

“Sir Stephen readily admitted that O was infinitely more exciting when her body was covered with marks, whatever their sort, if only because these marks prevented her from resorting to subterfuges and immediately proclaimed to whomever saw them that everything was permitted in her regard.”ⁱ

“I’m hardly recommending it, but there is no reason why abstraction should not be as subject to obscenity bans as any other style.”ⁱⁱ

Boys will be boys. Leave them alone for five minutes and they’re pulling the wings off flies, frying ants with magnifying glasses, running around with thwacking great bits of metal and wood re-enacting god knows what kinds of opaque inner fantasies, and generally getting covered in muck. We look on, laugh and indulge, and the boys grow up and, on the whole, stop larking about in such a disorderly fashion. Do we imagine this behaviour just evaporates from their surface like dew?

The things we do as little kids go nowhere but inwards. If anything vanishes, that’s where it’s gone.

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I don’t mind admitting that I was a particularly effete child. I drew, I read, I didn’t play football, and I hated getting sand between my toes. Yet even I loved nothing more than vanishing into the woods and battering a fallen tree trunk within an inch of its imagined life with the biggest stick I could manage to swing. My experiences of reading and drawing were still a child’s, and they didn’t locate me in my body. Hitting things did.

I also liked to dance; Thursday night, *Top of the Pops*, there’s me, five years old, hopping about no more than a foot or so from the screen, in what I imagined was something like unison with *Pan’s People*. It embarrasses me to recount this not because I would certainly have looked ridiculous (I was a kid and expect to be cut some considerable slack on that account alone), but because my actions definitely carried an unconscious sexual motivation. Not in terms of feeling oddly attracted to young ladies squirming about in tiny scraps of netting and lycra (these kinds of baffling internal stirrings were

reserved almost exclusively for Barry Sheene and the blonde one out of *The Dukes of Hazzard*); more in the relationship set up through self-consciously moving my body in tandem with a bunch of other people within the shared territory staked out by the music.

Except, of course, that the people I was dancing with were just a collection of strobing pixels that didn't even represent a live feed. What I was doing, essentially, was dancing with a box.

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“Such are the simpler forms that create strong gestalt sensations. Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation... One sees and immediately ‘believes’ that the pattern within one’s mind corresponds to the existential fact of the object... Characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established... it does not disintegrate. One is then both free of the shape and bound to it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“...the small child seeks to rediscover it’s own organs and their functions in every outside thing...”^{iv}

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The fallacy that genteel middleclass Victorians would cover up the legs of dressing tables and pianos with swathes of chintz, if not with special little trouser-like sheathes, has taken an unshakeable grip on the public imagination for many reasons; not least of all the fact that a well-turned piano leg can actually be very sexy. Is this a rational response? Think of *American Psycho*, in particular the chapter devoted to Patrick Bateman’s morning toilet – it’s a point in the book where he/his body is most clearly the empty eye at the centre of a storm of sexualised products. (We’ve all been there; shared unnatural relations with, say, the concaved surface of a teaspoon warmed from idling in a cup of café au lait.)

In the Animist tradition of Japanese Shinto, every object has a soul. Imagine. Each sheet of canvas stretched like skin; each block of wood, even as the tiny holes are scorched into it; all the paint that Frank Stella wished he could avoid ruining by taking it out of the can.

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“...it was likely, however, that some one of the four men would want to score her with the crop, for it caused fine, long, deep welts which lasted quite some time. They’d go about it gradually, giving her ample opportunity to scream and fight and cry to her heart’s content. They’d pause to let her catch her breath, but after she’d recovered it, they’d start in again, judging the results not by her screams or her tears but by the more or less livid and durable marks traced in her flesh by the whips”^v

The protagonist of *The Story of O* is removed, in the book’s initial chapter, to the Chateau at Roissy. Here, O’s body is whipped, bound and beaten, is repeatedly and violently made use of sexually by a number of anonymous men. Euan Uglow has commented on his continuing fascination with the human body as an infinitely poseable object, and is famous for the rigour and precision of the demands made on his models. At Roissy, O is put through a similarly rigorous and extensive practice; not in order to fully articulate the potential of her body as an object unfolding in a language of surfaces and volume in relation to light and space, but as an object capable of an extensive (though limited – and limits are important) pliability; an object that can absorb, and through absorption bear the evidence of, damage; an object which takes the physical brunt of a process which provides it’s executors and audience with supreme sensual and aesthetic pleasure. She is, in short, treated much like a painting.

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“The play of resemblances and differences, affinities and divergences, correspondences and disparities that has characterised the comparison between God and man, and between man and animal, has concluded in a tie. Man is an almost God and an almost animal. God and the animal are almost man. But who has the courage or the desperation to say that man is an almost thing and the thing an almost man?”^{vi}

“I’m gonna run and find / A place where I can hide / Somewhere that no one knows / Someplace that no one goes / So don’t you look for me / I’ll be where you can’t see / Somewhere I can’t be found / My little underground...”^{vii}

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Think of the gallery, and think of the studio. First, think of the studio: a room you have never seen where men with appetites labour over things we may or



may not be inclined to think of as paintings. Their backs are hunched, their faces brought in close to scrutinise the grain or pigmentation of a surface, mapping and deriving pleasure from each imperfection as it is discovered, from the webbings and constellations of damage as they come together under both hand and eye. Sweats are broken, pains creep into arms, legs, fingers, from holding a position, bearing a weight, from the endless repetition of a procedure. The things they pore over, smother and scrape down, polish and puncture, bandage and burn, give themselves unconditionally to these processes. The attentions they are lavished with as a result are a kind of reification-through-injury. They are worshipped, manhandled and enslaved.

Now. Think of the gallery, and what it is you are being shown within its enclosure.

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The snaking basements of Shoreditch Town Hall are no Roissy, but this doesn't mean they have no sensual language of their own. Dust and rot, splinters and pigeon feathers, blossoming rust stains, builders' and electricians' offhanded scrawls in magic marker; layers of paint peel from the walls in sheets, the architecture is a body constructed of layers it seems intent on sloughing off: scuffed and shredded wallpaper, crumbling cement, iron beams coming loose and poking out like the ends of broken bones.

In the midst of this grit and decline any sheath of modernist polish seems almost girlishly vulnerable. Thin skins of oil paint smeared across milled and polished metal cling there like films of perfume on frozen pulse points. The ruin is always waiting like a skeleton inside the undamaged object. The ruin is what will survive it. And ruination is the lynchpin around which a certain sensuality is happy to endlessly pivot. Marks burnt with painstaking deliberation into pieces of otherwise indistinct wood endow them with a preciousness which is at least in part to do with the delicacy of their wounded parts forming a counterpoint to the delicacy of those parts as yet unmarked. The act of laying a mark on something, no matter how delicately, is always an aggression, an assertion, a subjugation. All painting is a dirty protest against and in homage to the seductiveness of the blank canvas.

The corporeality at the heart of formalism is brought repeatedly to the fore in these winding basements, as various intensities of attention to surface skim, bruise, penetrate, encrust, scrape down, peel back and all but literally turn

inside-out the bodies suggested by wood, metal, canvas, ink, paint. These labours manifest in warty, fibrous accretions of Burnt Sienna, striated at times as if by the soft ribbing of an undulating duodenum, while elsewhere bearing crisper ligature marks, like those left by a pair of tight socks. They manifest in successions of tiny burn marks, executed with a ritual fervour and then hidden in the dark. They manifest in a cleanliness, sheen and hardness that make these very qualities subject to maculation, that herald their ruination at the hands of brick dust and damp air, cobwebs and pigeon shit.

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“The alliance between the senses and things allows access to a neuter sexuality that entails a suspension of feeling. This is not the annulment of sensibility, which would imply the absence of any tension, but the entrance into a displaced, decentred experience, freed of any intention of reaching a purpose.”^{viii}

The trajectory of most pornography is predictable enough: it starts with a flimsy premise and dives straight into the foreplay, a preamble which, through the repetition and intensification of its themes, surges towards an inevitable, orgasmic crescendo. At first, I wanted to apply that structure to this essay; but the further in I got, the more I tried to force the text towards what in coyer, more romantic fiction might be termed its ‘crisis’, I began to realise that it didn’t fit. It didn’t fit because in actual fact this work, like *The Story of O*, is all about the extension (if not *suspension*), the fetishisation, of the foreplay. Its temporality is that of the slow, lingering appreciation of the restrained epicure, not the headlong rush of the fuckmachine. Instead of release, instead of a *dénouement*, there is a continuous attention that unfolds and unfolds, like the paradox of Zeno’s arrow, in an increasing proximity to something with which contact is never actually made; in *The Story of O*, O herself is this object which, though stripped, bound, beaten, lashed, branded, deformed and penetrated, remains a target that Sir Steven’s arrows are never quite able to definitively strike. Consider Robert Morris:

“The constant shape of the cube held in the mind but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related. There are two distinct terms: the known constant and the experienced variable.”^{ix}

This is the most basic coinage of pornography; that while everything is shown,

it remains essentially unattainable. No matter how far we go splitting the atom, dissecting the electron, the ultimate nature of matter continues to elude us. The experienced variable is a tease, and as viewers, we never manage to penetrate beyond its slick patter of come-hithers and not-tonights. Whether the artist gets any further behind the closed doors of the studio really isn't for me to say.

ⁱ Pauline Réage, *The Story of O*, Corgi, London, 1994, p. 155-156

ⁱⁱ Lucy R. Lippard, *Eros Presumptive*, Minimal Art, Ed. Gregory Battcock, University of California Press, London, 1995, p. 220

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture*, Minimal Art, op. cit. p. 226-228

^{iv} Melanie Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, Virago Press, London, 1989, p. 147

^v Pauline Réage, op. cit. p. 21

^{vi} Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, Trans. Massimo Verdicchio, Continuum, London/New York, 1994, p. 4

^{vii} The Jesus and Mary Chain, *My Little Underground*, Psychocandy, Blanco y Negro, 1985

^{viii} Mario Perniola, op. cit. p. 2

^{ix} Robert Morris, op. cit. p. 234

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