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## Regalia and Repetition

Deborah I. Karpman

*University of Massachusetts - Amherst*, [deb.karpman@gmail.com](mailto:deb.karpman@gmail.com)

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REGALIA AND REPETITION

A Thesis Presented

by

DEBORAH KARPMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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REGALIA AND REPETITION

A Thesis presented

by

DEBORAH KARPMAN

Approved as to style and content by:

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Shona Macdonald, Chair

---

Mario Ontiveros, Member

---

Young Min Moon, Member

---

Susan Jahoda, Member

---

William Oedel, Chair  
Department of Art

---

Shona Macdonald, Graduate Program Director  
Department of Art

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ABSTRACT

REGALIA AND REPETITION

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DEBORAH KARPMAN, B.A. COLGATE UNIVERSITY

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Directed by: Shona Macdonald

My thesis investigates some of the conceptual ideas related to my studio work, both in terms of theory and contemporary practice. This thesis focuses how the visual images formally operate, as well as the larger framework of discourse that surrounds my practice. In my work, the habitual, incessant process of cutting and extraction and the subsequent meticulous reconfiguring use the strategies of repetition and labor. These sustained, ongoing acts have the possibility to be generative or transformative rather than simply repetitive. This thesis also explores the found object, complicating the classification and knowledge systems of the source image with odd juxtapositions and reconfigurations. This body of work presents and develops several contradictions: the gimmick or lure of the initial appearance versus the underlying reality; the paradox between the promise of beauty or pleasure, and the sense of antagonism or disruption embedded in these images.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My work appropriates and resituates images from found sources such as field guides, old textbooks, and other printed material. These apparatuses of classification imply a constructed interiority, delineating specific branches of information and history. A field guide's purpose is to record subtle variations within a specific niche of encyclopedic knowledge. The representations in a guide page demand strict accuracy, appearing as a grid of assimilated forms. Each entry is precisely identified based on species, categories, sex, and physical attributes. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas explains that these closed systems are often identified not on their own terms, but by what strays outside. She states "dirt [is] matter out of place... where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism."<sup>1</sup>

The reworked images in this thesis call into question the implicit neutrality and objectivity of the found image, intending to destabilize the embedded meaning while approaching a context that allows for variability and transformation. Both in surface and imagery, these works deviate from their intended use. They reference classification systems and methodologies, but they

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984), 35.

are jumbled and cobbled together, no longer grounded in the stable structure of their precedents. This repetitive operation of fragmenting ‘wholes,’ and subsequent reconfiguration allows for an exploration of the body, abjection, and heterogeneity. These permutations and deletions are generative, deviating from the proscribed signification of their sources.

The resulting images explore the tug between protection and invasion, strength and weakness, deterioration and healing. These works suggest bodily references, fluctuating between candy drops and abstracted corporeal forms: striations of sagging, bending musculatures; taffy-like intestinal matter; stacks of tarnished bones or hooves. The fragments appear discarded or stranded on the page, but also marked by some kind of strain or abnormality. Bloated with birds, wishbones, and confetti, the swollen forms indicate infection, acting as an external harbinger of an internal problem. Swelling inaugurates build-up; excess eventually yields collapse, and, potentially, cleansing, regeneration, and healing. And so these works present that possibility: a push and pull between the maintenance of form and the seemingly inevitable loss through unraveling and fragmentation.

Although the images are populated by a repetition of forms, the accumulations seem futile, resisting anything substantial or secure. The use of repetition reinforces the vulnerability and insubstantiality of the clusters. The obsessive accumulation of form suggests a futile attempt to build a presence despite the forms’ consistent fragility. In these works, the use of repetition seems to intentionally deflate itself, to neutralize the power of each individual entity

while at the same time questioning the potency of the arrangement. In fact, it seems to insist on the contingency of each particle, and the dependency on the whole for each unit – as if the removal of one piece could make the entire edifice flounder.

The images simultaneously oscillate between appearing either as external or internal bodies that invade their hosts, or, as buds, thorns, or outgrowths that benefit and even protect the organism. The two masses in *Spindles (Figure 1)* explore the relationship between the parasitical and the symbiotic. The formation appears to wrap and curl around a center axis, swirling into a distended balloon of candy-like forms. The relationship between the bird parts and the bodily forms are marked by ambiguity; the growths could be either external or internal to the colored slabs. For example, the sharp forms could be thorns, which serves a protective role towards its host, or foreign material, which invade and exploit its host.



*Figure 1: Spindles, 20.5" x 40" collage on found paper, 2008*

## CHAPTER 2

### PROCESS: REPETITION, GESTURE, AND PERFORMATIVITY

Critical theorist Michele de Certeau argues that improvisation and transformation develop through the repetitive routines of everyday activities such as reading and writing. He asserts that slight mutations and aberrations of dominant codes of representation emanate from the body, specifically in the performative transaction between ‘user’ and object. In “The Practice of Everyday Life,” de Certeau explores the formal structure involved in the practice of ‘making do:’ the operation that is “multiform and fragmentary, relative to situations and details, insinuated into and concealed within devices whose mode of usage they constitute.”<sup>2</sup> He argues for the possibility of improvisation and resistance within mass culture via *tactics*. A tactic is defined as a behavior that “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence...whatever it wins it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities.”<sup>3</sup> Although a tactic does not emanate from a location of power, it

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<sup>2</sup> De Certeau, Michele. The Practice of Everyday Life. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).The Practice of Everyday Life. xv.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

provokes a sense of mutability and resistance toward the dominant system of representation.

In my work, the everyday activities of collecting, organizing, cutting, and assembling explore de Certeau's notion of 'making do.' The performative act of cutting causes irregularities and variations that continuously transform the meaning of the found image. This repetitive task is marked by mutations and variability—slight aberrations associated with the handmade. In Touching Feeling, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick teases out the definition of the performative, focusing on the deviating trajectories of theatricality and linguistic deconstruction.<sup>4</sup> Tracing the concept's lineage to J.L. Austin, Sedgwick proposes that if not properly explicated, the term could absorb any indiscriminate utterance, both verbal and non-verbal. Sedgwick frames *explicit performative utterances* around several syntactic similarities: first-person singular, present, indicative, and active. By contrast, the theatrical aspect of performativity, following Judith Butler, confers the significance of the *act*, of the notion of "doing," the way that communication is embodied by gesture, intonation, and behavior.

Sedgwick's meditation on the preposition *beside* expands her analysis beyond speech and action, permitting a consideration of spatial and planar relationships. The word *beside* refers to the spatial arrangement of a given number of entities, though not an infinite quantity. In addition, it resists a "fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's

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<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity. (Durham: Duke University Press), 2003. 7.

shared a bed with siblings...*Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing...<sup>5</sup> As a non-hierarchical element of speech, *beside* permits the permeable juxtaposition of heterogeneous entities and transactions.

In the work *Regalia* (Figure 2), mounds of abstracted, fleshy striations are implanted with wishbones and bird wings. The agitated forms dampen the initial promise of beauty or pleasure. Candy-stripe hues, neon colors, and confetti ‘gimmicks,’ promise pleasure then strip it away. Jewels and gold feign preciousness, despite the emptiness of substance beneath the outer façade. The significance of the iconography—wishbones, wings, candies, gems, columns—lies not in their singular, isolated appearance, but in the juxtapositions that occur between disparate and repeated forms. In *Regalia*, layers of information coexist *beside* each other: the juxtaposition of old and new materials, stained, found paper and fluorescents, mechanically-produced, flattened images and textural shapes. Whereas an arrangement of homogenous materials suggests deliberate classification, an assemblage of heterogeneous fragments imply the remnants of things left behind – forgotten and then remembered, accidental, abrupt. The arrangements of disparate elements explore Sedgwick’s *beside*: “twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing” but definitively reject hierarchy of one element over the other.

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<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*. 8.



*Figure 2: Regalia, 31" x 51.5" collage on found paper, 2008*

This use of gesture, and performativity extends to Ellen Gallagher's artistic practice. Utilizing plasticine, coconut oil, paint, ink, and collaged eyeballs, Gallagher exhumes and reinscribes discolored 1930's era wig advertisements from *Ebony*, *Our World*, and *Black Stars*, collapsing the time between the historical document and her contemporary intervention. In the work *eXelento* (*Figures 3 and 4*), Gallagher assembles a grid of black and white ads. In each image, Gallagher layers a globular swath of yellow plasticine over each model's wig. The removal of the eyes further distorts the original image. The layers of material accumulate atop the myriad notations of historical events, styles, names, places, cartoons, records and songs, bleeding into the surfaces, masking and revealing information. Her work disrupts the historical moment, but also creates a

kind of “historical antinarrative,” unraveling “strands of history...to generate new meanings.”<sup>6</sup>



Figure 3: Ellen Gallagher, *eXelento*, 2004, *Plasticine, ink, paper on canvas, 96” x192,” (detail)*

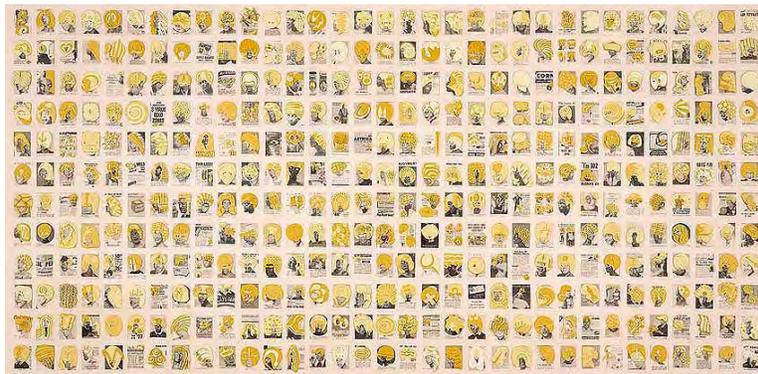


Figure 4: Ellen Gallagher, *eXelento*, 2004, *Plasticine, ink, and paper on canvas, 96”x192”*

The notion of resistance is central to Gallagher, both in terms of the artist’s manipulation of these dominant codes of representation, as well as the resistance of the material. Gallagher’s attempt to resignify the individuals in the

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<sup>6</sup> Medvedow, Jill. *Ellen Gallagher*. (Boston, DAP Publishers/ICA, 2001).12.

images confers their absence. She explains, “the signs from a page in *Ebony* come with their own specificity and undeniable drag—their inability to be fully woven into my world... They resist me, even before I manipulate them... No matter what I did, this person’s specificity was completely undeniable and unapologetic... I find that really moving.”<sup>7</sup> Gallagher refers to the specificity of the individuals in the advertisements, but also to the precise moment in time articulated by these images.

Gallagher’s use of plasticine feeds back into the idea of mutation and impermanence. Plasticine is a putty-like material that is known for its malleability and softness. It is frequently used in animation and claymation due to its fluidity and immediacy. The material remains vulnerable and fragile, susceptible to alteration. Plasticine is a substance that melts when heated, and, unlike clay, it cannot be permanently set through firing. Popular with children and a favorite for elementary school art classrooms, it is mutable enough to be altered with ease, but also dense enough to retain its shape. Gallagher’s use of plasticine reiterates her interest in themes of impermanence and mutability. Plasticine resists back, asserting its own properties.

My work explores the mutability of the found image. *Bouillon* (Figure 5) dissects and reconstructs architectural forms from antiquity. The miniature tripod-like structures derive from representations of the classical columns and edifices of Ancient Greece and Rome – physical manifestations of the expansion and

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<sup>7</sup> PBS Series Art 21, “Exelento and DeLuke: Interview with Ellen Gallagher,” <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/gallagher/clip1.html>.

transmission of power, ideology, and empire. The purpose of a column is to stabilize and support lateral force, absorbing weight and providing equilibrium and stasis. Defects such as crookedness and curvature jeopardize its solidity and strength. The constructions in *Bouillon* are marked by these deformities - the structures appear unhinged from the ground, excised from a material foundation. These pillars—previous emblems of balance and order—slump with gravity. The coiled appendages appear lop-sided and cobbled together. The forms affirm a sense of unfeasibility in their proportions and assemblage—their impotence as stable architectural formations. On one level, these images suggest the physical erosion of classical ruins – locales of determined conservation yet inevitable decline and decay. Yet the forms in *Bouillon* seem to create their own internal logic—rather than supporting an exterior arch or beam, the pillars and poles *sustain each other*.



*Figure 5: Bouillon, collage on found paper, 12" x 48" 2009*

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FOUND SURFACE

The discoloration of the paper in the work *Bouillon* reveals the progressive decay of the surface: the dissolve of the pigmentation from its original pure, untarnished white to an aged, yellowy complexion. The pigment bleeds from the edges and corners, a stain that announces both preservation and deterioration. The columns continue the relationship between stability and disintegration. According to Richard Flood, our contemporary time of increased volatility triggers artists to prod things into a state of suspended animation...to hurl works into “uncomfortable, anxious relationships.”<sup>8</sup> The images in *Bouillon* follow Flood’s logic—they insist on a sense of buoyancy and anxiousness. Yet, although precariously arranged, the delicate golden pillars remain upright. The columns in *Bouillon* have not collapsed or fallen; rather they remain contingent on the adjacent forms for solidity and strength.

Gallagher also explores the relationship between preservation and decay. Gallagher admits that despite her efforts to reshape these images, they have their own relationship to time: “It will yellow and darken...so no matter what it resists me in that way. No matter how I may try to build it into forms, or arc it, or cut it, it will darken and yellow, which I like.”<sup>9</sup> The heavy physicality of the materials,

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<sup>8</sup> Flood, Richard. et. al. *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*. (New York: Phaidon Press, Inc., 2007), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

comprised of layers of greasy coconut oil and yellow plasticine, catalyze a reaction with the magazine pages, weakening the physical constitution of the paper.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE HANDMADE

The evidence of the hand is central to my work. Just as the found paper has a relationship with time—stains and blemishes reveal the effects of light, humidity, moisture—the handmade quality suggest the temporal quality of the work’s production: the time spent cutting and affixing. As Gallagher pinches and sculpts each piece of plasticine, these actions remind one of the artists’ presence and subjectivity. Similarly, in my work, each extraction reveals the angle of the cut, the degree of pressure applied, and the rotation and speed of the wrist’s movement. De Certeau emphasizes the significance of these minor, humble gestures of appropriation: “The child still scrawls and daubs on his schoolbooks; even if he is punished for this crime, he has made a space for himself and signs his existence as an author on it.”<sup>10</sup> According to de Certeau, it is not only possible, but critical, to insert oneself into the dominant system of representation – to establish a relationship between text and user.

## CHAPTER 5

### METAMORPHOSIS

Michele de Certeau's argument for the potential for reading relates to the viewer's experience of the work. De Certeau emphasizes the bodily movement intrinsic to reading – the ocular engagement with the words and the tactile relationship between the physical text and the user. He recognizes the act of reading as a behavior that can be inhabited by the individual. For de Certeau, reading functions as a form of “silent production...the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meaning inferred...leaps over written space in an ephemeral dance.”<sup>11</sup> The reader transports himself into the text, aligning his subjectivity with the written words...a “mutation” that “makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment.”<sup>12</sup> For de Certeau, the bodily engagement with the text drives the potential for improvisation, transforming reading into a productive, generative act.

The images morph into fragments of an abstracted alphabet, implying the mutation and moodiness of language: the works suggest architecture as choreography, architecture as weaponry, architecture as language. However, the images do not compel a proscribed read, but rather attempt to open up meaning to the viewer. The viewer engages the work by deciphering the symbols laterally

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<sup>11</sup> De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life. xxi.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

through the scroll-like surface, akin to the act of reading. De Certeau emphasizes the body's role in this engagement, the physical appropriation of the surface. According to de Certeau's logic, although the imagery may initiate a sense of variability and metamorphosis, the viewer's interaction with the work drives the possibility for improvisation.

Critical theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that 'minor' interventions and appropriations can function as forms of resistance. While Deleuze and Guattari's examples reside in speech, their analysis emphasizes a bodily process. The alterations and mutations that occur in a minor language exist in speech, the manner in which consonants and vowels inflect upon each other, the way in which the mouth and tongue process and deliver the words. A minor literature permits a "collective assemblage of enunciation" that is asubjective, comprised of a multitude of intensities: this enunciation performs a movement from "the individuated animal to the pack or to a collective multiplicity."<sup>13</sup>

In A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Deleuze and Guattari liken language to the rhizome, a system that assumes many diverse forms, "from ramified surface extensions ...to concretion into bulbs and tubers."<sup>14</sup> Spatially, the rhizome is a decentered network, comprised of a multitude of interlinking, entangled nodes. The rhizome circulates laterally,

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). 18.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). 6.

transversing a horizontal course and gaining momentum as it proceeds. According to Deleuze and Guattari, language is rhizomatic: “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages.”<sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari bracket the revolutionary potential for minor language in relation to the body’s utterances, in the manifestations of intensities and vibrations that comprise speech. Deleuze and Guattari’s framework emphasizes linguistic performativity, delineating how language constructs or affects reality rather than simply describing it.<sup>16</sup>

The multiple incarnations of form in *Bouillon* approach Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome. The formations suggest choreographed animations, momentarily arrested in space but implying unremitting flux and transformation. Columns insinuate appendages, morphing from architectural structures into pictorial representations of an invented language. The constructions oscillate between collapsed figures, scaffolded habitats, archaic devices, and ritualistic objects. Each subsequent alteration confirms the mutability of the symbols.

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<sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*. 5.

## CHAPTER 6

### HYBRIDITY AND ‘BECOMING ANIMAL’

Artist Wangechi Mutu uses representations of the African female body as a site of intervention. Her hybrid forms exist in the interstices between human, animal, and machine, both “primitivist and post-human.”<sup>17</sup> Flanked by harsh bristling forms and serpentine parts, Mutu’s work gyrates and mutates: rocks morph into calcified abdominal tissue, limbs are excised, replaced by prosthetics, grafts of cobbled skin pieces hemorrhage and rupture, spasms of pigment spray from the roots of amputated parts. Mutu’s collages mine popular culture imagery, striving to create newly inducted wholes from their disparate, fragmented parts. Mutu fractures and reconfigures pin-up bodies, suturing the segmented parts into forms that challenge and disrupt the flat ordinariness, “the emptied-out desire” of their sources.<sup>18</sup> The determination of source material that Mutu’s work compels feeds back into the idea of habit and repetition associated with scouring archives of pop imagery, as well as the careful extraction from their original contexts.

Mutu’s trajectories demarcate issues of politics and representation. The bodies that appear in Mutu’s work bear the residue of Euro-America’s projected discourse.<sup>19</sup> Mutu’s imagery positions the “feminine as an embodiment of nation and continent, ultimately evolving into a cipher for a disfigured and evolving

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<sup>17</sup> Veal, Michael. “Enter Cautiously,” in *A Shady Promise/Wangechi Mutu*. (Bologna, Italy: Damiana Editore, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

continent, planet, and species.”<sup>20</sup> She articulates how the contradictory ideologies imposed on the female body act as a metaphor for the West’s representation of Africa - locus of ecstasy and trauma, sublimation and horror. Mutu complicates the “colonial tropes of Africa as a site of sex, mysticism, and unbridled nature as well as contemporary tropes of Africa as diseases, blood-stained horror.”<sup>21</sup>

Mutu’s figures slip between primal and post-human, challenging the fetishization and simplification of Non-Western cultures while at the same time invoking a sense of ecology and territory, both physical and spatial. Swathed in an amalgamation of fur and weeds, her humanoid figures are enveloped in rancid, ashen red and gray environments that connote waste, violence, and environmental destruction. Yet there is possibility and potentiality in these works, beyond the mere representation of aggression, violence, and abjection. Mutu’s work provokes a reconsideration of dominant cultural assumptions by literally re-scripting the behavior of these media-generated images. Mutu’s hybrid forms – a concoction of female, floral, animal, fungal - assault the strict taxonomical, hierarchized order of seeing, advancing a depiction that allows for flux and transformation.

Hybrids are typically defined as two entities that *permanently* combine into new forms: centaurs, mermaids, minotaurs merge human and animal in symmetrical relationships—unusual but *immutable* creatures. Mutu’s work departs from this concept of hybridity for one that implies volatility and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

instability. Although the prosthetic weapon-like limbs in Mutu's *Double Fuse* seem to momentarily suspend into their current state, it appears probable that they will continue augmenting and rearranging shards of metal and flesh.



Figure 6: Wangechi Mutu, *Double Fuse*, Ink and collage on Mylar, 2003

Similarly, the shapes in *Regalia* shift and churn, simultaneously accelerating and diminishing. Butterfly and moth wings provide ornamentation and the appearance of plentitude. Yet, as the wings penetrate the other forms, they antagonize and disrupt the sensual surface. The expectation of beauty and pleasure is diverted for a reality that appears aggressive, insidious, and unruly.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari establish the concept of 'becoming animal,' outlining three different formations of animals. Integrated into the family institution, the first concept is the individuated animal: "pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals, each with its own history, 'my cat,' 'my dog.'" These relations between human and animal encourage regression and narcissism, since they merely develop and reinforce the individual's self-image or ego. Deleuze and Guattari articulate the second version of animal as symbols of 'great divine myths...archetypes or State animals.'" This representation utilizes animals

as sacred emblems of constructed State identity – timeless, immutable, and eternal. For Deleuze and Guattari, the final type, ‘*becoming animal*’ addresses “pack or affect animals” which “form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale...” Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the word *becoming* indicates process and transformation; it suggests a condition of continual transition. These propagating multiplicities operate via swarms and packs. They are not unified by a common ancestor and are extricated from stratified classification of genus and species, heredity and filiation. Rather, epidemic and contagion direct their terms: a “chain of affects and variable speeds, with accelerations and transformations, always in relation to the outside.”<sup>22</sup>

My work *Locus* (Figure 7) is marked by a propagation and mutation of form similar to the notion of ‘becoming’ explored by Deleuze and Guattari. Dozens of bird heads swarm the surface in a kind of arrested animation. Suspended droplets emit numerous circular white particles, blanketing the surface. A tendril of tangled bird heads swirls throughout the space, erratically harnessed together by neon wishbones and suctioned into an irregular helix by the tips of their beaks. It is difficult to reconcile whether the singular birds have been released from the cluster, or if they are about to be grasped by the knot of bird heads and wishbones. The formation could be either accelerating or receding, the swift and easy transfer of material appears simultaneously alluring and threatening.

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<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. 9.



Figure 7: *Locus*, collage and confetti on paper, 35'' x 47,' 2008

In *Regalia*, conjoined wings stream throughout the space, suggesting a state of continual transition and transformation. Transactions between wings, wishbones, gemstones, and other forms oscillate between parasitical and symbiotic, suggesting an ominous undercurrent within the image and feeding back into the idea of mutation and contagion. Symbiosis literally means *living with*, and parasitism is a *type* of symbiotic relationship, marked by a relentless tug between benevolence and potential harm.<sup>23</sup> One could envision this relationship on a localized level, such as existing in a particular organism, or on a macro level, in terms of overarching power relationships and social structures. Whether on a micro or macro scale, the alignment of a parasite with a host typically connotes negative reactions: infection, exploitation, death. Yet this linking also suggests the urgency for survival, as well as dependency and closeness. To be symbiotic simply means for unlike organisms *to live together*: an intimate relationship in which the survival of one hinges on the survival of the other. In *Regalia*, clusters

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<sup>23</sup> Robert E. Ricklefs and Gary L. Miller. *Ecology*. (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2000). 725.

of wishbones cinch and clasp each other, embedding themselves into the other forms. The forked pieces mend the other forms together. They are akin to an impenetrable field, lined with barbs or talons. However, the sharp wishbone coils merely consist of delicate fragments of paper—each dependent on the adjoining entities for the preservation of form.

Wangechi Mutu's work also operates within Deleuze and Guattari's framework of the 'affect animal,' dismantling and reconstituting, merging human and creature, dog and woman, serpent and woman. Tracing the ceaselessly repeated incarnations of myth—Africa for 'saving;' Africa as primitive, starving, spiritual—Mutu's images retain these fetishized emblems of desire. Yet, Mutu's hybrids possess the West's contradictory perceptions of Africa—infertile and plentiful, pastoral and brutal—only to destabilize them. Her assemblages interrogate the consequences of the West's desires, symbols of the geopolitical transactions that produce destabilization and conflict. In the work *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head (Figure 8)*, flesh mutates into fur, feet are affixed to terrain. Mutu laces the figure's tribal headdress with detritus from Western capitalism, a heterogeneous assemblage of the natural and the synthetic: manicured acrylic fingernails, butterfly photographs, jewel-studded pins, collaged birds, porn, ears, leopards. These intertwined forms simultaneously appear parasitic and ornamental, infectious and integrated. Bloated by waste and excess, the hybrid human-creature appears "sterile, born of a sexual union that will not reproduce itself, but which begins over again every time, gaining that much more

ground.”<sup>24</sup> The figures display a sense of “becoming that implies multiplicity, celerity...metamorphosis, treason, the power of affect.”<sup>25</sup>



*Figure 8: Wangechi Mutu, “Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head” 2005, ink, fur, acrylic, and glitter on Mylar, 88 ¼” x 51 ¾” (detail)*

Cultural representations instruct wariness toward the process of mutation. The reproduction of dominant ideological systems necessitates the illusion of stasis, stability and continuity. In popular culture, mutation and mutability are associated with errors in replication and subsequent deviance, even monstrosity. Media representations correlate mutation with abnormality, an irregular entity that proliferates out of control. Mutation is associated with chemical, viral, and radioactive exposure: contamination, damage, and disorder. Wangechi Mutu explodes these sensitivities and fears, both feeding on and overturning

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. 241.

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. 243.

representations of the unruly black female, the diseased contaminant, and the feminine embodiment of nature in its simultaneous pull between mystique and vulgarity.

Mutu's work participates in the eroticization of the black female body only to unravel its contradictions and inadequacies. Color and pattern function as lures, provoking entrance into the work with sapphire-fingernails, bubblegum appendages, and diamond-studded brooches. In several works, Mutu mixes African-style textiles, patterns of tan, gold, and brown with glamorous jewels – hollow symbols of wealth and possession, skillfully contrasting “*National Geographic*-style depictions with hip-hop inflected porn, showing the ways in which looking, for education or prurient purposes, makes spectacles of flesh that are both incomplete and overdetermined.”<sup>26</sup> By extracting these images from their sources and recrafting her collaged hybrid figures, Mutu calls attention to our complicity in these fictionalized identities, compelling recognition towards the systems of power that produce and reinforce these representations.

In *The Presence of Myth*, Leszek Kolakowski argues that the preservation and coherence of society necessitates the transmission of myth. For Kolakowski, this entails the maintenance and confirmation of a socially constructed set of values. However, Kolakowski's analysis of myth permits variation and transformation: “the world undergoes changes by mutations and

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<sup>26</sup> Veal, *A Shady Promise*. 145.

reveals discontinuities at critical points.”<sup>27</sup> In “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” Benjamin H.D. Buchloh establishes a genealogy of artists whose works “speak publicly with hidden meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Citing Berlin Dadaists Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield, and Hannah Höch, as well as artists such as American artists Robert Rauschenberg and Martha Rosler, Buchloh argues that an image’s latent or concealed meaning can be revealed through idiosyncratic juxtapositions and incongruent relations between signifier and signified. According to Buchloh, these interventions can range from minute, subtle disruptions to explicit political agitation. In the context of a devastated post-WWII Germany, Höch states, “I want to show that what is small can also be large, and what is large small; it is only the viewpoint from which we judge it that changes, and all concepts lose their validity.”<sup>29</sup> Utilizing the emergent field of photography, Hoch demonstrates the efficacy of these erased boundaries and mutated forms.

Wangechi Mutu and Ellen Gallagher are inheritors of this aesthetic practice. Their images address the seemingly dormant ideologies contained in their source images. For Gallagher, this entails reconstructing Minimalism’s grid as “a repressive cage for feelings, secrets, urges, fantasies, sometimes implicitly

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<sup>27</sup> Leznek Kolakowski, The Presence of Myth. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art” in *ArtForum* (September, 1982), 43.

<sup>29</sup> Aliaga, Juan Vicente. “The Total Woman: On the Art of Hannah Hoch, Individuality and Gender Issues in Difficult Times” in Hannah Hoch (Madrid: Ediciones Aldeasa), 2004, 311.

erotic sometimes explicitly enslaved.” According to art critic Greg Tate, “her trademark oceans of peek-a-boo eyes could be that of holed up Middle Passage ancestors, of scaredy cat cartoon coons, or the dead-eyed carnival audiences, which attended lynchings well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>30</sup> Gallagher’s repeated marks slink and creep into the purportedly pure, interior crevices of modernism’s sublime, heroic canvases. Wangechi Mutu destabilizes and deconstructs myths associated with colonial legacies, “a genealogy of memories, histories, utterances.”<sup>31</sup> By reshaping the figures and fables that occupy her images, Mutu anticipates and develops her own myths in the face of popular and historical representations.<sup>32</sup> However, the myths extracted and refashioned by Mutu do not operate by a total dismissal or rejection of culturally encoded signs, but rather by the mutation and variation of normalized images and tropes.

Kolakowski affirms the need for myth, as something that allows us “to believe that what is past is retained—as far as values are concerned—in what endures; that facts are not merely facts, but are building blocks of a universe of values which it is possible to salvage despite the irreversible flow of events...that in the impermanence of events there is a significance which is not directly perceived; that therefore decomposition and destruction affect only the visible layer of existence.”<sup>33</sup> The works cited in this thesis stem from the top layer – they

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<sup>30</sup>Medvedow. Ellen Gallagher (Boston: DAP Publishers/ICA, 2001).12.

<sup>31</sup> Veal, A Shady Promise. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Leznek Kolakowski, The Presence of Myth. 5.

are the product of pop culture's multiplicity of competing images and representations. Yet, they are precisely selected and subsequently dissected, repeated, and inverted. These images appropriate the logic of their precedents only to disentangle their assumed meaning. They dismantle the exactitude of the classification systems of field guides and other printed material.

## CHAPTER 7

### TOWARD A PROCESS OF MUTATION

Mutation and transformation are central to my work. In *Bouillon*, the fragmented edifices and pillars function as parts of a lexicon, reconstructing the context of the original usage. Hallmarks of advanced civilization, the pillars recall temples and monuments, as well as the construction of overarching national or cultural identities. These structures reveal the transmission of power throughout history: Roman, Christian, Ottoman, Greek—each subsequent conquest delivers the converted space to its latest occupant.

The pillars and coils in *Bouillon* are lifted from posters of Ancient Pompeii. They reveal a world of precisely symmetrical interiors, decorated with gold-plated colonnades and marble walls. These source images annotate the triumphs of human achievement—harmonious, balanced proportions, linear perspective, and the notion of perfected form. Yet, removed from their sources, these forms shed their logic, extricating them from their rational, stable realm. This transformation discloses the precarious relations that exist beneath the illusion of unified, organized form.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

In the *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abject forms as entities that cannot be assimilated as definable objects. She argues that our revulsion toward abject stimuli does not emanate from a lack of cleanliness, but rather toward a disturbance of “identity, order, system.”<sup>34</sup> She writes, the *abject* is “radically excluded..it draws me to a place where meaning collapses.”<sup>35</sup> In my work, the collapse and subsequent reorientation of meaning highlights what strays beyond the system, the “dirt” and “by-products” identified by Mary Douglas. These works draw on objects that have been discarded— old paper fragments and books whose functions have been rendered obsolete by the passage of time. While Kristeva identifies abject forms as corpses, blood, pus, and fluids, these works follow her argument – they hover between recognition and misidentification.

My work further suggests that there is value in imagery that evades the systematic order. The images are loosely identifiable as figural. They are extracted from a defined source, yet determinedly outside of it. Although the forms appear collapsed and fragmented, they support and sustain each other. The images in my works suggest dependency—not as a symbol of weakness—but as a sign of collaboration, commitment, and urgency.

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<sup>34</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.) 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 9

### TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Most of the works were created on the back of old wallpaper with a variety of collaged images. Archival glue was used to affix images to the surface. Images consist of found images from old textbooks, posters, and field guides, (duplicated through color copying), as well as store-bought confetti and cut paper stock. Several works use white Rives BFK as a surface.

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PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST AT WORK

