindsmyr, Installation view from *Every Earlier Stage Persists Alongside the Later Which Has Arisen from It*, MFA Exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2021

I started out as a figurative painter, something I have been moving away from over the years. However, I still carry the figurative painter's gaze. This approach to painting is about looking, intensely studying. Understanding what is going on underneath. As a figurative painter, intimacy can be very intense; a shivering closeness comes with tuning the eyes to details and nuances. How a finger or a toe is placed during conversation; the exact mix of colours needed to produce the right tone of a patch of skin; the precise curving of a nostril. Your gaze is constantly breaking down the face of the person you are talking to: ounces of ochre, titanium, crimson, cobalt, vermillion, sienna, and cadmium. Bumps, wrinkles, scratches, and flakes.

I have always preferred the Swedish word *skiktmåleri* (layer-painting) over its English translation, "glazing." It better describes the process of repeated veiling. Calculating what needs to go under what. Transforming, in your mind, a skin into a medical cross-section; layers on top of each other; lifting each other. Complementary and contrasting colours; shades and shadows; from light building up towards dark or the other way around; blue under ochre for the right coldness of a wrist.

skin  
for a painter, a surface is a process  
you ought to understand what is under the

Closely related to the abject is Bataille's concept of the formless (*l'informé*). With this concept, he opposes—what he experiences as—a general claim that everything should have a form. The formless is about attacking the very imposition of categories. The formless does not carry an inside-outside model with it—as the abject does; rather, it suggests an ambiguous fluid formlessness.<sup>44</sup> However, even if the division between inside and outside is not as clear in the formless as it is in the abject, both concepts deal with fluids and excrement. In his definition of the formless, in his *Critical Dictionary*, Bataille connects formlessness to saliva: "To affirm on the other hand that the universe does not resemble anything and is nothing but formless amounts to the claim that the universe is something like a spider or a gob of spittle."<sup>45</sup> According to him, matter is seductive waste, appealing to what is most infantile in us, since the blow it strikes is devolutionary, regressive.<sup>46</sup>

In "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the 'Informe' and the Abject," a discussion between the editors of the journal *October* published in 1994, the formless and the abject are brought together. Both concepts provided the foundation for several large exhibitions in the 1990s. The discussion covers how the formless "allows for slippage—where at certain moments you can't tell the difference between an eye and an asshole."<sup>47</sup>

Twombly's work is a clear example of this formless slippage. In *Venus and Adonis* (1978), his scribbling gestures transform into vague body parts. From what at first seems reminiscent of a child's naive drawing arises sexual content, buttocks and phallic shapes. Suddenly, what could at first sight be read as a flower could as much be an anus.

**Ambera Wellmann.** In the essay "Unwanted," artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger describes how Wellmann's works function to queer space, through her depictions of figures as *formless* uniform colour fields.<sup>48</sup> In Wellmann's paintings, scattered elements of the human body are recomposed. A representation that lingers in-between; a figure without fixed borders. This idea draws us back to Kristeva and the abject as "what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>49</sup>

**Rita Ackermann.** In 2016, Ackermann's chalkboard paintings were presented at Malmö Konsthall as part of her solo exhibition *The Aesthetic of Disappearance*. Her earlier, more figurative works from the 1990s were presented alongside recent chalkboard paintings. Seeing the different periods side by side accentuated the figurative elements in her later works—making the physical erasures appear more violent. Behind her expressive gestures linger bodily fragments; erased. Over time, and work by work, the figures become more and more dissolved. But they are there—maybe to an even greater degree—in the more abstract works. It's there in the haze, even if only assumed in

some vague lines. Ackermann explains that she made the chalkboard paintings through multiple erasures, referencing what happens on a chalkboard in a classroom.<sup>50</sup> In her work, time becomes present through the act of wiping out.

**Christopher Wool.** A similar act is performed in Wool's series *Gray Paintings* (2005). No direct figurative element appears, and yet an inscribed body is delineated through gestural mark making. He erases a gesture he just performed. Wool declares this to be "erasure as a picture itself."<sup>51</sup> He builds up his work through creation and destruction overlaid; gesture and erase, gesture and erase. The artist's hand is inscribed through its present absence and absent presence. Left behind is a time-stamped surface. An act reminiscent of cleaning a mirror: spraying on some cleaner, and wiping it off with a piece of cloth.

It's now been many years since I first encountered Lacan's mirror stage as a concept. It lingers in the back of my mind, forcing its way into my painterly practice. For my master's degree exhibition, the mirror has taken on a central role.

Using the concept of the mirror stage, Lacan explains how the child, between the ages of six and eighteen months, identifies with its image in the mirror, and through this comes to a first understanding of itself existing not as a fragmented body but as a whole individual; an "I." This understanding evolves through a process of exploring the relation between gestures and movements of the body

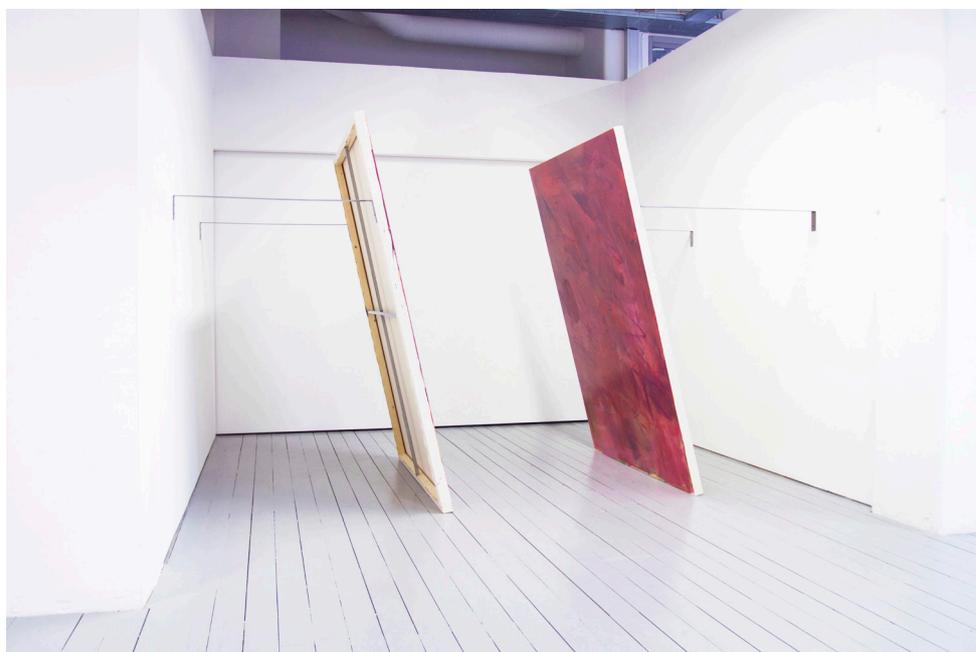


Image courtesy of the artist

Rebecca Lindsmyr, Installation view from *Every Earlier Stage Persists Alongside the Later Which Has Arisen from It*, MFA Exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2021

and of the reflected mirror image. Through gestures and movements reflected in a surface, an “I” is formed. Lacan describes the mirror stage “as an identification; a transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.”<sup>52</sup> The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relation between the inner world (*Innenwelt*) and the outer world (*Umwelt*).<sup>53</sup> This process of recognising oneself as an “I” also entails recognising oneself as an other. Hence, the mirror stage is a process of both unity and alienation. It is a process of stepping out of and back from the physical body; to observe it in its entirety.

*“Color is the scattering of unity. Thus, it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject, accepts.”*<sup>54</sup>

For Kristeva, the mirror stage exists between the pre-linguistic stage associated with the abject and the accusation of, and entering into, language. Through the mirror stage, the child enters into language and moves from what is before it. An objective gaze of the self is explored, under which the self is formed by being presented as an object. Before the mirror stage, the world is fragmented, built up of body parts. The mirror gives the child shape, becoming a whole being. The “I” moves from being a fragmented body and, through a surface, starts to see its contours. For Kristeva, this process is in constant flux: we move through the mirror stage into establishing language, and back to matter before language, back to the semiotic.

*“Let us not forget that the painter’s brushstroke is something in which a movement is terminated. We are faced here with something that gives new meaning to the term regression.”*<sup>55</sup>

Related to the mirror stage is Lacan’s screen theory. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan draws a system of two overlapping triangles; on each side of the triangles is the subject of representation, respectively that which turns *me* into a picture under the gaze. In the central overlap is the image, or screen.<sup>56</sup> The screen exists between the subject and the gaze. The gaze is that which is outside; where the “I” becomes looked at, becomes a picture. It is a splitting of the being; the being breaks up between its being and its semblance: “The being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield.”<sup>57</sup>

In one part of the text, Lacan situates the screen in relation to painting:

If a bird were to paint would it not be by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales, a tree by letting fall its leaves? What it amounts to is the first act in the laying down of the gaze. A sovereign act, no doubt, since it passes into something that is materialized and which, from this sovereignty, will render obsolete, excluded, inoperant, whatever, coming from elsewhere, will be presented before this product.<sup>58</sup>

The painting becomes the screen, between the subject and the gaze.

*“The mirror’s phantom draws my flesh into the outer world.”*<sup>59</sup>

For my master’s exhibition, polished metal is united with my paintings—in the shape of mirroring planes and structures; supporting, reflecting, pushing, or restraining the canvases. Raw metal has been polished into reflecting surfaces. Through layer after layer of different sandpapers and polishing rags, the objects have transformed into a reflection of movements. The movements made during the process have left traces: tiny scratches pointing towards the movements of the body in front of it. My body has moved in relation to a plane; covering the surface, layer after layer. Day by day, the object has taken one step closer to becoming a painting. A hazy membrane lingers on the surface. Painterly marks are left from polishing discs and wax, on the front as well as the sides. Never have metal and paint felt this close to me.

I went through a period years ago where I painted shiny metal: scissors, hospital beds, different medical equipment. It is so far from painting. From paint and flesh and liquids. It feels like a contradiction in itself: painting metal.

But then again, what is paint if not metal; *zinc white, titanium white, transparent red oxide, nickel titanium yellow, gold ochre, vermilion extra, cadmium red, cobalt violet ...*

In *Madness and Civilization*, philosopher Michel Foucault describes processes of mirroring in the asylum: this is how the inmate is to be shown that their experience is “in fact” insanity. He describes how the inmate recognises their own insanity in a mirror they are forced to face. It is an act of humiliation, and of self-regulation. The inmate’s solid sovereignty as subject breaks down in this object that they have demystified through internalisation. The subject is now mercilessly observed by themselves, and recognises themselves objectively as insane. In the asylum, mirrors are arranged in such a manner that the inmate cannot but be taken by surprise at finding themselves insane. They are chained to the humiliation of perceiving oneself as object. Through this mirror play, insanity is forced to reveal itself.<sup>60</sup> What Foucault describes is the mirror as a structure of power and of self-regulation.

***I cannot paint before noon. Best circumstances are on a rainy day or when darkness arrives. It’s such a cliché. Winter is good for painting; Malmö is generally good for painting. It is grey and the colours show off at their best. In the afternoon and evening, my presence falls down from the head, into the body.***

In the documentary *With My Back to the World*, painter Agnes Martin describes how she is sitting in her studio chair, awaiting what she calls *inspiration*.<sup>61</sup> In my own practice, I would describe this waiting as *spending time with the shadow of who is about to come*. As if knowing you

are about to meet someone who will be important to your life, and you prepare for the encounter. It is about becoming present in the body, getting ready for a physically and mentally challenging process; about waiting and building up the right space.

I work on several paintings at once. Not at the same time; I go between them. But they exist alongside each other, each having its own time and space. They stand in the studio like beings I am forced to relate and adjust to. At the beginning as empty surfaces, and later on in the process of becoming. Many painters describe their fear of the empty canvas. Its vacuity can be overwhelming. What is not fear-inducing about a blank figure without a past? An empty mirror that does not reflect you back. We spend time together, feeling each other. Getting to know one another through physical presence. Then comes that feeling; we approach.

***I leave the painting behind. Still feeling rushed from the intensity and emotion. It all went by fast. The act. I am leaving, but at the same time, I am not leaving at all. My body has left the room, but is still in it. I go over the dialogue again and again. Figuring out if it evolved properly, and where to pick it up next.***

*“After a while, your body is the partner to the materials, you are the medium as well as the tool, the boundaries between you and your object become unclear, mirroring or antagonizing each other. The art-making process is a recording of these restless interactions between subject and object on a par with one another, locked together.”<sup>62</sup>*

***Be in—in a state, affected by, in a rush—then, step out, gaze, evaluate. Diagnose. Be therapist and patient, doctor and patient, artist and model, subject and object. Be both. In-between. Floating. Between canvases. Between roles. Between performances and representations.***

Lacan calls the mirror stage a drama. It is a drama performed in relation to a surface; a transforming performance. Much like the process of painting. Caught up in a process; reflected in a surface; trying to form a language that is before language; leaving a self-reflecting object behind.

**Jutta Koether.** In 2009, Koether presented the work *Hot Rod (after Poussin)* as part of the exhibition *Lux Interiors* at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York. The exhibition consisted of one single work mounted on an angled floating wall on legs, which had one leg on and one off the raised platform that delineates the gallery’s exhibition area—as if it were stepping on stage. Here, the painting became something to walk around—to interact with. Three lecture-performances accompanied the exhibition, for which Koether moved around, and even under, the work. The performance activated the painting as object, but also as subject. The work was being performed by Koether, but was, through its subjectivity, also performing itself. Its legs suggesting that the painting could walk away, from her and the gallery, if it wanted to.

*I have created painterly situations that challenge my physical position—and through them my movement and brushstrokes—in relation to the canvas. The canvases are physically challenging me. Forcing themselves upon me. Causing resistance. I plan the constructions, build them, and, then, perform within them. I cannot know my reactions to them beforehand. The canvases become physical entities I have to relate and adjust to—entities lingering between subject and object.*

All the works in my master’s exhibition were painted as they are presented: leaning, bending, forced up against a wall. During the course of the work’s development, I could not step back from the work any further than, later, a visitor in the exhibition space can. The visitors are invited to meet the work as created; to stand in the position of another. The paintings reflect where I cannot reach; reflect the proportions of my body. I want the audience to meet the work as it was produced. Not giving myself, nor them, the possibility to turn around or change the position of the canvas. Instead, I want to create a bond between body and canvas—a reflective and formative bond—and allow for this bond to be the base for an intimate encounter.

1 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

2 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

3 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

4 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11.

5 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11.

6 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 45.

7 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 15.

8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 176.

9 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

10 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

11 Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons,” in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 50.

12 Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy,” in *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchard (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), 99.

13 Graw, “The Value of Painting,” 52.

- 14 Carina Bukuts, "A Library of Movements," in *Ina Gerken*, ed. Ina Gerken, the Fine Art Collective, and Achenbach Hagemeyer (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber, 2018), 22.
- 15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 144.
- 16 Graw, "The Value of Liveliness," 95.
- 17 Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 164.
- 18 Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," 173.
- 19 Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," 171.
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- 24 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 64.
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- 26 Francis Bacon, quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 5th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 14.
- 27 Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: Norton, 2012), 227–28.
- 28 Willem de Kooning, quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, "In Lieu of a Preface," in *Willem de Kooning Nonstop: Cherchez la femme* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.
- 29 Edwin Denby, quoted in Krauss, "In Lieu of a Preface," 11.
- 30 Willem de Kooning, "The Renaissance and Order" (lecture, 1949), quoted in Krauss, "In Lieu of a Preface," 16.
- 31 Krauss, "... Its Bad Name," in *Willem de Kooning Nonstop*, 51.
- 32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 73.
- 33 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 90.
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- 35 Anna Fricke, "Maria Lassnig's Metapaintings," in Redizisz and Barnes, "What Next?," 95–97.
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