

Two mirrored surfaces refract two disparate scenes —

One, a tool of conquest: Cloaked in invisibility, Perseus approaches the serpent-haired Medusa as she sleeps. He intercepts her deadly gaze, which turns anyone who meets it to stone, with a mirrored shield. Medusa's own defenses are used against her, petrifying the expression of horror in the moment she realizes her defeat. Her decapitated head—his trophy—becomes a talisman, an amulet.

The other, a witness to decomposition: Seeking a vicarious escape from his everyday pursuits, a young French intellectual takes a job on a fishing boat. At sea one day, his colleague points out a sardine can adrift in the waves, its metal edge catching the sun: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" On the contrary, its shimmering surface is entirely indifferent to him. The young man—Jacques Lacan—finds this joke less amusing than its teller.1

What would it mean to bracket a space between Perseus's shield and Lacan's sardine can? The former presents a moment of controlled arrest; the latter undermines the very possibility of mastery. The unstable exchange that unfolds in the gap between the two catalyzes their mutual undoing.

Rochelle Goldberg's sculptures occupy the space between two mirrors, but this *mise en abyme* doesn't simply fold two stable terms back on one another in infinite regress. Rather, it stages a mimetic relation that incorporates difference and mutation, continually unmooring the distinction between one entity and another.² Here, the gaze multiplies endlessly—"the mirror touches back."³ Boundaries are delineated and traps are set only to have their integrity perpetually undermined.

Intraction is the artist's term for this unruly set of relations: a transmutation from the French entr'acte, which designates the interval between acts—where the real action is. Spoken aloud, placed between speaker and listener, it invites misapprehension: entr'acte becomes intraction becomes interaction becomes in traction.⁴ Intractable: "hard to control or deal with."

Rectilinear steel frames in tripartite formations act as mirrors and thresholds. They test our psychological attachment to barriers by conjuring porous boundaries, shimmering veils, and glass panes that move in and out of the realm of perceptibility alongside the body's movements. These vertical steel transversals flatten, attenuate, and invert the depth of the architectural enclosure as they intersect with its seams (floor, wall, ceiling) and thresholds (doorway, window). With neither entrance nor exit, they frame but can't contain. The firm distinction between one surface and another becomes impossible to sustain, "passing through the opposite of what it approaches."5 For Goldberg, these frames operate as self-suturing cuts: in one move, they divide space and conjoin it, a form of "cutting together-apart." The cut's contact with space and matter dislocates inside and out, like the edge sliced off of a Möbius strip. They offer "a real temptation by space."7

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting
meets—nothing—renews
itself in metal or porcelain—

whither? It ends — $[...]^8$

Meanwhile, a digestive network writhes at your feet on a carpet that doubles as a dumping ground. Laid flat, the mirror quickly turns into a festering swamp.⁹ Crude oil seeps and pools with insidious viscosity. Serpents coil into vessels, receptacles, attachés, shape-shifting with every movement. They devour the carcasses of other creatures not by engulfing and expanding to contain, but by adopting their forms from within—a perverse interspecies masquerade. Crocodile maws extend from buckets of snakes. (Predator or prey?) Clusters of grapes merge with snakes and fins in oil-slick glazes suspended from barbed hooks. (Baited or bait?) Greasy coils litter the scene. (The accessories of digestion, or excretion, or both in turn?) Crude oil reservoirs bordered by glaze reflect their surroundings and become coextensive with them. Plastic liners suggest the containment of organs and the disposal of waste, but these leaky sacs hold little more than errant fiberoptic light.

Primordial life forms take up residence here as unwitting or unwanted cohabitants. Sprouting seeds undergo rapid growth under seemingly hospitable conditions, offering momentary refuge to local flora and fauna before sliding into swift decline, an afterimage of slime and decay. Others have been duped into growth by a toxic membrane steeped in crude oil, itself

compressed plant matter caught between changes of state. Unbounded parasitic proliferation leads to the double demise of the host and its dependents; the same conditions that give rise to an ecosystem lead to its inevitable undoing. Displaced snails add sticky trails to the accumulation. An encrustation of seeds mixed with glitter, or dirt, or metal filings borders seventeen inches at the base of the container—a high-water mark that continues to entice efflorescence and oxidization. Some signs of life are more conspicuous than others.

A pair of dark cavities punctuates the periphery. Surveillance apparatuses? Shallow receptacles? Concealed portals? Panoptic decoys? These Tan[s] of Cuna, sunk into opposing walls, bracket the architectural container. Their military-spec coatings – mirrored or superblack – deflect or absorb unlimited information while disclosing nothing of their own motives. Mimetic representation is blindly refused or distorted beyond recognition in an opaque feedback loop. According to the fair-weather fisherman introduced at the outset, the lure is both an enticement and a decoy. 10 While animals might lure through camouflage or feints, humans do so through a double deception: the act of deceiving by pretending to deceive ("telling a truth that [one] expects to be taken for a lie").11 Following the panoptic principle, the surveillance apparatus' impassive eye need not log information in order to operate upon the bodies it oversees. Its lie is also the truth of its function.

Intraction operates metonymically: it sets up a centrifugal chain of relations linked by the contiguous, combinatory logic of both/and (rather than the this-for-that—the suppression and substitution — of metaphor). 12 Within this structure, an absent referent is evoked through proximity and displacement. Likewise, the digestive network is a "bite that keeps biting": a cycle of cannibalistic and interspecies predation that places each constituent term in a state of perpetual accretion and decomposition, an endless process of mutual consumption and digestion. "The chains of signification leak as they link, each leak re-linking, until the succession of thought and movement accumulate as an ecstatic form," Goldberg writes. 13 The death drive and libido are held in perpetual tension here.

The interior is externalized; the exterior is internalized. The resulting forms are ontologically unreliable: an empty space becomes a transparent veil; crude oil merges with glazed clay; a waste receptacle serves as an orifice; shed skin borders on excrement; clustered grapes double as disembodied eyes; an unblinking lens might merely be a prop. Duplicity (itself never merely double) can be an act of self-defense. How to take aim, when your target cannot be located with any certainty? The desire to pin down the identity of these polymorphic forms leads down a treacherous path. After all, desire itself is always a deferral, a desire for something else - and in that sense, metonymic.14

Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation* of Saint Antony concludes with a scene of orgiastic transformation: the hermit dissolves into his environment, itself overflowing with life forms that merge with one another deliriously—

A phosphorescence gleams around the whiskers of seals and the scales of fish. Urchins



revolve like wheels, horns of Ammon uncoil like cables, oysters set their hinges creaking, polyps deploy their tentacles, jellyfish resemble balls of quivering crystal, sponges float, anemones spew water; mosses and sea-wrack have sprouted.

And all sorts of plants extend into branches, twist themselves into gimlets, elongate into points, curve round like fans. Gourds look like breasts, lianas are interlaced like snakes....

Vegetable and animal can now no longer be distinguished. Polyparies looking like sycamores have arms on their boughs. Antony thinks he sees a caterpillar between two leaves; but a butterfly takes off. He is about to step on a pebble; a grey grasshopper leaps up. Insects resembling rose-petals adorn a bush; the remains of may-flies form a snowy layer on the ground.

And then the plants become confused with the rocks.

Stones are similar to brains, stalactites to nipples, iron flower to tapestries ornate with figures.

In fragments of ice he perceives efflorescences, imprints of shrubs and shells—so that he hardly knows whether these are the imprints of the things, or the things themselves. Diamonds gleam like eyes, minerals pulsate.

Insects having lost their insides continue to eat; dried ferns recover their freshness; missing limbs grow again.

At last, he sees little globular masses, no bigger than pin-heads and garnished with hairs all round. A vibration quivers across them.¹⁵

Amidst these ecstatic dissimulations, Saint Antony, too, aspires to the condition of mere matter:

I'd like to have wings, a carapace, a rind, to breathe out smoke, wave my trunk, twist my body, divide myself up, to be inside everything, to drift away with odors, develop as plants do, flow like water, vibrate like sound, gleam like light, to curl myself up into every shape, to penetrate each atom, to get down to the depth of matter—to be matter!

In the entanglement of intraction, distinctions between living and inert, predator and prey, inside and out are cast into crisis through contact and permeation. Handmade coils imprinted with synthetic snakeskin become the alibi for a dense tangle of disparate forms: buckets, briefcases, beasts. A coiled serpent creates a reciprocal relationship of "touching-being touched": in one move, it is both the instigator of contact and its recipient. The



residue of the encounter between material and touch is significant for Goldberg: "The indentation on the surface of the ceramic material is the registration of the raw ceramic moving away from you while you are in the act of touching it.... [It] will continue to recede until you remove touch from it. The fingerprint arrives at the termination of this contact." ¹⁶

A snake's writhing body, sheathed in tenuous layers of casing, encapsulates both the emergence of form and its evacuation, its "raveling and unraveling." A shed skin peels away from the corpus, but abides as a ghost of its form—the self as other. Consumed prey continues to touch the predator from within until it is digested and integrated—the other as self. The once living, when discarded, becomes mere matter; when ingested, it is reincorporated into the animate realm. A snake eating its tail tightens the circuit of consuming-being consumed, a slippery signifier of reanimation and demise. What would it mean for vision to flip back on itself—catch up with itself—in the space between two mirrors?¹⁷

Reflecting on reversibility, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the finger of a glove turned inside out, a thin membrane at once separating and joining two cavities: "There is no need of a spectator who would be on each side. It suffices that from one side I see the wrong side of the glove that is applied to the right side, that I touch the one *through* the other." ¹⁸ He describes the self and other as two openings, each the reverse side of the other, like the spaces surrounding the finger of a glove—"a nothingness you can turn over." "There is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another —."19 The boundary between the two, however tenuous, remains intact.

But what if the material in question isn't a membrane that can be flipped inside out and outside in, like a mirror made concave and convex again, but matter that moves in a manner less easily contained: crude oil seeping, spores proliferating, minerals migrating, plant matter rotting, spills encrusting and oxidizing? With intraction, reversibility—the intersubjective act of gazing from one point of view or another—becomes permeability—the loss of a stable distinction between self and other, or self and surround. In his essay on animal mimicry in nature, Roger Caillois describes space as a "devouring force." Not only do insects evolve to resemble their environments, but, paradoxically, this tendency can lead to their demise:

The case of the Phyllia is even sadder: they browse among themselves, taking each other for real leaves, in such a way that one might accept the idea of a sort of collective masochism leading to mutual homophony, the simulation of the leaf being a provocation to cannibalism in this kind of totem feast.²⁰

Caillois analogizes animal mimicry and dissociative mental states in humans. In both cases, the ostensible subject merges with its surroundings, becoming "but one point among others [in space]."²¹

The snake-haired Medusa elicits fear and horror in part because of the threat she poses to stable categories of body and state. In the encounter with Perseus, her gaze is a weapon capable of physical transformation: *your gaze hits the side of my face*.²² But the tale of conquest doubles as an allegory of uncontainability. In Ovid's telling of the Medusa myth, Pegasus and Chrysaor spring from her decapitated body, while stray drops of her blood form the corals of the red sea and the

poisonous vipers of the Sahara.²³ The moment that her gaze meets Perseus's shield is but one in a chain of metamorphoses evading terminal arrest.

It is no accident that the French word for jellyfish is la méduse, for what creature confounds stable boundaries more thoroughly? Its translucent, lenslike body is permeated by the salt water that envelops it and gives it form. The jellyfish doesn't hunt using vision; rather, its trailing tentacles form a net that trawls passively yet ceaselessly for prey. Ingestion and excretion are mediated by the same hole in the middle of its body. One especially venomous species, Tripedalia cystophora, harnesses twenty-four eyes to achieve a 360-degree field of vision.²⁴ Marcel Broodthaers, in his poem about the shape-shifting creatures, writes:

Pas de moule Rien que le corps

Grenade sertie de sables [...]

Cristal du mépris enfin précieux, ce crachement vague, vague ²⁵

In the absence of a stable and bounded subject, the possibility of mastering vision or space dissipates. This casts into crisis some of Western culture's deepest attachments to the body: that it occupies only one place at a time; that the space it occupies is mutually exclusive with the space occupied by other bodies. (The parasite is "the exception that proves the rule.")²⁶ Anne Carson observes that the ancient Greeks fixated on boundaries as guarantors of order. "In such a society, individuals who are regarded as specially lacking in control of their own boundaries, or as



possessing special talents and opportunities for confounding the boundaries of others, evoke fear and controlling action from the rest of society."²⁷ Those who cannot contain themselves must be contained. Such anxieties most often localized around female bodies, which were feared for their perceived lack of boundaries: not only their permeability, but also their capacity to transform and deform.²⁸

In myth, woman's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of myth regularly lose their form in monstrosity. Io turns into a heifer, Kallisto becomes a bear, Medusa sprouts snakes from her head and Skylla yelping dogs from her waist, while Daphne passes into a leaf and Pasiphaë into a mechanical cow. The Graiai are three old women who make themselves repellent by sharing one human form amongst them, passing an eye and a tooth back and forth as needed. At the same time, the women of myth are notorious adaptors of the forms and boundaries of others. They repeatedly open containers which they are told not to open ... or destroy something placed in a container in their keeping.... They prove unreliable as containers themselves. 29

Agents that confound the paradigm of one-body-one-space—viruses, parasites, metamorphosing creatures—are regarded with suspicion and distrust. They are seen as sites of contagion, pollution, or sorcery. But what do they threaten through their displacements and reattachments? The ideals of order, cleanliness, legibility, and private property. To instate a border is to make power material and manifest. A cordon sanitaire (a barrier, physical or

metaphorical, erected to block the spread of pathogens or ideas considered dangerous) is an attempt to isolate, insulate, and contain. But in the space of intraction, barriers and thresholds are set up only to be crossed. Such variability and mobility are hostile to normative notions of value, which hinge on the circumscription and circulation of stable objects. Immutability eases exchange. To undermine this imperative is to resist instrumentalization, and therefore a certain form of domination.

Ever unruly, dirt has been defined as "matter out of place,"31 which raises the question: What does it mean to have a place? What happens if one cannot—or will not—contain oneself within it? Framed this way, having a place, or taking up space, then becomes explicitly political: In whose interest is "the line drawn" between inside and outside, public and private? Such questions are urgently worked through in the dense tangle of intraction. A shed snakeskin, a viscous trail of mucus, an oily fingerprint: these traces index absent bodies, overlaying them onto a space that no longer holds them. Contact initiates crisis, confounding categories and unmaking boundaries.32

As the metamorphosing women of Greek myth intimate, to slip in and out of materialization is to slip in and out of legitimation, but playing in these gaps opens up a slippery kind of agency. The invisible threat (covert gaze, microscopic pathogen, shape-shifting body) may be more sinister than the visible (sword, shield), for it ingratiates itself quietly and travels unannounced. Duplicity presents the possibility of playing both sides — or better, of rejecting the very premise of the line drawn between them. Once put into play, these duplicitous strategies may just as easily turn against you.

But you're already in knee-deep.

- 1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 95–96.
- 2. "Benjamin's insight into mimesis as the art of becoming something else, of becoming Other," writes Michael Taussig. (Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses [New York: Routledge, 1993], 19–20, 36.) The Medusa myth, too, has been understood as "metamorphosis by the mediation of mirrors" that "diminish[es] the identity of the reflected figure." (Julia M. Walker, Medusa's Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self [Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1998], 194.)
- 3. Conversation with the artist.
- 4. The term *intra-action* is Karen Barad's. See *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 5. Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Idra Novey (New York: New Directions, 2012), xi.
- 6. Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–87.
- 7. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," October 31 (Winter 1984): 27. Originally published in Minotaure 7 (1935). Taussig describes Caillois's mimesis as "a drama in which the self is but a self-diminishing point amid others." (Mimesis and Alterity, 34.)
- 8. William Carlos Williams, "The Rose Is Obsolete," in *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 2011 [1923]), 30–32. Alain Badiou's lecture "Contemporary Art Confronting the 21st Century" (Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, February 7, 2015) proposed the concept of a "cut without cutting" through Williams's poem.

- 9. Rosalind Krauss (with Yve-Alain Bois), "Horizontality," in Formless: A User's Guide (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 93–103.
- 10. Alan Sheridan, "Translator's Note," in Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), xi.
- 11. Slavoj Žižek, Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 73; Lacan, Écrits, 131.
- 12. Ibid., 167. Roman Jakobson and Moris Halle, Fundamentals of Language (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1971 [1956]), 75.
- 13. See Goldberg's text in this volume, 104.
- 14. Lacan, Écrits, 167.
- 15. Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, trans. Kitty Mrosovsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 231–32. The writings of Caillois and Taussig (op. cit.) brought this passage to my attention.
- 16. Goldberg interviewed by Elena Tavecchia, *Mousse* (March 2016).
- 17. This question is posed by Goldberg, and the preceding phrases in quotation marks are also hers. Craig Owens's description of the Medusa myth as "proto-photographic"—capturing "that split second in which vision bends back upon itself to produce its own imprint"—in the essay "The Medusa Effect, or The Specular Ruse" has been influential both to her thinking and mine. See *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 191–200.

- 18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 263.
- 19. Ibid., 264.
- 20. Phyllia are a genus of moth. Caillois, "Mimicry...," 25.
- 21. Ibid., 28.
- 22. This phrase is taken from an untitled 1981 photomontage by Barbara Kruger, wherein the stacked words flank an appropriated 1950s photograph of a female bust in plaster or stone.
- 23. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 4.770–85.
- 24. Georg Glaeser and Hannes F. Paulus, *The Evolution of the Eye* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 113.
- 25. Marcel Broodthaers, "La Méduse [The Jellyfish]," in "Selections from 'Pense-Bête 1963–64," trans. Paul Schmidt, October 42 (Autumn 1987): 28–29. This passage translates as "no mold / Nothing but body / Pomegranate set in sand / [...] / Crystal of scorn, of great price at last, gob of spit, wave, wavering."
- 26. "[A] body, as traditionally construed, can be defined in part as that which occupies a place, and more precisely, which occupies one place at a time," Samuel Weber writes. "This means both that a body cannot take place in *more* than one place at a time and that the place it 'takes' is held to be off-limits to all other bodies: two bodies cannot take or share the same place at the same time. (The case of the parasite may be cited here as the exception that proves the rule.)" Weber in "Television: Set and Screen," in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 115. As

- Craig Owens writes, the loss of mastery that a psychoanalytic understanding of the subject entails is extended into the field of representation by Lacan's theory of vision. Owens, "Posing," in *Beyond Recognition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 212.
- 27. Anne Carson, "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity," in *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 130.
- 28. Ibid., 135.
- 29. Ibid., 133-34.
- 30. This is best elaborated by Joyelle McSweeney's concept of the *necropastoral*: that which is "occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral, and ... defined by its activity, its networking, its paradoxical proliferation, its self-digestion, its eructations, its necroticness, its hunger, and its hole-making, which configures a burgeoning textual tissue defined by holes, a tissue thus as absence as it is present, and therefore not absent, not present—protoplasmic, spectral." McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2015), 3.
- 31. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004 [1966]), 50; William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (London: Longmans, Green, 1952 [1901–02]), 129; Carson, "Dirt and Desire," 143.
- 32. "Contact is crisis," writes Carson. Ibid., 130.