

A SPLICE OF LIFE (HOME, LAPTOP, WI-FI)

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INTRODUCTION

Metamorphosis is a process of change on borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and non-I, a process of transgression and fading away. The metamorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze -or, if it has a centre, it constantly slides to the borders, to the margins.¹

This paper examines Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's matrixial theory in relation to her concept of Metamorphosis as "a process of change on borderlines and thresholds"² when experienced from the perspective of living at home during the pandemic. It attempts to do this by addressing the circumstances of the artist/author of this paper, as a way to (re)produce encounters, firstly lived through the screen, then later developed upon through a palimpsestic process whereby layers and layers of 'artworking' are applied through interdisciplinary virtual, digital and analogue methods, as a response to working through the pandemic. The term artworking is derived from the title of Ettinger's exhibition and catalogue of the same name - Artworking (1985- 96) and thus forms a referential place to consider a host of materialities as those produced in accretions.

This seems relevant in the context of thinking through, but also beyond a Freudian Psychanalyses utilising the tangible concept of a mystic writing pad in which to inscribe memories into a pre - existing surface. Here traces of past experiences form part of a memory board upon which further and future inscriptions might be placed. Indeed, via Freuds tools, the Oedipus complex provides a concept in which to expand upon, by adopting Ettinger's matrixial theory as a point of reference. Extending upon Sigmund Freud, but more importantly, Jacques Lacan, Ettinger proposed further perspectives on the female body; femininity and female identity so that subjectivity is not approached as fixed, the 'feminine' itself denotes a being not structured in the binary, or as Other, but as fluid and dynamic, in the process of becoming. This combined with "a Laconian analytical perspective with Deleuze and Gauttari's emergent model of the "residual subject"³ introduces (albeit very succinctly), some aspects of Ettinger's matrixial theory, involving the "hybridization of psychoanalysis with schizo -analysis".⁴ Understanding this context is important since it then enables the visual aspect through her painting methods to proceed with these aspects in mind.

Ettinger's influence on the fields of psychanalysis and painting from the early 90's onwards through a post - structuralist lens, has been significant, and, in this paper, my aim is to 'work with' some of these key aspects which she denotes to the 'matrixial'. For example, it is important to outline how Ettinger's psychoanalysis departs from more traditional forms of psychoanalysis, since this challenges patriarchal/phallogocentric power structures, and is itself is an important aspect of her matrixial theory, which also reside within this praxis.

My approach here, has been to consider matrixial theory and practice through my own pandemic methods, utilising both the new circumstances of working from home as well as navigating a new set

of artistic tools. This shift away from the office and open studio teaching environment, literally occurred over the course of one day on March 26th, 2020, forcing (many of us) into our homes, as a result of the strict Covid 19 pandemic.

As a result, professional paid work (teaching) then defaulted online to virtual Microsoft Teams teaching, as the core object of our fascination or even frustrations and became dependent upon computing devices. These devices literally enabled many of us to stay connected with one another, as a point of convergence across time and space. At times, however, I would argue, overly exposing us, as we met the daily challenges of teaching online, or meeting with family members, for example.

As an artist however, this new situation also involved relinquishing many favoured or familiar artistic tools - the abandonment of the xerographic processing machine was one such intrinsic instrument in my artistic method which became off limits. I mention this since Bracha L. Ettinger's own process of artworking is dependent upon the use of scanning devices. This is essential to her working method/painting practice providing a way of looking and demonstrates the importance of developing an artist's tool kit. This is important to note, since the pandemic shift in working conditions depended upon an over reliance of some aspects (digital technologies/the digital screen/ virtual Microsoft Teams) and an under reliance of others (in- person face-face contact, photocopier). Evolving around digital screens, this then offered a different and new space of encounter in which to view domestic-professional life, when experienced through the eyes of the artist/author.

Matrixial theory, here, through the digital/virtual screen, could therefore provide a glimpse into work(wo)manship, (my neologism) as a particular feminist lens, in which to apply during and beyond the pandemic. This change in circumstances enabled the participants of the house to be put on public display by making the screen a constant feature of the interior, altering not only the domestic space, but also the participants within it. As kerkoff suggests, feminism provides a way to "address multiple issues blurring the edges of the binary artifice of the object/subject"⁵ and here, through this encounter with the screen new bodies of knowledge and new bodies of work (creative practice) could be developed. I mention this, since in not wanting to lose site of the context, as an applied theory inherited from Bracha L. Ettinger, it is important to also not lose site of the visual arts practice. I mention this now, since it is in and through the process of 'artworking' – of an experiencing and experimenting through (new or altered) interdisciplinary materials/methods that it seemed possible to capture real life events, in the moment, but also as after- effects, and affects.

This is of the upmost importance keeping the examination in relation to Ettinger close. Here, the artist is concerned with how these experiences might be captured through here machinic visual method, so that painting acts as a screen; an encounter between artist and others, a space to confront the issues at play in her work.

As art historian Grizelda Pollock suggests,

Ettinger's identity as a Holocaust survivor and immigrant, and the trauma related to it are of particular significance to her. She interrogates this through her painting practice, so that "metamorphosis opens another pathway for meaning donation that is not based, phallically on substitution and displacement, but on borderlinking"⁶.

Over her lifetime, Ettinger has developed a set of concepts that are fundamental to her psychoanalytical and painting practice. As mentioned above, these include 'metamorphosis' and 'borderlinking' – just two frames of reference that are combined with many others and featured on her glossary below. I have attempted to explore just some of these key terms and to demonstrate how they also can be rife for re-contextualisation through further visual experimentation in ways that are multiple and miscible, producing both psychic traces, and a range of interdisciplinary practical outcomes.

within arthouse cinema, and women's first-hand experiences as artists and activists has therefore become a feature of this analysis, with examples finding their way into the visual representation, much like Ettinger's matrixial theory, which can be understood to impact on the female psyche, and woman's oppression generating a need for feminist activism. This provided raw material in which to embellish upon through both visual exploration and textual analysis, to question these gendered representations. Here, private space conversely, and (perhaps perversely) became public property viewed through digital/virtual home/work, in turn bringing issues of spectatorship, through the visibility of (undervalued) others in the screen.

I want to suggest that this experience, enabled new or altered subjectivities, what might be referred to as a 'residual subject',¹¹ to be encountered through these new threshold spaces, because of this period of social transformation and that this in turn has prompted a feminist art enquiry. Citing myself at the kitchen table, I am conscious of how everything, "Things and thoughts," as Gilles Deleuze states might "advance or grow out from the middle" because "that's where everything unfolds."¹² but further to this feel splintered and fractured, scattered, and spliced between matters of home and work.

As a contemporary (pandemic) representation of these politics, aspects of daily life become enmeshed through the continual presence of the digital / virtual screen occupied for both work and leisure, formal meetings, family meetings, online lecturing, online schooling, making transactions, online shopping, gaming, administration, research, reading, recording, and using software to navigate and negotiate a maelstrom of activity in myriad ways. Here, 'borderlinking', via screen-based technologies – home – wi-fi – laptop activated the autoethnographic lens of author/artist/lecturer/mother, as a response to this condition during, but also beyond the pandemic.

As a consequence, this utilised autoethnography as a research method in which to address and reflect on these issues, as others have. Autoethnography when approached from a moderate perspective "allows for innovation, imagination, and the representation of a range of voices"¹³, a stance which, it is hoped can be explored here. As Wall says,

I used my unique positioning as a mother, a health care practitioner, and a sociologist to contribute an alternative discourse to literature on a social practice that significantly impacts people's lives (Wall, 2012a, 2012b)¹⁴.

Similarly, I use my own unique positioning as a mother, an artist, a university lecturer, and researcher to contribute to the ever - expanding literature related to homeworking during and after the pandemic, and as a way to generate visual arts practice.

For example, in *Jeanne (Dielman) and Me: Lockdown*, I overlay one domestic chore with another, one subject with another, one household with another, an act which in one sense might seem superficial and simple and yet is loaded with political significance, as a representation of feminist activism through arts practice.

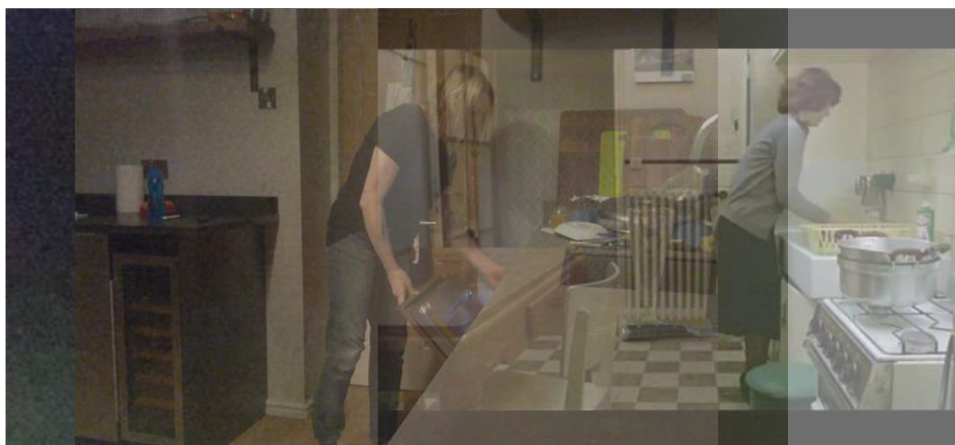


Figure 2. *[Jeanne (Dielman) and Me: Lockdown, Digital assemblage by [Shellie Holden] ©[Shellie Holden][2022] combining [film still] 'Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels' directed by Chantal Akerman © The Criterion Collection 1975 All rights reserved.*

Unlike the fictional depiction of Jeanne, whose life appears neatly organised into the routine activity of daily household chores, in this pandemic life it feels difficult to tease apart one occupation from another, as it drifts in and out between screen time, but also between households as collective audio-visual resonances. In this way the virtual /digital meeting space can be used as a site to stir emotional and/or affective responses, through computational post - production gestures. For example, turning off cameras and microphones, or blurring backgrounds to obscure or block out sounds and (facial/bodily) expressions, can act as a form of 'tidying up', as editing out.

Jeanne (Dielman) and Me: Lockdown, exemplified a way of communicating this experience holding or folding together Jeanne with I is a way to bring relational aspects of woman's life into contact. Technically speaking, using the found image is a surface in which to layer upon/ or alongside, to combine my contextual references. This work demonstrates how 'borderlinking' (woman's) independent experiences, can be unified in a single image - bringing those peripheral, or overlooked events into the screen, "those moments that are typically left out of cinema"¹⁵ a presence on screen, as director Chantal Akerman did in the making on Jeanne.

I have alluded to in the description of the piece above, to a feminist assemblage, whereby assemblage itself represents a particular method of working, that involves "the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (agencer), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well."¹⁶

My title, *A S/PLICE OF LIFE (Home, laptop, wi-fi)*, conversely is suggestive of severed or selected parts. Splice, which refers specifically to genetics and molecular biology, seemed a suitable reference point to consider, what at times, seemed like scattered and disparate actions or events as part of pandemic lived experience. Here, though, through a methodological approach, selected elements (images/ jpeg images) could be spliced together, utilising the screen, as a place of convergence, to assemble such matters in a unified meeting point, but also in multiple (alternative) arrangements, whilst being open to further alteration. Ettinger's theory refers to "fragments without totality, cut-up particles, vessels without communication, partitioned scenes analogous to part-objects"¹⁷ and this particularly, becomes a viable metaphor in which to view subjectivities, especially when viewed partially or disparately. Splices and splits, facets and fragments, pieces and patches – all form tangible aspects in which to reproduce documents of daily life through combination. Here, aspects of lived

experience, can be retrieved or discarded (binned) through creative and conceptual method, quite literally taking screen grabs of documented moments and impressing them upon a (digital) surface to produce further visual and textual accretions.

Making the comparison to Ettinger's methods embodies both the psychological experience of her life and legacy but also that of artistic production itself. Here, enmeshing conventional (painting) method with inventive (low fi, experimental, intuitive) artistic process has involved developing a scanning process, as "a multimedia technique or visual language" the resulting effect to "create strong effects and intellectual reactions in the viewer."¹⁸ Here, 'metramorphosis', as that which involves a combination of actions seems paramount to the artistic process, enabling the allusive, fragmentary and at times figurative aspects of the work to come into contact, through ethics, aesthetics and affects, and "to remove the image from the empirically graspable instant"¹⁹. Here it produces aesthetic and affective elements through experimentation with different digital expressions so that matrixial provides a way of working, combining selected splices, parts, facets, or pieces, as material entities, (including digital software, and found imagery), and methods (feminist practices) as equal and contributory elements.

In my experimentation juxtaposing image and surface, digital and analogue, produces this assemblage between past and present, here and now, as a process of retrieval and borderlinking. Borderlinking is suggestive of a way of working across virtual, digital and physical interfaces but is also a way of bringing together disparate aspects of everyday life as a palimpsest of digital screen grabs, found imagery, digital and analogue gesture, colour sampling, stacking, cutting, splitting, duplication, looping, fading, layering as recurrent computational postproduction methods. This echoes the experience of domestic chore through the reproduction of processes and procedures, as production in accretion as and

ever evolving and expanding assemblage.

This is very much a body of work in process which is intended as a way of 'holding together', aspects of daily life from the margins, and indeed the marginal. In this way, the process of 'artworking' serves as a reparative outlet in which to reflect on experience, as a point of interaction.

NOTES

- ¹ Grizelda Pollock, "Nichsapha: Yearning/languishing The Immaterial tuche of colour in painting after painting after history" in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999*, (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.61.
- ² Grizelda Pollock, "Nichsapha: Yearning/languishing", p.61.
- ³ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain" in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999*, (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.30
- ⁴ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain" p.30
- ⁵ Sonja van Kerckhoff, "Fuzzy- Edged Feminism When the artist is a she" in Katy Deepwell, *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms*, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020) p. 18.
- ⁶ Grizelda Pollock, "Nichsapha: Yearning/languishing The Immaterial tuche of colour in painting after painting after history" in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999*, (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.51.
- ⁷ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain" in "Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999", (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.29.
- ⁸ Katy Deepwell, *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms*, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020) p. 18
- ⁹ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain 'in' "Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999", (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.29.
- ¹⁰ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain", p.13
- ¹¹ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain", p.11.
- ¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972- 1990* Translated by Martin Joughin. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), P.161
- ¹³ Sarah Stahlke Wall: "Toward a Moderate Autoethnography" in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1) (2016).
- ¹⁴ Sarah Stahlke Wall: "Toward a Moderate Autoethnography", 2016.
- ¹⁵ Glickstein, A: *Radical Banality: On Chantal Akerman, Labour in Cinema, And Legacy on May '68. 2018* Available at <https://www.anothergaze.com/radical-banality-chantal-akerman-labour-in-cinema-and-legacy-may-68/> (Accessed 12 May 2020)
- ¹⁶ Micheal DeLanda: *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. (London: Continuum, 2006).
- ¹⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger B: *The Matrixial Borderspace*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p.100.
- ¹⁸ Piet Coessens, (Foreword) in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999*, (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) P.7.
- ¹⁹ Brian Massumi, "Painting: The Voice of the Grain" in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Artworking 1985-1999*, (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000) p.10,11.

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