

WHOSE BODY?
NICHOLAS AND SHEILA PYE'S 'THE CORONATION'

by

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Abstract

In 2008, Canadian artists Nicholas and Sheila Pye travelled from Toronto, Ontario to Graz, Austria for a six-month artist residency. Working within the Austrian landscape and drawing from an influence of Northern European Medieval and Renaissance art the Pyes produced *The Coronation*, a twelve-minute, three-channel video installation enmeshed with art historical references. Their deliberate appropriation of the triptych format and the Adam and Eve imagery of the fifteenth-century *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck place the Edenic narrative of the side panels in *The Coronation* in conversation with the shifting seasons and ecological processes in the centre panel, providing numerous entry points for contemplation. While this video installation suggests an exploration of the iconographic body, it is also indicative of the Pyes' complication of the notion of the autonomous human body, its engagement with the environment and, furthermore, an emphasis on the instability of identity.

Previous writing on the collaborative practice of the Pyes has taken the form of exhibition reviews and curatorial essays, concentrating on a sustained narrative that prioritizes the Pyes' relationship. Shifting away from the specificities of a biographical framework, my research focuses on *The Coronation*'s attention to the interrelationality of life. Furthermore, the Pyes push their artistic practice beyond one that assumes the specificity and autonomy of an individual human body, reconstituted in the intersecting body and earth. This informs our understanding of corporeal signification as comprised of embodied social and ideological performativity. Framed by a broad ecological lens and with Judith Butler's notion of performativity in mind, I demonstrate the capacity of the Pyes' work to problematize the stability of physical and enunciated boundaries that demarcate the human body.

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Introduction: Rethinking the Body

“Ecological thinking”¹, argues Timothy Morton, does not belong solely within scientific discourse. It spans all aspects of human and non-human life. “Ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. ... Human beings need each other as much as they need an environment. Human beings are each other’s environment.”² Morton, a contemporary scholar of literature, ecology and philosophy, proposes an ecology without nature, re-emphasizing that the bifurcation of nature and culture is one that is socially constructed. This corrective underscores the construction of the concept. The concept of Nature often viewed “as a reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild.”³ Nature, by its very nature, is un-natural. To borrow from Jacques Derrida, “The law and the counter-law serve each other citations summoning each other to appear”.⁴ Thus, the *idea* of Nature is created in opposition to the *idea* of the human, delineated through perceptual boundaries and autonomy from one another. Yet, the relationship of living beings within their environment and each other defines ecology. It extends beyond localization to engage the interrelations of human and non-human bodies within the social, political and material systems that govern them. Ecology, therefore, encompasses figuration which is shaped by these systems, events and ideologies we encounter throughout our existence; and, as such, the delineation of the body becomes the manner in which we understand our body to be constructed.

¹ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 58.

Selected artworks by Canadian artists Nicholas Pye (1976-) and Sheila Pye (1978-) call to mind this ecological interrelationality of human bodies. While the pair actively maintains their own individual artistic practices, their concurrent collaborative work surpasses a decade – encompassing their eight-year marriage, their divorce and their cross-Atlantic collaborations with Sheila currently in Madrid and Nicholas in Toronto.⁵ Throughout, the Pyes have consistently used their own bodies to create visually stimulating, painterly and theatrically inspired films and photographic works that evoke the interweaving of social, historical and material events that enable variant perceptions of the human body. For Nicholas Pye, “The aesthetic character of the work comes out of a need to be engaged by the visual first in order to explore the conceptual.”⁶ Art functions to challenge our views, and it is through the visual that the Pyes have found this.⁷ Habitually employing unconventional narrative structure to their filmic works and photographic series, linearity is frequently replaced by ambiguity, opening up greater heuristic possibilities. Their work is often grounded in investigations of the intricacies and intimacies of a male-female relationship; yet they push beyond these specificities to attend to the capacities and limits of a human body. In this manner, an intersecting of the body and earth is persistent in their work, and the Pyes’ play with identity, gender and the evocation of an unstable discourse suggests an attempt to articulate space for rethinking subject-categories and subject-formation. Extending beyond a discussion exclusively of gender, subjectivity is, therefore, not only inseparable from lived experience, but also from one’s environment.

In 2008, the pair travelled from Toronto, Ontario to Graz, Austria for a six-month artist residency. Working within the Austrian landscape and drawing from an influence of Northern

⁵ Nicholas and Sheila Pye met while in art school at the Ontario College of Art and Design. They were married in 2001 and divorced in 2009.

⁶ Nicholas Pye, in conversation with the author, March 18, 2011.

⁷ Ibid.

European Medieval and Renaissance art the Pyes produced *The Coronation*, a twelve-minute, three-channel video installation enmeshed with art historical references. Their deliberate appropriation of the triptych format and the Adam and Eve imagery of the fifteenth-century *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck place the Edenic narrative of the side panels in *The Coronation* in conversation with the shifting seasons and ecological processes in the centre panel, providing numerous entry points for contemplation. This video installation suggests an exploration of the iconographic body, yet it is also indicative of the Pyes' complication of the notion of the autonomous human body, its engagement with the environment and, furthermore, an emphasis on the instability of identity. While the religious iconography of *The Coronation* remains present, it is in my view that its literal precedence subsides, and the encounter of body and earth comes further into focus. In this sense, the ecological body may be informed by the theological body, but it is not superseded by it. Building from here, the interdependencies and shifting attributes of the two figures in the context of the biblical narrative, instead, act to foreground the question of what constitutes a human body.

With methodological consistency, the artists' bodies reappear throughout their works. Some of their earlier large-scale photographs, such as *A Conversation with Myself I*, *A Conversation with Myself II* and *Heavy Bodies* from 2005, employ the naked bodies of the artists in a dialogical space with the soil of a potted tree. Emphasis of the interconnectedness of the human in nature is derived through depictions of the physical encounter with the material manifestations of the earth. On a rudimentary level, the works relocate the human in nature, yet this relocation further signals the Pyes' concern with elemental transformations and entropic forms continuously maintained throughout their engagement with the abject and the imagery of

death and decay.⁸ These earlier photographs are therefore suggestive of nature transposed into the designated space of the human, whereas *The Coronation* takes the body outside and into a wide open field. The immediacy of ecological processes not only represented through entropy and seasonal cycles but through the intersecting body and earth also signals the greater connotations of ecology in an expanded sense.

Preceding *The Coronation*, a trilogy comprising of a series of photographs and three films, *The Paper Wall* (2004), *A Life of Errors* (2006) and *Loudly, Death Unties* (2007), is viewed by critics as projections of their real-life relationship. The trilogy prioritizes investigations of codependency, both banal and volatile, alongside the dissolution of the individual in the context of an intimate relationship. Integral to my own line of inquiry, these issues represent an intermingling of perceptual limits often considered inherent to a singular body. In these works it is thus this suspension of psychological and physiological autonomy that bares the question of bodily limits. More recent photographs from 2010, *Departure*, *Denial* and *Amend*, break from much of their previous works to deal prominently with post-relational stages of grieving.⁹ Nevertheless, the earth-body intersection is most distinctly retained in *Denial*. Created post-divorce and taking a cue from the title, there seems to be a refusal in the two protagonists to acknowledge their individuality. I see that in this manner the bodies implanted in the soil function to metaphorically reassert their ‘becoming’ of one another. In other words, reaffirming a death of the individual¹⁰ and their inseparability from the experience of the other, and secondly, to evidence their insertion of bodies within the elemental components of the earth

⁸ Clayton Maxwell, “Nicholas and Sheila Pye: Vanitas,” *Eyemazing* 172 (Spring 2009): 80.

⁹ Nicholas Pye, in conversation with author, March 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

as articulations of the ecological processes of living beings, and further, ecological interrelationality.

Previous writing on the collaborative practice of the Pyes takes the form of exhibition reviews and curatorial essays, and the scope of critical analysis has been slight in favour of a sustained narrative that prioritizes the Pyes' relationship and the works that appear to take this as their subject. Certainly the relationship of the two artists is an element that leaches into their films and photographs, and the Pyes do not deny the inevitability of this infringement of their factual relationship onto their fictional productions. Yet, an inquiry entrenched in the biography of the artists neglects to "look under the hood" so to speak.¹¹ What I mean is that many of the reviewers appear to write from a point of seduction, evoked by the cinematic character of the Pyes' images and by the potentiality to locate the *real* artists within the artworks. This concentration on the Pyes' relationship, therefore, results in an absencing of a significant interrelational component of their work that reconnects figuration and ecology, which not only disrupts the binary structure of human and nature, but also problematizes the limits of the body.

I derive this notion of "looking-under-the-hood" from American art historian Rosalind Krauss and her 1993 essay on photographic artist Cindy Sherman and her *Untitled Film Stills*. Krauss, referring to a review by a young Richard Rhodes in 1982, posits "Rashomon-like misrecognition" of the content of Sherman's photographs.¹² Taking subjectivity at its core, the *Rashomon* effect is understood as the variation of possible interpretations of an event.¹³ Herein,

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975 -1993* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), 25.

¹² Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 17.

¹³ The Rashomon effect is derived from the title of a 1952 film by Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. "Designating something resembling or suggestive of the film *Rashomon*, esp. in being characterized by multiple conflicting or differing versions, perspectives, or interpretations" in "Rashomon, n.", OED Online, June 2012, Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/268257?redirectedFrom=rashomon> (accessed August 23, 2012).

the art critic reads Sherman's images at face value, making visual connections via memory to an "original" that, in all reality, does not exist. Scrutinizing the details of Sherman's photographs, the young art critic is seduced by what he sees, falling prey to the surficial myth and, thus, consuming it.¹⁴ Let me explain. Krauss' deconstruction of Rhodes' reading calls upon French literary critic Roland Barthes. And Barthes, Krauss claims, would have classified "this strange hallucination" as myth. Myth, in this case, that reconstructs Sherman's imagery as something pre-existing.¹⁵ Krauss explains Barthes usage of myth would thus be deployed in such a way to illuminate the fact that "myth is also what Sherman herself is analyzing and projecting in *Untitled Film Stills*. Although not as a myth-consumer, like the critic [Rhodes]; but rather as a mythographer, like Barthes – a demystifier of myth, a de-myth-ifier."¹⁶

Myth, thought through Barthes, is derived from material embedded with meaning, encompassing the history given to a form.¹⁷ Material as such includes but is not limited by speech, image and the signification of objects and their arrangements. Furthermore, myth as "depoliticized speech" is indicative of that which has been evacuated from the form.¹⁸ Through the myth of the Christian iconography of Adam and Eve and the triptych altarpiece format in *The Coronation*, it is the transparency of the historical production of corporeal boundaries, associative gender roles and correlating behaviours that have been evacuated. Thus, myth is the fabrication of the meaning through form through the naturalization processes of history, veiling such corporeal designations that are not inherent or universal amongst human bodies.¹⁹ "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them,

¹⁴ Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid, 20.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 118.

¹⁸ Ibid, 143.

¹⁹ Ibid.

it makes them innocent”, Barthes claims. Yet, he continues, “in passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts”.²⁰

If I take from Krauss (following Barthes) a methodology of “de-myth-ication,” I must now ask Krauss’ question: “What, then, is under the hood?”²¹ The images Sherman constructs are rooted in a cinematic culture that historically perpetuates certain ideals and notions of the female in Western society; but the goal of her works is not recreation. In a similar manner, the Pyes’ works are not an outlet to exclusively recreate the details of their lives together. Understanding that a substantial component of their work investigates how an individual is positioned in relation to another is also paralleled in the positioning of their work within art history, extending to how they have positioned *themselves* within art history. Placing *The Coronation* at the centre of my research, I demonstrate that the Pyes take on both art history and ecology in their video installation with deliberate reference to the triptych format and the Adam and Eve imagery of the fifteenth-century *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck, alongside representations of shifting seasons and processes of decay and regeneration. In view of Timothy Morton’s notion of ecological thought, such processes in the Pyes’ work extend beyond the cyclical nature of the seasons to encompass a broader consideration of both conceptual and material interrelationality. Such consideration is further made visible through the intersection of the body and earth persistent in their work, again highlighting ecological interdependence and simultaneously presenting itself as a binding apparatus for tangential investigations, such as gender, identity and performativity.

²⁰ Barthes, 143.

²¹ Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 28.

The notion of gender performativity, according to Judith Butler, reifies perception of corporeal classification through ritualized and repeated action, showing us how categorical boundaries are reinforced to create naturalized understandings of what constitutes a body.²² These boundaries, however, are simultaneously unstable and they are not universal. Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.²³

The specific appropriation of the Adam and Eve characterisation in *The Coronation* calls our attentions to the processes, events and ideologies that shaped our existence; and thus, delineate our bodies through their construction and proliferation. Moreover, throughout human history, these processes have manifest as (pliable) boundaries for what is and is not considered a body. In this way, critical rethinking of the body must expand and transgress disciplinary boundaries. As in Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, it is myth, or more accurately a selection of myths, that is called to question through the Pyes’ works. Placing them unmistakably on view, lifesize and transforming, confronting the viewer with the performativity and the naturalization of myth.

In an artist talk on *The Coronation* at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC in 2011, the Pyes disclosed that they wanted art historical referencing to be “a point of departure” for their own allegorical and illusionistic investigations; positing the referencing as a framework in which to “delve into different subject matters such as sexuality, sexuality and identity, and assuming

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xv.

²³ Ibid, 6.

each other's identity"; and furthermore, to explore the psychological and physiological transformations endured by human beings.²⁴ My vein of inquiry follows Krauss' model to depart from one entrenched in the biography of the artists or a literal interpretation of the religious iconography bound up in the Jan van Eyck reference. Therefore, shifting away from the specificities of a biographical framework, my research takes *The Coronation* as a focus to demonstrate that Nicholas and Sheila Pye's attention to the interrelationality of life pushes their artistic practice beyond one that assumes the specificity and autonomy of an individual human body, reconstituted in the intersecting body and earth, which in turn highlights our understanding of corporeal signification as comprised of embodied social and ideological performativity. Framed by a broad ecological lens and with Judith Butler's notion of performativity in mind, I will demonstrate the capacity of the Pyes' work to problematize the stability of physical and enunciated boundaries that demarcate the human body.

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²⁴ Nicholas Pye and Sheila Pye, "Artists Nicholas and Sheila Pye discuss The Coronation," Sound Recording (Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection, 2011), MP3, http://www.phillipscollection.org/exhibitions/intersections/audio_tour.aspx.

The Coronation

The first showing of *The Coronation*, and my own encounter with this work, was in 2008 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.²⁵ With the preliminary title *Reconstitution*, the piece was exhibited on its own, in a small gallery room with the larger-than-life-sized characters of the Pyes projected onto the wall. More recently, the piece was shown in 2011 on three large-scale plasma monitors at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.²⁶ In this video-installation it is the Pyes who emulate, with their own bodies, the style and posture of the figures in the Adam and Eve sections of the fifteenth-century *Ghent Altarpiece*. The two figures each occupy one of the exterior panels, naked with distended bellies and postures akin to the Netherlandish triptych. They are represented as near-mirror images, facing centre and covering their genitals with their outside arm. Over the course of the film, the pair steps slowly towards the central panel, and each other, eventually stepping out of their respective frames. In the background, a landscape is also mirrored on the two side panels and disappears along with the figures.²⁷ The effect of this disappearance signals a shift and insinuates crossed paths as they re-emerge from behind the central panel to take each other's place. In doing so, there is transference in the characters. Adam now holds the fruit in his left hand and wears the crown of thorns. Eve's torso is turned, positioning her back to the viewer, in a posture that conceals her breasts and long hair, as her body moves toward the exterior frame of her panel.

²⁵ Lab 8.3: *Reconstitution* ran from November 28, 2008 to January 18, 2009 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in Victoria, BC. The Lab is an experimental space within the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria designated for contemporary art.

²⁶ The Intersections Art Projects at the Phillips Collection explores the intersecting practices of contemporary with historical art. From February 17 to May 22, 2011, the Pyes' *The Coronation* was paired with George Rouault's 1930 *Tragic Landscape*.

²⁷ The Pyes filmed the two exterior panels in Graz, Austria during a six-month artist residency in 2008 at Instyria Kultur Service, whereas they filmed central panel in Ontario, Canada.

The movement from one panel to the other reveals a distinct re-characterization of both figures with the passing of the fruit and their posturing. Employing established indicators of gender, this functions to destabilise the account of Adam and Eve, and pushes beyond the biblical implication to provoke a repurposing of this narrative. Read outside of the biblical context, the shifting of bodies instead posits the dissolving individuality of the figures and highlights issues of codependency. The use of the image of Adam and Eve thus provides a clear example of performativity through regulative discourse and mythology, representative, also, of hegemonic power.²⁸ While I did not initially come to my research into the Pyes' work with the predominant question of boundaries, it has since become clear that their attentions to these transitory spaces of life – the unfixed, the uncertain – are undeniable concerns here. With Adam and Eve, the Pyes provide their viewers with a pre-existing and exhausted point of departure, one that claims to evidence fixed gender, fixed sexuality, and fixed corporeal boundaries. Yet, further engagement with the Pyes' work confirms that this fixity does not hold. The opening pages of *Bodies That Matter* reveal an important alignment of my project with Judith Butler. With increased attention to the materiality of the body in her rearticulation of issues of performativity from her earlier book *Gender Trouble*, Butler found,

Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies “are.” I kept losing track of the subject. I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably, I began to consider that perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand.²⁹

It is precisely this matter of instability (the instability of the subject and of the material body) that is clearly at stake in my own understanding of *The Coronation*, and in the broader scope of

²⁸ Butler argues, “performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the “Discursive” Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), xii.

²⁹ Ibid, viii.

the Pyes' body of work. Diverging, however, from the centrality of matter my question does not exclusively necessitate extensive deconstruction of the materiality of the body, nor does it endeavour to suggest a complete absence of distinction between material entities. My inquiry, instead, assumes a position of deconstruction within *The Coronation* that questions the apparatuses that have enabled a perception of fixity in the categorization of the human body.

Returning to Krauss, her application of the used car salesman metaphor and lax buyer neglecting to look under the hood is not intended to elucidate “that the myth's manipulation of signifiers and signifieds is somehow concealed.”³⁰ It is instead employed to establish the visibility of the manipulated myth, and turning once again to Barthes: “This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalized.”³¹ In this view, the Pyes' employ the naturalization of theological ideas and iconography in *The Coronation*. The well-known imagery of the *Ghent Altarpiece* therefore functions as part of the myth the artists are presenting, yet it is more importantly part of that which is manipulated by the artists in the service of “de-myth-ification” – the exposure of the performative processes of naturalization. The appropriation of the religious reference thus functions on multiple levels. It is suggestive of the indoctrination of such imagery in our everyday lives, but it additionally highlights the naturalization of ideologies signified within the representation of Adam and Eve.

A consideration of *The Coronation* as a direct re-enactment of the format and iconography of the *Ghent Altarpiece* presents a link to the structure and function of Netherlandish triptych altarpieces from the fifteenth century. As a structural format for altarpiece and panel paintings,

³⁰ Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 28. See note 6.

³¹ Barthes, 131, quoted in Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 28.

the three distinct panels of the triptych are hinged and function in dialogue with one another. Additionally, Netherlandish triptychs from the period of the *Ghent Altarpiece* emulate earlier chapel architecture by positioning the viewer to physically move through the space, directed by the iconography and the structural layout. A simple pictorial program would have been displayed at the entrance of the chapel, often depicting the patron or patrons of the work alongside imagery introducing a central theme such as the Annunciation, as in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. A more complex and elaborate visual program was established upon entry into the chapel, and was organized in such a way that the message would unfold in a linear manner as the viewer moved through the space. The temporal and spatial engagement of chapel architecture was replicated in the structure of the triptych via the hinged side panels, or wings, with more modest and terrestrial imagery on the exterior, which opened up to display the increased complexity of the interior imagery promising paradisiacal eternity. The viewers were meant to retain the exterior imagery of the side panels in their minds as they contemplated the interior depictions.³²

With the absence of hinged side panels, the temporal and spatial components of chapel architecture are recreated in *The Coronation* through the time-based medium of video. The video, however, is looped, inhibiting a teleological reading as intended in altarpiece triptychs. This absence of linearity, therefore, allows for potential viewer engagement without reference to the biblical narrative or the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The intersecting bodies in *The Coronation* work to privilege interrelationality in both the central and the side panels, bracketing the Christian references, and enabling a multiplicity of readings.

³² Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 4-7.

The concurrent events of *The Coronation*'s central panel depict a vast field in which a man and a woman appear for five of the installation's twelve minute duration. Again it is the Pyes who act out these characters. As they stand with their backs to the viewer side-by-side in the field, the woman raises her right arm, placing her hand on the back of the man's head and grabbing a fistful of his hair. The pair then turns toward each other and begins to descend. As she lies next to the man who is now kneeling, the emotional tie between the two characters is addressed in his slouched posture and blond hair hanging in his face – signalling the appearance of melancholy or of mourning for the woman. At this point, a tree and flames rise together from her head. Predicated on characters in the Pyes' earlier works, particularly the trilogy, *The Coronation* is perforated with the dominance of the female character found in the subtle but poignant details of grabbing the man's hair and his sombre pose. While *The Coronation* moves away from the volatile intensity that underscores the trilogy, it is clear that they have not disposed of all their previous investigations.

Augmenting repressed and disguised elements of an intimate relationship, the films and photographs of *The Paper Wall*, *A Life of Errors* and *Loudly, Death Unties* move through the stages of a relationship towards its deconstruction. With significant emphasis in the first film *The Paper Wall*, the codependency of the two characters is illustrated by the simultaneity of their actions, extended to the inability to even urinate without the other. As they are confined each to their own room in the film, the corporeality of the imagery is reinforced through close up shots of fingers picking voraciously at scabs, urination and an eyeball licking scene that makes direct reference to the eyeball and razor scene in the 1929 Surrealist film *Un chien andalou* by Luis Buñuel in collaboration with Pablo Picasso. As with the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the reference to *Un chien andalou* ensures dialogue between the Pyes' work and the history of art. Further Surrealist

influence is also apparent in the Pyes' deliberate use of absurdity and juxtaposition. More, the film holds creative significance for Sheila Pye. She explains,

One day I saw 'Un chien andalou' by Dali and Bunuel and my life would never be the same! For the first time I saw that cinema did not have to be something esoteric. This was a revelation for me. I realized that the cinema could be a tool for creative expression and not just something that was controlled by corporate interests or corrupted by power. It was something pure and could not be affected by the rules of logic!³³

The events in *The Paper Wall* take place on a lone set. The characters are separated for the film's duration by a central wall. During a period of heightened reliance their conjoined actions are accompanied by the undetermined sound of breaking dishes. A foreshadowing to the childish games played in the second film, *A Life of Errors*. Their inability to access one another, imprisoned both physically and emotionally by their co-dependency, shifts in the second film to incorporate a communal yet vengeful room in the centre of the home. They are no longer confined as they were in *The Paper Wall*. From a menacing game of tug-o-war spanning the two bedrooms and the communal space in the opening scene, to the female character leading her blindfolded and unknowing partner through a maze of broken dishes, reciprocated by a forced game of jump-rope in a ring of fire, the games of the second film are emblematic of the menacing possibilities of a relationship. The rope's reappearance throughout becomes a prelude to a trap set earlier in the film as the woman's last destructive gesture, and to the finality of their union culminating in the death of the female character as the final scene of *A Life of Errors*.

Working from the same film set and conceits, the photographs in the trilogy are not stills from the films, but instead depict scenarios better represented photographically, although they

³³ Emily Vermont, "BEV talks to The Red Virgin director Sheila Pye," *Birds Eye View*, March 5, 2012. <http://news.birds-eye-view.co.uk/>.

are also capable of standing on their own.³⁴ The slippage between film and photography results from feeling “never quite satisfied with photography as a document.”³⁵ Nicholas Pye explains, “I always wanted to do more imaginative photography that I felt existed in a head space, and less documentary sort of work ... building context through composition.”³⁶ The deliberateness of the aesthetic character of the films functions not only to draw the viewer in, but also to provide a dynamic space to engage with the conceptual elements. In reference to the aesthetics of the trilogy, Nicholas Pye states,

We both were interested in abandoned homes and relics of the past. In Ontario, where we’re both from, outside of the cities there is a sort of dying agricultural state where farmers are being forced into the cities and mega-farms are taking over, so there are all these beautiful houses that have these textured walls and wallpapers. They’re these dinosaurs from the past ... just about to fall in on themselves. This aesthetic of entropy and texture, and dirty texture in a way, [with] stained walls and lace Chantilly fabrics, really speaks to a time – that aesthetic – but it’s also timeless.³⁷

Moreover, he explains, the structure of the films and photographs of the trilogy is intended to function in both cinematic and gallery installation settings, where, additionally, “the viewer can enter with no real beginning or end.”³⁸

On January 22, 2008, a few months prior to their Austrian residency, Nicholas and Sheila Pye performed *Heavy Hearted* at the Power Plant in Toronto. Working through a similar problem set in yet another medium, the forty-three minute live performance was visually and conceptually reminiscent of their trilogy from the same time period. And like *The Paper Wall*, *Heavy Hearted* retained the segregation of two self-contained rooms, separated by a central wall.

³⁴ Nicholas Pye, in conversation with author, March 18, 2011.

³⁵ Nicholas Pye, “Artist Interview: Nicholas and Sheila Pye,” Sound Recording (St. Kilda, AUS: Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2011), MP3, <http://www.lindenarts.org/exhibitions/2011/a-way-of-calling.aspx>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, transcribed by author.

³⁸ Ibid.

As in the photographs and the films of the first installment of their trilogy, the set was constructed like a theatre stage with both rooms accessible to the audience but not initially to the performers. Sheila occupied the room on the left, painted pale blue and embellished sparsely with patches of peeling pink and yellow floral wallpaper. The darker tones of the room on the right occupied by Nicholas were similarly embellished with peeling wallpaper and framed pictures. A standing lamp provided a moody glow, flanked by a chest of drawers and a kitchen chair. Opening the performance, Sheila lay in a small white iron-framed bed located in the far left corner of her room, accompanied by a wooden desk and chair on the right. Opposite, Nicholas stood barefoot, facing the central wall. The rooms incorporated visual elements that were clearly detectable, then, as reminiscent of the *Paper Wall* and, now, as foreshadowing to the trilogy's second and third installments, *A Life of Errors* and *Loudly, Death Unties*.

During the performance, the characters' attempts to access one another began with Nicholas Pye removing pictures from the wall and peeling back the wallpaper. A hole in the central wall facilitated their interaction, through which the pair passed segments of wall paper back and forth, at times enveloping elements of themselves such as finger nail clippings. The appearance of tasting or consuming the fragments of each other and their wallpapered enclosures as they received them through the opening reinforced the physical transference of materiality between bodies, in addition to a literal and physical merging of one's environment with one's self. Thus, the inseparability of interrelationality was highlighted through their actions.

The performance, however, expanded on the finality of the physical segregation in *The Paper Wall* as Sheila broke through the central wall. Tied to the iron bed in her previous enclosure by a rope, Sheila's subsequently lifeless body was brought to the floor by Nicholas, who undressed her, washed her, and re-costumed himself in her summer dress. The assumption

of the other's identity and the play with gender norms remains consistent with trends apparent throughout their earlier photographic work, especially with examples such as *The Marriage and Death of Two Minds*, 2002 and *Stasis*, 2005 wherein Nicholas Pye is depicted in drag wearing fish-net stocking and a green floral summer dress, respectively. For Butler, drag makes visible "the 'normal' constitution of gender presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disavowed attachments or identifications".³⁹ Further, "What is 'performed' in drag is, of course, the *sign* of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but cannot be read without it."⁴⁰

Continuing through to *The Coronation*, the costuming of gender is once again illuminated in the event of the re-emergence of the two naked bodies in the outer panels. Traditionally the painted nude has occupied a fantastical role for the gaze of its presumed male viewers; it is a role that allows a continued and unmediated dominance over the objectified female body. While indicative of the biblical mythology where Eve provides Adam with the fruit from the tree of knowledge, the painted body of Eve in the *Ghent Altarpiece* has additionally been sexualized by her open chest and revealed pubic hair. With slight disparity, the artist's naked body as Eve in the first half of *The Coronation* is covered more thoroughly with her hair and the position of her arm. Moving into the second half of the triptych video installation, however, ambiguity is insinuated in the two characters with the shifting of gender specificity through the concealing of her breasts and long hair, and by turning her stance toward the background, disengaging her feminized body from the viewer's gaze. Gender is also reversed for the male character, signified through the posture and transferred headdress, where the subsequently "feminized" male body is

³⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 180.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 181.

made available to the viewer and is rendered subsumable. In turn, the submissive female nude is no longer available for consumption, and the certainty of sexual designation is diminished.⁴¹

Drawing another parallel amid their works, near the end of the trilogy's third film *Loudly, Death Unties* the male character enacts a ritualized burning with the event of the woman's death carried into the final film. Gathering together remnants of the female character, such as hair and pieces of clothing, Nicholas Pye explains in an interview from 2009, fire is used to "symbolise purification, new beginnings and closure through a ritualistic act".⁴² The flames in *The Coronation* recede in time. The man begins to stand and the tree fades away, leaving the woman's body lying in the swaying grass. With the ensuing disappearance of her body, it is only the landscape and the changing seasons that remain. In this case, the presence of fire moves beyond the ritualised implications and can be linked to the ecological processes of decay and rejuvenation. The body now absent is the natural body, the biological entity that includes both physical composition and mind. It is a body not divorced from its environment. The sustainability of the body is dependent on the land which essentially supplies both nourishment and shelter. And further, the decaying body provides nourishment for the land. There is no human body without nature, and as established through Morton, we must work to resolve the distinction.

In the latter half of *The Coronation*, the hurried growth, and then disappearance, of a group of deciduous trees on the horizon line is also emphatic of the cyclical processes of nature. The video installation can be read in part as exemplary of what has emerged, for Nicholas Pye and through the experience of producing this video installation, as a renewed consideration of

⁴¹ For a discussion regarding the differentiation of nude from naked, see Giorgio Agamben, "Nudity" in *Nudities* translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatalla (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁴² Nicholas Pye quoted in Maxwell, 80.

nature “as a living breathing entity.”⁴³ Carried into a pair of photographs also developed during their 2008 residency in Austria, a romantic yet more literal entanglement of nature and the human body is presented in *Animism I* and *Animism II*. Posed as traditional portraits, the heads and shoulders of the two sitters (Sheila in *Animism I* and Nicholas in *Animism II*) are nearly consumed by vines and dead leaves. Less complex than *The Coronation*, this pair of photographs is emphatic of the entropic reality of life and the place of human bodies within it.

The intensity and the slippage between the male and the female characters integral to earlier works is also manifest in the interactions of the two bodies in *The Coronation*. Though the intensity has been subdued, its lingering presence draws the viewer’s attention to the function of the interaction. I want to argue for a reading of *The Coronation* that takes the opportunity to engage the question of bodily limits. This question extends to the *perceptual* limits of a body, problematizing the fixity of the *idea* of a human body, and attending to the delineation of a body as one in constant flux – both in terms of its materiality and its social construction. Nicholas Pye’s statement regarding the vitality of nature is representative of a significant point in the development of my own research that deduces what is meant when we talk about the body and when we talk about nature. Returning to the notion of ecological thought applied in its expanded capacity, the inseparability of the body and nature, therefore, necessitates a continuous rethinking of the body. And furthermore, whose body counts.

~ ~

⁴³ Nicholas Pye quoted in Maxwell, 80.

Whose Body?: An Art Historical Context

The human body has a prominent place throughout the history of art – both as figurative pleasure and as the site of ontological and material investigation. Furthermore, a precedent has certainly been set for entwined life partnership and artistic practice with couples not limited to Marina Abramović and Ulay, Gilbert and George, and Canada's Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge. Within the parameters of this thesis, however, the Pyes' work resonates more profoundly with a selection of individual artists for whom the autonomous site of the body has been called to question.

The necessitation of visual engagement remains present throughout the artistic practice of the Pyes. In correlation with their conceptual investigations, this visual emphasis is evidenced in the aesthetic and formal choices that they make. Drawing influence from an array of artistic forms including opera, painting, photography and cinema, deliberate nods to specific artists such as Belgian Surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967) and British photographer Bill Brandt (1904-1983) can also be detected throughout their work. The influence of the British photographer is manifest in the Pyes' frequent emulation of Brandt's close framing of the body and its placement in the immediate foreground of the picture plane.⁴⁴ Used extensively throughout their work, the viewer is confronted by closely cropped bodies that push the realm of affect and the abject, also calling to mind the work of Montreal photographic artist, Geneviève Cadieux (1955-).

⁴⁴ Speaking to *The Paper Wall*, *A Life of Errors* and *Loudly, Death Unties* as part of the group exhibition *A Way of Calling* (May 14 to June 19, 2011) at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts in St. Kilda, Victoria, Australia, Nicholas Pye notes Bill Brandt's *Portrait of a London Child, Eaton Place* from 1955 as one of his favourite photographs.

The Pyes' work often oscillates in the gap between photography and film – working through concepts both “photographically and in time”,⁴⁵ creating an experimental space that frequently handles painting as video, and breaking from the determinacy of each medium.⁴⁶ Also drawing inspiration from the extended and rhythmic camera shots of filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) and Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007),⁴⁷ the prolonged, hypnotic movement of *The Coronation* additionally traces its lineage through the history of video art to Bill Viola (1951-), one of the first North American artists to employ the medium of video in artistic practice. British art critic Sally O'Reilly notes, “By stretching time, Viola enhances the nuances of the on-screen act, the minute movements of the body prompted by subconscious reflexes and external stimuli that would normally be eclipsed by fast-paced action.”⁴⁸ The extension of movement in duration therefore functions to disable a passive encounter with the events of the video and presents a greater contemplative space for the viewer.⁴⁹ In contrast to Brandt and Viola's representations of bodies however, the Pyes' employment of their own bodies presents an additional problem set.

This performative usage of the artist's own body in art, as outlined by British and American art historians Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones in *The Artist's Body*, is demonstrative of the infinite shifting of corporeal signification. “In the late 1950s and early 1960s body art is largely aimed towards an exhibition of the self in its full embodiment as a way of laying claim to being itself.”⁵⁰ Since the 1960s, the performative artist's body has functioned as a site for

⁴⁵ Nicholas Pye, in conversation with author, March 18, 2011.

⁴⁶ Nicholas and Sheila Pye, *Reconstitution* (Victoria, BC: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008).

⁴⁷ Pye, “Artist Interview: Nicholas and Sheila Pye.”

⁴⁸ Sally O'Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 62.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 62.

⁵⁰ Amelia Jones, “Survey,” in *The Artist's Body*, edited by Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 21.

political contestation, challenging hierarchical structures of class, race and gender.⁵¹ With methodological resistance, the reciprocity of social performativity has been illuminated through the investigative actions of the artists' bodies. Jones argues, "The emergence or unveiling of the artist's body in the 1960s can be viewed as a means of enacting and asserting the self within the social."⁵² Moving into the early 1980s, however, the characterization of body art shifts; the unwavering presence of the artist is firmly established, and "'performance art' proper" is distinguished from photographic self-portraiture.⁵³

In an essay from 2002 Jones argues, the "performative images [of artists] are still 'self-portraits' in the sense that they convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image."⁵⁴ At the same time, it is the performative aspect of this representation of the self – the potentialities of an alternate self and its reliance on its viewer – that mobilizes the conventional perception of portraiture.⁵⁵ In Jones' purview, the artists imagine, and subsequently perform themselves in a role for an audience, thereby soliciting critical engagement with the probabilities of their performances and scenarios within them.⁵⁶ Therefore, the Jonesian photographic self-portrait sets out a platform for the couple to enact alternatives to their existing relationship. "As the maker but also the object of the work, the artist's dual role casts into doubt the inexorability of the gap that normative subjectivity manufactures in order to produce the subject as definitely separate from the object."⁵⁷ She further explains, "*Our* role, in viewing the artist's self-portrait photograph becomes further complicated by the artist's having performed

⁵¹ Tracey Warr, "Preface," in *The Artist's Body*, edited by Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 13.

⁵² Jones, "Survey," 22.

⁵³ Ibid, 22 and 37.

⁵⁴ Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technological Embodiment" *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 948.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 948-949.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 963.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

herself or himself actively as the object of our desire.”⁵⁸ At first encounter, I, a viewer of the Pyes’ artwork, am unsure who I am looking at in the conflated representations of the artists. I imagine the artists as the roles enacted, and I gain an understanding of the characters through imagining myself in those roles. Essentially collapsing the figurative characters of the artists into the figurative character of myself.⁵⁹ Once aware that it is, in fact, the Pyes themselves in their works, this representational uncertainty complicates the viewers’ understanding of the images. This *is* a seductive place to dwell. And such investigation undoubtedly proves fruitful, as is the case in Jones’ article “The ‘Eternal Return’: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment” and her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Nonetheless my argument deviates from the biographical stronghold that attempts to locate the artists’ psychological positioning, in favour of one that questions how artworks by artists such as Nicholas and Sheila Pye can assist in re-evaluating and breaking down the boundaries attributed to the human body. By considering their work in relation to postmodern artists Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman and contemporary artist Faye Mullen, I will locate the Pyes’ work amongst the corporeal-centred artistic practices of the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, and highlight a continuum that investigates the instability of figuration and corporeal boundaries.

⁵⁸ Jones, ‘Eternal Return’, 963.

⁵⁹ In reading “The ‘Eternal Return’: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,” I was struck by Jones’ declaration of her experience of Laura Aguilar’s *Nature Self-Portrait/No. 4*, “Dangling in the gap rendered through this difference, I cannot quite imagine myself “as” her.” Jones, ‘Eternal Return’, 969. Though taken slightly out of context here, her statement resonated in me. It resonated in the way I had been inserting myself into the lives I perceive within these photographs; moving beyond understanding the photograph as an object, but also as a way to understand the limits of human life, through my own.

Ana Mendieta

In the wake of the “emergence of the artist’s body”⁶⁰ in the 1960s combined with the body-oriented feminist art practices of the 1970s,⁶¹ Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) created artworks that illustrate the cyclical fluidity that functions throughout the categorical boundaries of nature and culture. During the late-1970s and into the 1980s Mendieta used her own body, or its imprint, in the natural landscape to create her earth body works together with her *Silueta* and *Tree of Life* series which she meticulously documented through photographs and occasionally film. With the photograph as a fixed representation of Mendieta’s form in collision with the physical earth, her artwork allows both a continual revisitation of the intersecting body and earth that questions the seen and unseen geographical and political factors that act onto our bodies, alongside a historical positioning for a situated conceptualization of human subjectivity. Available to its viewers only as a photographic document, *Untitled* (*Silueta* series, Iowa) from 1978 depicts the formation of the *Silueta* figure through the shaping of a section of grass and plants with small white flowers. The figure is subtle as it blends with the surrounding landscape. Mendieta’s physical body is not present within the work; however, the *Silueta* form acts in emulation of the silhouette of her body.

With similarities to works from her *Siluetas* series, *Untitled*, an earth body work from 1977, draws together performance, collective history and material process.⁶² *Untitled* (1977) depicts Mendieta covered entirely in mud, her body nearly indistinguishable from the dry and decaying wood of a fallen tree trunk. Her arms are raised in the goddess pose, out to the sides and bent at the elbows, and her body is positioned within a long indentation of a fallen tree at the

⁶⁰ Jones, “Survey”, 21.

⁶¹ O’Reilly, 7.

⁶² In Mendieta’s work performance can be understood in terms of both performance art and Judith Butler’s notion of performativity.

riverbank where she remained until the mud dried completely. In a sketchbook from 1976-78, Mendieta documented her idea for the 1977 untitled earth body work with a sketch in ink and a short note in pencil. The translation is as follows: “On the river of Old Man’s Creek – use mud to form the Mazapan de Matanza on a tree trunk.”⁶³ The note refers to the hills near Matanzas in Cuba known as the Pan de Matanzas, thought to be in the shape of a reclining woman.⁶⁴ The artwork takes on historical significance in relation to Mendieta’s past. Her family had been active politically in Cuba since the beginning of the 20th century. Her father was an early supporter of Fidel Castro, but was eventually imprisoned for anti-revolutionary activities. Subsequently, Mendieta and her sister were sent to the United States in 1961 through Operation Pedro Pan, ending up in foster care and boarding school in Iowa.⁶⁵ *Untitled* (1977) references Cuban legend and its metaphorical reconstruction in the United States. While my discussion of these works takes on a more extensive account of biography, the intersecting body and tree in *Untitled* (1977) demonstrates a component of Mendieta’s work that calls to question the line of distinction between her individual body and the ecology that defines it. Like the *Untitled Silueta* piece, *Untitled* (1977) exist now solely as a photographic document. The figure in *Untitled* (1977) becomes increasingly more indistinguishable as the mud dries just as the figure in *Untitled* (1978) recedes as the growth of the grass takes its course, both demonstrating the manner in which we perceive figuration through demarcation, but also the impermanence of such formation in relation to the human body.

⁶³ Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 121.

⁶⁴ Julia P. Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta’s Iowa Years, 1970-1980,” in *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body: Sculptures and Performance, 1972-1985*, exhib. cat. (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), 176.

⁶⁵ Laura Roulet, “Ana Mendieta: A Life Context,” in *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body: Sculptures and Performance, 1972-1985*, exhib. cat. (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), 224-225.

Like the Pyes, Mendieta's artwork draws from the personal, but more significantly it resonates in a number of ways that obfuscate dominant understandings of the body. Butler's account of performativity assists in understanding the manner in which boundaries seemingly become fixed in certain geographical and historical moments, and enables further understanding of material and socio-political factors that act onto our bodies to fix these unstable perceptions of the human. Thinking performatively about the biological and material components of the body, it is possible to see that not only are the perceptual boundaries of the human body not fixed, but additionally that material and ontological categorizations are in a continued state of becoming as well. Through the practice of ecological thinking, Mendieta's collapsing of the body with the fallen tree facilitates space for rethinking the historicity of such boundaries, and to create new understanding toward the interconnectivity of bodies and the earth. Accordingly, the concrete autonomy of the body dissolves as the body disappears into ground.

A professor of Feminist Studies, Philosophy, and History of Consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Karen Barad's realignment of the social with science draws from critical theory, feminist theory and theoretical physics to incorporate the notion of intra-activity in her posthumanist extension of Butler's performativity.⁶⁶ Barad argues that performativity "is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to determine what is real."⁶⁷ In questioning what is real, Barad highlights the systematized processes of figuration. Problematizing the limits of the human and the non-human body, Barad maintains that, "performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that

⁶⁶ Posthumanism de-centralizes the position of the human and the privileging of human interests, and disrupts fixed distinction between human/non-human materiality and consciousness.

⁶⁷ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 802.

grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.”⁶⁸ Barad does not privilege the social or the material, but posits both as active contributors; therefore, the bodies in *Untitled* (1977 and 1978) and *The Coronation* can be understood in terms of the associative constructions of material *and* discursive processes.

In the context of the Pyes’ work, what is important in Barad’s text is her usage of intra-activity central to her conception of posthumanist performativity that relocates matter in the formation of bodies. Expanding on observations set out by quantum physicist Neils Bohr, Barad explains, “according to Bohr, the primary epistemological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather *phenomena*.”⁶⁹ For Barad, “phenomena are ontologically primitive relations – relations without pre-existing relata”.⁷⁰ It is therefore the relation that is essentially “the ontological primitive.”⁷¹ In turn, intra-activity deviates from interaction, “which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata”.⁷² Intra-activity furthermore takes into consideration the employment of apparatuses as “*dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted*.”⁷³ (Barad’s italics) Without definitive exterior delineation, the effective capacity of the apparatus is ongoing. Therefore, as the apparatuses continually effect becoming, they too are continually in flux, renegotiated through perpetual intra-activity. For Barad, boundaries are in a constant state of reconfiguration.⁷⁴ The

⁶⁸ Barad, 802

⁶⁹ Ibid, 815.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, 816.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 817.

trajectory of reconfiguration is not fixed, yet, at the same time it is not completely unrestricted.⁷⁵ Boundaries define how we understand bodies, however, “[b]oundaries do not sit still.”⁷⁶

Bringing culture and nature together as concepts with permeable boundaries produced performatively through material and discursive intra-actions, Barad diverges slightly from Morton’s evacuation of nature. “Nature,” she says, “is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances.”⁷⁷ The idea of this fluidity, this cyclical and reciprocal creation, is concretized within the Pyes’ work, notably in the central panel of *The Coronation* in its representation of performativity and cyclical material process that function simultaneously with the exterior panels in the formation of the subjectivity and the perceptual limits of the bodies within the artwork. Understanding *whose* body participated in the performance and *whose* body is depicted within the image also shifts the interpretation of the work, and the significance of the demarcated body. Through the lens of intra-activity, what constitutes the specificities of demarcation is dependent on the interrelational arrangements of various phenomena through support of apparatuses. Therefore the perception of figuration stems from each individual’s circumstance (their ecology), yet it simultaneously embodies a greater matrix of perception that has been maintained through social, geographical and material performativity. Barad explains,

[the] belief that nature is mute and immutable and that all prospects for significance and change reside in culture is a reinscription of the nature/culture dualism that feminists have actively contested. Nor, similarly, can a human/nonhuman distinction be hardwired into any theory that claims to take account of matter in the dullness of its historicity.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Barad, 826.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 816-817.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 827.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Arguably Barad's focus on the physical arrangement of matter, or more specifically phenomena, pushes beyond the scope of *The Coronation* and the Pyes' artistic practices in general.

Nonetheless, Barad opens up the notion of figuration to greater interpretative options by deconstructing assumptions surrounding the autonomy of objects, bodies, and even thoughts. In correlation with Butler's performativity, the potentiality to consider figuration is no longer bound by immediate and perceptual limits.

By reflecting on this collision of body and earth beyond the cinematic context of the Pyes' video installation and in correlation with Mendieta's employment of the body within her artworks, I want to rethink the disappearing body in central panel of *The Coronation*. Here, thinking first about Mendieta, I look again to Jones who suggests,

... Mendieta's *Siluenta Series* from the 1970s resists the fetishization and commodification of the body of the artist, the woman, the racially other. She initially performs her body in nature to claim a connection with the earth and the Santeria goddess Yemaya (the protector of women) and eventually, in the later works from the series, removes her body entirely, marking its absent form with gashes of dirt or flames. ... Mendieta's later *Siluetas* offer [a] way of negotiating commodity culture. She chooses, in contrast, to absent the self (the artist) as 'origin' of the work, as starting and ending point of artistic meaning. Mendieta's absence forces us to reconsider our attachment to the unveiled and seemingly 'authentic' (but disappeared) bodies of Postmodernism. The violence of this disappearing (the violence of the fetishization of women's bodies and coloured bodies under white patriarchy) is signalled by Mendieta's use of fire and wound imagery.⁷⁹

The notion of the unveiled body signifies an absencing of classification, contrasting a veil that is perception. A cloak of enunciation that consigns certain bodies as inferior, tarnished, and, historically, damned. In such case, through the affixation of a doctrine of sin to our bodies – tied to nakedness, gender and sexuality – a framework of authority and control is created. Thought through Butler's terms, the enunciated norms relegate the 'authentic' (unveiled) and yet

⁷⁹ Jones, "Survey," 31.

perceptually absent body as the exclusion, in the service of reinforcing the dominant body.⁸⁰ Regarding this, the absent body is the body without classification, the purely biological body. Jones states, “The veiling of the body in Modernism is ideologically and practically linked to the structures of patriarchy, with all of the colonialist, classist and heterosexist pretensions it produces and sustains.”⁸¹ Arguably, as a Cuban woman in the United States, the boundaries imposed on Mendieta’s body during her lifetime did not necessarily correspond with the ideal and dominant view of the body in North America.⁸² And thus, the disappearing body, the body that is both present yet absent, emerges inseparable from its ecology. Mendieta’s articulation, her body or its imprint immersed in mud, soil, sand or fire, is therefore defined through its geographical presence in the United States and its simultaneous marked absence through exclusion from the dominant ancestral group and gender.

Francesca Woodman

The critical space created by the Pyes’ art historical predecessors such as Mendieta was also occupied by another American female artist whose life endured a tragic and premature end: Francesca Woodman (1958-1981). The aesthetic similarities of Woodman’s photographic work to many of the Pye’s collaborative films and photographs are undeniable. Working in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Woodman consistently used and manipulated her own body for her

⁸⁰ Butler states, “The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as ‘being’ – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic.” In Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 140. My usage of the ideal ‘dominant body’ implicates the white, male, heterosexual body. In correlation with Butler’s notion of performativity, Derrida’s law and counter-law additionally serve the creation of a geographically and historically specific ideal.

⁸¹ Jones, “Survey,” 20.

⁸² Mendieta was only thirty-six when she died, after falling to her death from the window of the New York City apartment she shared with her husband artist Carl Andre. Andre was suspected of causing her fall. The events of Mendieta’s death, however, remain unsolved.

photographs.⁸³ The manipulations occurred both pre- and post-photographic moment, instilling movement, ephemerality and the abject. “Always to insert her body onto the field of the problem,” Krauss states, “to use it, understand it, as the ground of whatever the sense the image might make, is the pattern that emerges throughout the problem set that Woodman undertook.”⁸⁴ This movement and manipulation posited by American performance art scholar Peggy Phelan as “a refusal to be still” occupied a central position in her photographic works, contradicting the inherent stillness of her medium.⁸⁵ Such inadequacy, in turn, highlighted the “indeterminacy of the bodies and objects” she portrayed.⁸⁶ As with Mendieta and the Pyes, Woodman’s present yet absenting body exemplified in *House #4* (Providence, Rhode Island), 1976 and *Space*² (Providence, Rhode Island), 1977 functions to disrupt the clear distinction from its surroundings. The 1976 photograph depicts the interior of an old house with wooden floors and peeling floral wallpaper, an aesthetic paralleled significantly in the Pyes’ trilogy and performance piece, and as described by Nicholas Pye. A fireplace mantle dominates the photograph, leaning out from the wall with Woodman crouching behind it. She straddles the mantle’s right side from behind, her knees bent and her Mary Jane clad feet planted on the floor. Her face and arms are indistinguishable through the blur of movement, and the positioning of her body within the structures of the house signals an immersion. Similarly, in *Space*² Woodman places her naked body behind the peeling wallpaper, as if merging with the wall. Here again the immersion of the

⁸³ Like the Pyes and Mendieta, the trajectory of Woodman’s aesthetic and corporeal investigations developed extensively while still in art school, and beginning even further back at the age of thirteen, as an adolescent growing up in a family of artists. Sadly, Woodman took her own life at the age of twenty-two. Woodman attended the Rhode Island School of Design, graduating in 1978. Mendieta attended the University of Iowa and received a Bachelor of Fine Art in 1969 and her first Master of Fine Art in 1972. Nicholas and Sheila Pye both completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at the Ontario School of Art and Design in Toronto, ON, Sheila in Integrated Media in 2001 and Nicholas in Photography in 2002; and both also completed a Master of Fine Art in film production at Concordia University in Montreal, QC, Sheila in 2003 and Nicholas in 2005. In 2011 Nicholas Pye began working toward a PhD in Visual Art at York University in Toronto.

⁸⁴ Rosalind Krauss, “Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets,” in *Bachelors* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 172.

⁸⁵ Peggy Phelan, “Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and the Image One More Time,” *Signs* 27, no. 24 (Summer 2002): 985.

⁸⁶ Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman: Scattered in Space and Time* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), 7.

body calls subject formation to question. “Abandoning overt objecthood to present herself as a non-presence.”⁸⁷ This “non-presence”, illuminated by British art historian Tracey Warr, joins with Mendieta and the Pyes to signify an oscillation between modes of being, alongside the occupation of transitory states of becoming.⁸⁸ Warr argues,

The photographs present a metaphysical presence, a portrait of the invisible, a sense of a life, rather than a record of a person. As such, they disrupt the codes by which we normally read images of the artist, or of a woman, or a woman-artist. Her images present a state of being that is both personal and non-personal, highly particular and utterly general.⁸⁹

In this sense, the Pyes also inhabit a space in their work that is both personal and general,⁹⁰ drawing from their own relationship and the potentialities of interweaving identities, thus reinforcing the inescapable indeterminacy within their artistic processes, and within boundaries on a whole. The body in art, as art, becomes a medium with which to consider the materiality of the body – as a vehicle to convey an idea rather than solely as a representation of that person, their identity and their relationships. Yet, at the same time, there is always an intrinsic inseparability of the body from its subjectivity.

Faye Mullen

A study of artwork by the Pyes makes clear that the ontological question of boundaries carries on throughout the history of art, as bracketed by the investigative practices of postmodern artists such as Mendieta and Woodman and the corporeally-centred work of twenty-first century

⁸⁷ Tracey Warr, “Absent Bodies,” in *The Artist’s Body*, edited by Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 170.

⁸⁸ The oscillation between modes of being is also paralleled in the oscillation between modes of representation – film, photography, painting and performance.

⁸⁹ Warr, “Absent Bodies,” 170.

⁹⁰ Pye, “Artists Nicholas and Sheila Pye discuss The Coronation.”

artists such as Toronto-based Faye Mullen (1987-).⁹¹ Mullen, whose generation dovetails that of the Pyes, focuses her practice on the exploration of “loss, lack and limitation”⁹² most often through the use of her own body. *to be veiled.*, a single-channel video installation from 2012, consists of a four second performance shot on a Phantom camera, extended and reversed to produce a five minute looped segment. In the video, Mullen lies at the centre of the frame, on her own and naked in an expansive and dry field. Her body is still. Her head is turned toward the viewer and her knees slightly bent and leaning. Over the duration of the video an expansive white cloth spans the space above her and floats to the ground, covering her body and the ground, until the action is reversed and repeated.

The veil always folding, unfolding and refolding allows the linen to act as a whole, each fold resonates as *part* of and not *apart* from. ... Through still life and tableaux vivant, and yet neither one nor the other, *to be veiled.* the *act of absencing* to visually form not the loss of the figure, nor the death of this rather the death within, the death that composes the figure.⁹³

This work resonates within the thematic structure of *The Coronation*, and draws extensively on Jacques Derrida’s notion of the fold, delving into to the question of ontology, figuration and subsequent interconnectivity.⁹⁴ Mullen’s written component accompanying her thesis artwork for the University of Toronto explicates the infinite flux of being. Both her textual and visual

⁹¹ Faye Mullen completed a Bachelor of Fine Art with Honours in sculpture and installation at the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2009, and in 2012 she completed a Master of Visual Studies in Studio Fine Art at the University of Toronto.

⁹² Faye Mullen, “Bio,” *Faye Mullen*, <http://www.fayemullen.com/english/bio.html>.

⁹³ Faye Mullen, *Silence, Silenced, Silencing: Deceit in Representation* (University of Toronto. Master of Visual Studies Thesis. May 2012), 7.

⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida’s notion of the fold is found in his book *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). “Yet neither (is it) a fold in the veil or in the pure text but rather in the lining which the hymen, of itself, was. But by the same token *is* not: the fold in a lining by which it is, out of itself, in itself, at once its own outside and its own inside; between the outside and the inside, making the outside enter the inside and turning back the antre or the other upon its surface, the hymen is never pure or proper, has no life of its own, no proper name.” (229) “The fold folds (itself): its meaning spaces itself out with a double mark, in the hollow of which a blank is folded. The fold is simultaneously virginity, what violates virginity and the fold which, being neither one nor the other and both at once, undecidable, *remains* as a text, irreducible to either of its two senses. ... The masculine is turned back upon the feminine: the whole adventure of sexual difference.” (258-259)

ontological exploration, poignantly in *to be veiled.*, have been essential in extending my own thinking around the absenting and interrelational bodies of the Pyes' work, and further in the work of Mendieta and Woodman. *to be veiled.* also inhabits a referential space that draws on Renaissance art, reactivating, specifically, Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (1605-06) and the usage of drapery "that veiled the dying and the dead female figures."⁹⁵ Like the Pyes in *The Coronation*, Mullen emulates the posture of Caravaggio's central and illuminated female figure. The blood-red drapery that hangs above the mournful scene is transposed and subtly repurposed in Mullen's video with the rolling white linen. In view of her historical point of reference Mullen states, "In the folds of the shrouds there is a veil that unveils, not a revelation alone but a sentencing alike."⁹⁶ One does not exist as such because s/he *is not* the other, but because s/he *is also* the other. A state of becoming.

A momentary dissociation of the bodies in *The Coronation* from the iconographic framework conveys the simplicity of being: the body as process, experience and perception. In dialogue, *to be veiled.* becomes the concentrated act of the body. With mirroring slowness, the attention these two pieces place on the body highlights the instability and the performative construction of our ontologies; yet, also, the ontological construction is paralleled by the body as, simply, a body.⁹⁷ In extension, the notion of the veiled body is also bound to the mythology of the nude, which finds evidence in Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben's *Nudities*: "Nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological signature."⁹⁸ To once again reinforce the ecological notion; the veiling of the body does not present itself as a universal form. Therefore,

⁹⁵ Mullen, *Silence, Silenced, Silencing*, 7.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Here I am referring to the unmarked biological body.

⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, translated by David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 57.

reinstating a consideration of *The Coronation* in its entirety alongside Agamben's astute conclusion, the veiling functions as an apparatus to manage the body within a specific ontological framework – in both cases, a Judeo-Christian perspective. In part and in other words, it functions to maintain the body's ontological status as separate from the animal, separate from biology.

As the nakedness of the historical Adam and Eve bodies is inevitably transposed into the represented bodies in *The Coronation*, it is accompanied by the question of denudation central to Agamben's text. "Though they were not covered by any human clothing before the Fall, Adam and Eve were not naked; rather, they were covered by clothing of grace, which clung to them as a garment of glory".⁹⁹ Therefore, by removing the veiling of grace – this "supernatural clothing"¹⁰⁰ – the denudation resulted in their need to cover themselves. Continuing, Agamben calls our attentions to two instances of nudity in paradise: firstly, the moments after the pair have consumed the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and secondly, the moment when they remove their self-fashioned loincloths to put on the tunics prepared for them by God. Agamben suggests it is through these actions that we can comprehend nudity as existing "only negatively"¹⁰¹ – as a result of an absence. In Agamben's terms, this absence necessitates the veil of grace to complete the body. In this manner, the notion of religious salvation proposes a re-veiling of sorts, a reinstatement of grace. And as Agamben places the axis of the theological apparatus on the

⁹⁹ Agamben, 57. The story of Adam and Eve and the theological framework from which Agamben's discussion stems from the first book of the Hebrew Bible. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?'" (Genesis 3:7-11).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 57.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 57.

affiliation of clothing and nudity,¹⁰² the act of the absented body of the artist comes to equate the biological body without designation, without veil. Accordingly, the damned, sexed or excluded body.

Through embedded theology the experience of “naked corporeality”¹⁰³ (the biological body) becomes one that sustains a constant search for clothing – read: grace. In that nudity has been constructed as the result of an act in the removal of clothing, Agamben claims:

In our culture one of the consequences of this theological nexus that closely unites nature and grace, nudity and clothing, is that nudity is not actually a state but rather an event. Inasmuch as it is the obscure presupposition of the addition of a piece of clothing or the sudden result of its removal – nudity belongs to time and history, not to being and form. We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never a form and a stable possession.¹⁰⁴

With the stronghold of nudity firmly encapsulating the human body, we find the near impossibility of releasing the body from the veil of perception. Moreover, as Agamben looks to both contemporary and historical art examples for his genealogy of nudity, where the nude bodies he speaks of are consistently women, his own critique arguably does not succeed in liberating the female body from an unequal gender positioning resulting from the patriarchal structure that he outlines.

And so, in many cases, ideological veiling not only defines the non-human from human body, but also designates parameters for gender. A concern with much deserved attention in art. Returning to Jones, we are again reminded of these objectified boundaries within which Agamben’s nudes are enslaved. With the infiltration of performance art practices since the mid-

¹⁰² Agamben, 59-60.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 60.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 65.

twentieth century however, the setting of the art historical body in motion, manifest through the artist's body and significantly the female body, "radicalizes the painterly female nude, denying that it is necessarily the object of a 'male gaze'".¹⁰⁵ With this in mind, I return to Butler and Agamben.

Placing these two scholars in conversation, we can see that Agamben arranges his genealogical framework "not to tap into an original state prior to the separation [of nudity and clothing, nature and grace] but to comprehend and neutralize the apparatus that produces this separation".¹⁰⁶ Butler, in relation, endeavours to explicate the process by which the apparatuses that manage our bodies infiltrate culture and are maintained. With her focus on gender performativity, Butler suggests, "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex ...; gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established."¹⁰⁷ As such, gender as a corporeal categorization does not function as a stand-alone veil. It functions, in essence, as a surficial matrix, as a mythology, that has been evacuated of its historicity. The gendered or otherwise demarcated body is thus figured – made visible – through the performativity of mythology. Further, the reinstatement of figuration with ecology in its expanded form is emphasized in *The Coronation* through the disruption of myth and the *unveiling* of the body. Absence, therefore, becomes a prevailing action that arrests the enunciated and material fixity of the physical and perceptual delineation of the body.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, "Survey," 24.

¹⁰⁶ Agamben, 66.

¹⁰⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11.

Within the work of Mendieta, Woodman, the Pyes and Mullen, interrelationality becomes most evident through immersion, entropy and absence. The loss of one body to create another; the merging of one body into another. Encompassing the materiality of both human and non-human elements. Reaching back to French Modernist painting for one final example, I find in Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and his *Les Grandes Baigneuses* completed in 1906 evidence that the absence of concrete figural delineation results in a space for that which cannot or has yet to be represented and thus fixed. In keeping with Cézanne's *époque*, Modernity's attempt to clarify, classify and arrest societal processes can only be represented via its surface. Its particulars are always in flux. With such conceptualization transposed into painting, art historian T. J. Clark argues, "Certain works of art show us what it is to 'represent' at a particular historical moment – they show us the powers and limits of a practice of knowledge."¹⁰⁸ Like the represented bodies of Mendieta, Woodman, the Pyes and Mullen, Cézanne's flat and unanimated bodies, then, insinuate depictions of bodies without costume, without veil, without ideology and hierarchical structures such as class, race and gender. In each case, they are the materiality of the body, and all that is visible is the surface. Therefore the articulation of bodies figured through material and enunciated transference, becomes, instead and in many cases here, an articulation of absenting bodies.

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¹⁰⁸ T. J. Clark, "Freud's Cézanne," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 65.

Conclusion: New Works, No Limits

Working in a collaborative partnership that has lasted over a decade, the Pyes continue to produce critical and innovative works. In September 2011, *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board*, a solo exhibition at Toronto's Birch Libralato gallery opened a new series of video works that diverge significantly from their earlier and sustained aesthetic and conceits. Presented in collaboration with the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival's Future Projections program, the exhibited works, *The Bride*, *The Dreamer*, *The Flower Eaters* and *The Bird Watcher*, once again blur the cinematic and photographic boundaries to reinvent a selection of childhood games enacted, of course, by the Pyes. Retaining the seductive slowness of *The Coronation*, these four looped video projections encompass a much more modest visual quality. Here, the bodies are presented against a plain background of tones of grey or black. Unlike the menacing and childish pranks in *A Life of Errors*, the works do not attempt to dismantle our understandings of an intimate relationship, but instead it is the potentialities of magic as expressed through cinematic trickery.

Also screened at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival were individual films by both Nicholas and Sheila Pye as part of the Short Cuts Canada program. Sheila's film entitled *The Red Virgin* is in keeping with the earlier painterly aesthetic of the Pyes' collaborative works as well as the collapsing of the photographic with the cinematic.¹⁰⁹ The narrative of the film follows with a more traditional linear format, yet maintains its critical alliance with earlier investigations of corporeal limitations to articulate the non-fictional story of Hildegart Rodríguez Carballeira (1914-1933) in early twentieth-century Spain, drawing inspiration from the 1987

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas Pye's short film screened at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival is entitled *The Encounter* (2011).

novel *Aurora's Motive* by Austrian writer Erich Hackl (1954-). The seventeen minute short film, set and filmed in Madrid, portrays the relationship of Spanish feminist activists, Aurora Rodríguez and her daughter Hildegart.¹¹⁰ The film is centred on the maternal relationship and the provocative intensity rooted in the Aurora's radical eugenic filial selection process, with political aim to raise her only daughter as "the world's first fully free woman."¹¹¹ *The Red Virgin* thus highlights the politicization of bodies through the events of Hildegart's life, becoming "famous at an early age for her controversial publications on politics and sexual difference during the brief Republican period of liberal governance" during the Second Spanish Republic from 1931-36.¹¹² The development of Hildegart's push for independence from her mother brought Aurora to perceive of her eighteen year old daughter as a failed project and to subsequently murder her, citing her as becoming a "dangerous political tool."¹¹³

To Be Wounded Without Bleeding – Portrait at 35, Before New Beginnings and *The Mountain*, three recent video works from 2011 by Nicholas Pye, relinquish the highly baroque painterly style of the trilogy, also emulated in Sheila's film, to follow closer in the vein of the pair's collaborative photographs from 2010, *Departure, Denial* and *Amend*. *To Be Wounded Without Bleeding – Portrait at 35* depicts a solitary Pye from the head up with a white shirt buttoned to the top and spewing coloured paint; similarly reappearing in *Before New Beginnings*. As in the photographs from 2010, *Before New Beginnings* is once again located at the water's edge and takes a fully clothed and, again, solitary Pye slowly into the water and then back out

¹¹⁰ The character of Aurora Rodríguez is played by Spanish actress Maribel Verdú (1970-), and the character of Hildegart Rodríguez Carballeira by Barcelona-born Ivana Baquero (1994 -).

¹¹¹ Vermont.

¹¹² Maria Van Liew, "Defying the Past in Post-Franco Spain: The Interrogation of Aurora Rodriguez," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 36, no. 3 (2003): 113.

¹¹³ Eduardo De Guzman, *Aurora de sangre* (Madrid: G. del Toro, 1972), 72, quoted in Van Liew, 115.

like a ritualized cleansing, also reminiscent of a baptism. The visual austerity of solely the body of water and the shoreline is repeated in *The Mountain*. In a set composed entirely of white backdrop and white drapery, Pye emerges naked from beneath the “mountain” of drapery. Although with significant subtlety in contrast to *The Coronation*, these three works employ biblical mythologies that signify renewal. Further, the monochromatic drapery and naked body locates the three minute and forty second video within an Agambenian conceptualization of the veiled and unveiled body, which is expanded further through the figure’s ascent of the mountain and exiting of the frame. Once again, the absented body discards its veil to emphasize the performative and unstable nature of corporeal, and arguably psychological, demarcation.

Maintaining their place in dialogue with the history of art, the Pyes’ Judeo-Christian art historical references in *The Coronation* allude to the recognized religious origin of pre-Modern artistic practice; yet they do not leave it there. Shifting in and out of mythology,¹¹⁴ the fragmentations of these references push the boundaries of specific artistic identities. The side panels of *The Coronation* emphasise the root of male/female designation in the biblical perspective, whereas the contemporary figures in the central panel simultaneously represent the transformative and interrelational nature of human and ecological existence through decay and regeneration. In correlation, the secularization of religious concepts and practices, in addition to the inseparability of nudity from its theological origin in Western society, is made clear through the scholarship of Agamben in his 2010 publication, *Nudities*.

The treatment of the artist’s body as material continues to manifest itself through the relationship of the two bodies and the fluid identities of the characters enacted by the Pyes –

¹¹⁴ Kriston Capps, “Galleries: Nicholas and Sheila Pye at the Curator’s Office and the Phillips,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/galleries-nicholas-and-sheila-pye-at-curators-office-and-the-phillips/2011/03/17/ABQeD2m_story.html.

working through issues of gender, codependency and the question of corporeal boundaries. Moving beyond the determinacy of binarism frequently used in the discursive matrix that encircles the Pyes' work, positing human against nature, male against female, and the sacred against the profane, Butler's notion of performativity elucidates the processes that reify bifurcation to produce categorical norms. Collective performativity, therefore, establishes perceived conceptions of the human body – both in terms of its material and its social construction. Nonetheless, in allowing for differing perceptions of corporeal boundaries, the question of ethics must always take place. It is a complex line, but it also one that has been infinitely crossed, evidenced by colonization and the attribution of degrees of value to corporeal differences, such as gender, race and class.

In conclusion, what has stemmed from an exploration of Nicholas and Sheila Pye's film and photographic works is an investigation of the impermanence of corporeal boundaries through a selection of artworks from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What is manifest is the manner in which these select artists, Nicholas and Shelia Pye, Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman and Faye Mullen, have attended directly and indirectly to these issues through an absencing of the human body. My employment of *The Coronation* as a point of departure exemplifies both the art historical and social performativity of gender designation developed through religious ideology, and specifically the iconography of Adam and Eve in the outer panels of the video installation. The clear disruption of their naturalized form in *The Coronation* provokes a rethinking of the construction of perceptually fixed corporeal designations and the subsequent processes of naturalization. More, in correlation, the central panel reconnects the represented bodies and their mythology to their environment. The codependency of the Pyes' earlier trilogy subtly transposed into the video triptych not only emphasizes a trend in the Pyes' work, but also the continuous exchange of material and psychological elements to highlight the

interrelationality of bodies. The alignment of selected works by the Pyes with Mendieta, Woodman and Mullen, makes visible the concentrated performative acts of the body that disrupt the notion of the universal body to instill a question of the perceptual limits of a body, problematizing the fixity of the *idea* of the (gendered and racialized) human body and attending to the delineation of a body as one in constant flux – both in terms of its materiality and its social construction.

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Appendix: List of works discussed in text

(Works listed in order of appearance in text)

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Coronation*, 2008, multi-channel video installation, 12:30 min loop

Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, c. 1423-1432, oil on panel

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *A Conversation with Myself I*, 2005, chromogenic print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *A Conversation with Myself II*, 2005, chromogenic print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Heavy Bodies*, 2005, chromogenic print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Paper Wall*, 2004, 16mm film, colour, 10 min

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *A Life of Errors*, 2006, 16mm, colour, 14 min

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007, HD, colour, 11 min

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Departure*, 2010, digital c-print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Denial*, 2010, digital c-print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Amend*, 2010, digital c-print

Luis Buñuel & Salvador Dalí, *Un chien andalou*, 1929, 16mm, 17 min

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Heavy Hearted*, 2008, performance, 43 min

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Marriage and Death of Two Minds*, 2002, chromogenic print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Stasis*, 2005, chromogenic print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Animism I*, 2008, digital c-print

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *Animism II*, 2008, digital c-print

Bill Brandt, *Portrait of a London Child, Eaton Place*, 1965, photograph

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (Silueta Series, Iowa), 1978, 35mm colour slide

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (earth body work, Old Man's Creek, Iowa), 1977, 35mm colour slide

Francesca Woodman, *House #4* (Providence, Rhode Island), 1976, photograph

Francesca Woodman, *Space*² (Providence, Rhode Island), 1977, photograph

Faye Mullen, *to be veiled.*, 2012, single-channel video installation, HD, colour, 5 min loop

Michelangelo Merisi Carravagio, *Death of a Virgin*, 1605-6, oil on canvas

Paul Cezanne, *Les Grandes Baigneuses*, 1898-1906, oil on canvas

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Bride*, 2011, HD, colour, 4:40 min loop

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Dreamer*, 2011, HD, colour, 4:58 min loop

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Flower Eaters*, 2011, HD, colour, 11:47 min loop

Nicholas & Sheila Pye, *The Bird Watcher*, 2011, HD, colour, 10:23 min loop

Sheila Pye, *The Red Virgin*, 2011, HD, colour, 17 min

Nicholas Pye, *The Encounter*, 2011, HD, colour, 6:30 min

Nicholas Pye, *To Be Wounded Without Bleeding – Portrait at 35*, 2011, HD, colour, 2:30 min

Nicholas Pye, *Before New Beginnings*, 2011, HD, colour, 9 min

Nicholas Pye, *The Mountain*, 2011, HD, colour, 3:40 min