

## **Disturbing Bodies**

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## Band 5

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# The Body Within: On Images and Ruptures

Alena Alexandrova

## Abstract

Anhand dreier Installationen des belgischen Künstlers Lawrence Malstaf untersucht dieser Artikel zum einen wie Bilder und Körper sich gegenseitig irritieren, und zum anderen auf welche Weise die traditionelle Unterscheidung zwischen dem Körper und seiner visuellen Repräsentation in Frage gestellt werden kann. Alle drei hier im Fokus stehenden Arbeiten – *Shrink* (1995), *Sandbible* (1999) und *Madonna* (2000) – stellen die Frage nach der Repräsentation des Körpers durch die Re-Inszenierung bekannter Imagines aus dem Fundus des christlich-abendländischen Bildrepertoires. Verschiebung, Inversion und Dekonstruktion sind drei der künstlerischen Gesten, mit denen Malstaf dabei bevorzugt operiert. Aufbauend auf Theoremen von Jacques Lacan, Georges Didi-Huberman und Hans Belting werden hier Lesarten von *Sandbible* als ›Symptom‹, von *Madonna* als ›Symptom-Imago‹ und von *Shrink* als ›Gegen-Abdruck‹ vorgeschlagen.

## Introduction

Several installations by the Belgian artist Lawrence Malstaf open a space where images and bodies unsettle each other. *Shrink* (1995), *Sandbible* (1999) and *Madonna* (2000) restage images from the past in order to question what it means to re-present the body. By presenting it once again, they disturb the history of its representations. Most of Malstaf's installations are set in motion by different mechanisms, using air, light or vibrations, thus inviting the visitor to enter micro-environments which address not only the eyes, but also the other senses.

*Sandbible* consists of a book with blank pages positioned on a vibrating surface under a glass cover. The book is laid open in the middle and its hollowed pages are filled with sand. The vibrations gradually change



Abb. 1: *Sandbible*, Reproduction of pictures by courtesy of Galerie Fortlaan 17, Ghent, Belgium.



*Abb. 2: Madonna, Reproduction of pictures by courtesy of Galerie Fortlaan 17, Ghent, Belgium.*

the micro-landscapes in the sand, making the trembling book appear as if it was simultaneously writing and erasing itself.

*Madonna* is a life-size sculpture of a pregnant woman. The figure is hollow, sculpted from semi-transparent adhesive tape and illuminated from within. The sculpture consists only of a dynamic surface of multiple folds of garment wrapped around the absent pregnant body. The figure ›exhales‹ and shrinks slowly, then in sudden darkness, it is noisily re-inflated. The translucent, semi-rigid material keeps the sculpture in a vertical position without any support, yet it is still flexible enough to allow the stream of air, coming out of it, to collapse it slowly. The figure's absent face contrasts with the protruding pregnant belly, which is lit brightly leaving the head and the legs in shadow. One of the figure's hands is pointing

downwards, touching the pregnant belly, the other is raised in a greeting-like gesture. This breathing sculpture borrows a sacred figure with a long history of depictions, and at the same time it presents its radical re-interpretation, its complete inversion.

*Shrink* consists of two large, transparent plastic sheets and a device that gradually sucks the air out from between them, leaving the body (in this case the artist himself) vacuum-packed and vertically suspended.



*Abb. 3: Shrink, Reproduction of pictures by courtesy of Galerie Fortlaan 17, Ghent, Belgium.*

The transparent tube inserted between the two surfaces allows the person inside the installation to regulate the flow of air. As a result of the increasing pressure between the plastic sheets, the surface of the packed body gradually freezes into multiple micro-folds. For the duration of the performance, shown on a video screen next to the empty installation, the person inside moves slowly and changes positions, which vary from an almost embryonic position to one resembling a crucified body.

The three installations make for interesting cases, which challenge the traditional division between the body and its representation

in visual images. The couple image/body has a complex cultural history, which exceeds the boundaries of visual art, and encompasses not only other mediated forms such as theatre, but also religion and medicine, which traditionally claim (visual) mas-

tery over the body. I will argue that the installations problematise the body's status in the visual world, in the sense that it can be (and often is) considered a medium in the artistic, as well as in the religious or medical sense.

*Shrink*, for instance, presents a living body, which starts to function as a screen and invites the viewer to project other images onto it.<sup>1</sup> In this case the body presented and its image do not fully overlap; the body becomes both an image of itself and a screen, a place where other images ›happen‹. Thus, the installation disturbs viewers' traditional ideas of image, screen and medium. By setting flexible surfaces in motion and by using fluid elements such as light, sand and air, the three installations foreground the transformability of the body and simultaneously illustrate a profound ambiguity about images. Precisely because an image is irreducible to one particular meaning, it has power to both fix or even to invent the body and to disturb our fixed ideas about it.

Malstaf's pieces set in motion a set of iconographic motifs and simultaneously invert one of the oldest techniques of making images: the imprint, an image that results from a direct contact between a mediating surface and an object. In addition to that, the pieces cannot be easily categorised as one particular type of mediated image. In a broader sense they could be called works of contemporary art, but they still reside in the space between sculpture, installation and performance. The installations intervene in the history of the representations of the body to the extent that they destabilise the historical meaning of images and symbols. *Sandbible*, *Shrink* and *Madonna* resist a univocal reading, because they simultaneously present well-known motifs, their traditional association with certain meanings *and* their inversions. I suggest capturing such iconographic and technical inversions with the concept of the ›counter-motif‹. This concept cannot be reduced to a simple negation of a motif, because in order to make an inversion or an artwork, an image has to retain the motif it inverts. Similar themes and concepts that capture crucial aspects of the incessant dialogue between the image and the body are present throughout the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, which provides a point of departure for my analysis in several respects.

### »Written on the sand of flesh ...«

*Sandbible* transforms the Bible into a visual object. There are no signs, letters or sentences on its pages, only the moving sand, which gradually transforms itself. By subs-

1 Here I follow Hans Belting who argues that internal and external representations, or mental and physical images are two aspects of the same phenomenon, and that images ›do not exist by themselves [...] but happen via transmission and perception« see Belting, (2005), pp. 302–304. Similarly, Malstaf's installation is a visual object. At the same time it also functions as a screen onto which images – either seen in the past or in a broader sense mental images – can be projected.

tituting paper and text with sand, the sand-book refers to the story of Jesus who wrote in the sand.<sup>2</sup> However, the installation does not illustrate the biblical story, but presents its own version of it, as a story about writing that cannot be read because it is written on a surface that cannot retain clear traces. In a broader sense, it becomes an allegory of the impossibility to attribute one fixed meaning, or one privileged interpretation to a text. By employing the instability of sand as a medium, the work almost literally restages one of Jacques Lacan's definitions of the symptom as a »symbol written on the sand of flesh«.<sup>3</sup> He refers to the enigmatic outcome of writing on an instable medium in order to articulate the semantic ambiguity of the symptom in the sense that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is much less stable than for instance in the symbol. In the Lacanian sense the symptom »speaks« the subject, whose very flesh – the matter of his/her body – is the medium of content previously repressed, or imprisoned in the unconscious. In Lacan's phrase, the transformability of the sand stands for the transformability of the body.

Didi-Huberman, who works with this definition by Lacan, argues that the term »symptom« can capture a crucial aspect of the complex life of images when transposed from a clinical to a critical category.<sup>4</sup> As he explains, the symptom is »over-determined both synchronically (it means several things at the same time) and diachronically (it modifies itself over time)«.<sup>5</sup> It appears to interrupt the normal course of events and, accordingly, interrupts the logic of a law that resists a trivial type of observation. In that sense the symptom is the »return of the repressed«, it allows for an unconscious content to become visible, or to re-surface, to be dramatised at the surface of the body, which is the symptom's location *par excellence*. Furthermore, the symptom has a »moving, metamorphic character«, as it displaces itself on the body's surface, substituting one primary location for another.<sup>6</sup> Then the image-symptom would manifest itself as an anachronism, as an old problem that comes to trouble our present.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the symbol, the symptom does not have a univocal meaning. As Didi-Huberman puts it: »The symbol, ordinarily made to be understood, becomes *symptom* the mo-

2 As the artist himself points out, one of the associations invoked by *Sandbible* is the story of Jesus who, when asked whether a woman who sinned should be stoned to death, did not answer but wrote with his finger in the sand, John 8:1–11.

3 »A symptom here is the signifier of a signified that has been repressed from the subject's consciousness. A symbol written in the sand of flesh and on the veil of Maia, it partakes of language by the semantic ambiguity that I have already highlighted in its constitution.« Lacan, (2006), p. 234. Didi-Huberman refers to this definition in his article on the significance of the notion of symptom for understanding of Aby Warburg's project. Didi-Huberman, (2001).

4 Ibid., p. 640.

5 Ibid., p. 636.

6 Ibid., p. 630.

7 Didi-Huberman, (2000), p. 40.

ment it displaces itself and loses its primary identity, when its proliferation suffocates its signification, transgressing the limits of its proper semiotic field.»<sup>8</sup> The symptom as a critical category provides me with an alternative model to interpret the relationship between body and image. A model which differs from representation (especially in its mimetic modality), in the sense that the correspondence between the signified and the signifier is much more open and flexible, acknowledging the body itself as a medium. Furthermore, such a category opens up a possibility to explore how the three installations work with time; both with the micro-time of the living body's rhythms, and the macro-time of the history of its representations.

*Sandbible* presents a transformed and transformable Bible that distances itself from the religious text. The trembling sand-book places an emphasis on the act of reading, by actually making it impossible. Even if it was presenting a real text, the vibrations would blur it and disorient the gaze that attempts to read. In Lacan's definition, sand is a metaphor for flesh which stands for the living body. The body is a mediating surface of its own symptom; both sand and flesh resist ›writing‹ in the sense of ›leaving permanent traces‹. The *Sandbible* offers yet another reading of Lacan's phrase. It demonstrates that we can only *see* where we cannot read anymore. In that sense *Sandbible* points to Didi-Huberman's interpretation of the symptom as a visual image. It uses the Book of Books in order to demonstrate that the process of mediation is by no means simply the gesture of inscription of writing on a mediating surface. The unsettling of the Bible in *Sandbible* frames the other two pieces, which articulate a similar question by setting the body in motion. The mobile garment of *Madonna* transforms an absent body into a flaming surface. In *Shrink*, the living body is defined as a screen, which resonates with different images-signifiers and simultaneously evades being ›fixed‹ by any of them.

## On Self-Annunciation

*Madonna* is an image-edge, or an image-membrane; the ghostly presence of a figure without a face, a shell that is left by its body. The illuminated figure exhales and collapses slowly; then, in sudden darkness, it is noisily re-inflated. *Madonna* presents an absent body that rhythmically dies, and then is reanimated again. The breathing sculpture is a complete inversion of the Virgin Mary, as it literally presents her in the negative. The contrast between the darker hollow space of the absent face and the illuminated garment visually resembles a photonegative where the dark areas of the positive image appear as light. In addition to that inversion, *Madonna* conflates several iconographic

8 Didi-Huberman, (2001), p. 640

motifs. The stage of the pregnancy as well as the position of the hands strongly suggest the scene of the Visitation in spite of the absence of Mary's cousin Elisabeth, the second participant in the scene. The Annunciation is another popular scene from the Marian iconographic tradition. It typically depicts Mary reading, while the archangel Gabriel announces that she is to be the mother of the Saviour, and the Holy Ghost, usually represented as a beam of light, connects heaven and the Virgin. Malstaf's contemporary *Madonna* does not simply reproduce either the Visitation or the Annunciation scene. Rather, it fragments the first – by cutting out Elisabeth – and inverts the second – by staging *exhalation* and containing the light *within* the figure. The inversions of those motifs suspend any possibility for an unambiguous reading that would refer *Madonna* to a particular biblical scene. Not only is it a visual conflation which (quite literally) disturbs the figure of Mary by setting her in motion, but it also interferes with the way theological doctrine defines her body.

According to the Christian doctrine of incarnation, Mary is considered an uncorrupted medium for the human manifestation of God. The issue whether Christ passed through the Virgin's body as through a channel without being formed in her, or whether she indeed actively participated in the formation of that body-image with her own body, was essential for early theologians.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on her human nature, as Hans Belting points out, prevents her from acquiring a fully divine status, which would subsequently cast doubt on Christ's human aspect and, in another way, makes her resemble a pagan goddess-mother.<sup>10</sup> Her human body was considered a medium for the visible image of the invisible God. Analogously, the icon, as Marie-José Mondzain argues, is an interpretation of the incarnation, and – as a visual medium – was also defined as a virgin space for the sacred image: »Thought about the Son is thought about the image, thought about the image is thought about place and space (the icon), thought about space is thought about the bodies of women under the double sign, already broached, of virginity and materiality.«<sup>11</sup> Thierry De Duve takes the issue further in order to articulate how some traces of that doctrine still play out in twentieth century art. He points out that within a religion of incarnation, the central doctrine involves a miraculous conception:

[W]omen have been condemned to being the medium and the vehicle of incarnation [...]. They are virgins *and* mothers, bereft of their own flesh, or else they are fallen

9 Mondzain, (2000), p. 65, quotes Gregory of Nazianzus (pp. 330–390): »Whoever claims that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a canal, without having been formed in her in a way that is both human and divine, divine because it was without the activity of a man, human because it was according to the normal process of pregnancy, he too is a complete stranger to God«.

10 Belting, (2005), p. 33.

11 Mondzain, (2000), p. 66.

women. It is on the place of woman in the economy of incarnation that the status of images – and hence of art – has depended in Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

De Duve argues that even modernism did not break this pact – which is, to a great extent, negotiated between men – and translates incarnation through the formula »painting = woman«. <sup>13</sup> Thus, the relationship between the artist (genius) and the canvas, or the medium as a virginal space for his ideas remains strikingly similar to the Christian doctrine, which reduces women to muted media for the image of God.<sup>14</sup>

Malstaf's breathing *Madonna* deconstructs her religious counterpart from within. In order to perform such a gesture, however, the sculpture has to reproduce the religious model it deconstructs to some extent. It does not stand for, or represent the Virgin Mary in the proper sense of the word. In a double gesture, it makes itself similar to an image that belongs to the iconography of Mary, and simultaneously blurs that resemblance. By inverting the figure of Mary, *Madonna* becomes an intervention in the history of her representations, as well as in the history that establishes the equation between women and media. In the case of Christian doctrine, the process of mediation happens as incarnation, which requires Annunciation (the Word), speech that announces itself and affects the medium of flesh. The installation restages in reverse the moment of interaction between the materiality of the flesh and the intangibility of the spirit. In *Madonna*, however, there is no flesh to write on, and the spirit is no longer an exterior force as depicted in traditional paintings, where the Holy Spirit descends on Mary at the Annunciation. In Malstaf's version of the Annunciation, *Madonna* mirrors the impossible act of writing in the sand, presented in *Sandbible*. It is the Madonna's body that radiates light and exhales; the Word does not come *into* her. Instead, her body announces itself by the light and air it emanates. Busy with her own breathing, this Madonna is not a medium of the divine breath. Perhaps it is one of the artworks that are, in De Duve's words, »incarnate images«, but one that is not born from the breath of a God and a virgin's womb. In that sense *Madonna* ruptures the sign of equality between women and media, suggesting another definition of materiality, namely one where flesh is no longer affected by a master-signifier and has a voice (and a body) of its own, a power to present itself.

Apart from being an inversion of the Annunciation scene, which problematises the notion of medium as associated with the idea of the incarnation, *Madonna* is a material,

12 De Duve, (2006), p. 661.

13 De Duve, (2001), p. 249.

14 De Duve quotes Kandinsky, who writes about his shift to abstraction »This is how I've learned to fight with the canvas, to get to know it like a being resisting my desire, and subjecting it to this desire by violence. At first, it stands there like a pure, chaste maiden, with clear gaze and heavenly joy – this pure canvas that is itself as beautiful as a picture.« In: *Ibid.*, p. 249; the original reference is to: Kandinsky, pp. 372–373.

or as I argue further, a technical inversion. It presents the Madonna in the negative, but not as an iconoclastic negation, as it does not strike against or break the image of Mary. A more adequate interpretative model of this inversion performed by *Madonna* would be photography. A photograph and the breathing sculpture are similar in the sense that they are indexical images, or images that involve direct contact between an object and a mediating surface. *Madonna* is of course only allegedly a cast of an existing sculpture, because it conflates different motifs, which in properly religious images are normally represented separately. But as in the photonegative, it fully retains the image it inverts. Perhaps the central element that renders *Madonna* and the medium of photography similar is the role of light. The negative figure filled with light corresponds to the photographic image, which is itself a result of ›writing with light‹. By pointing to the technical condition of a medium, which is usually associated with truthful rendering of the world, *Madonna* also ›thinks‹, in the sense Louis Marin invests in the term: what an image *is*, contemplates its own conditions.<sup>15</sup> The figure radiates light, which not only stands for the Holy Spirit as in religious images, but also is, as Marin points out: »the transcendental condition of all visibility, the invisible condition of all the visible.«<sup>16</sup> Light in painting is a point of rupture in representation, since it does not represent, does not stand for anything else but is the condition of both creation and perception of the image. The luminous *Madonna* that radiates, instead of being penetrated by divine light, is in that sense no longer a medium, a sensitive surface that receives the touch of God, but an image itself because it literally contains the condition of its own visibility – light. There is no *external* (in other words transcendent, divine) source of light, that source is displaced and located *in* the body.

## Image-Membrane

*Madonna* presents itself as a cast of a supposedly existing sculpture of the Virgin Mary. It is a »positive« image as a form seen from outside, but at the same time, the light inside the sculpture renders her body in the negative: as stated above, it visually resembles a photo-negative. In that sense, I argue that it can be seen as an inverted imprint or a technical inversion. The imprint is of one of the oldest techniques of producing images and it is considered to be especially authentic, since it is the result of the direct contact between a mediating surface and the ›represented‹ object. It is however, not

15 »A picture, a representation in painting, thinks. It conceives of itself, and the way pictures, representations in painting, have of thinking and of conceiving of themselves while representing something is to represent, to put their thinking into figures (into representation)«, Marin, p. 380.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 375.

a mimetic representation. Visually it is a constellation of stains, a negative image, or a counter-form.<sup>17</sup> The imprint is a paradoxical image in the sense that it signifies simultaneously the definite but past presence of a body and its *absence* in the moment the image is seen.

The hollow figure of *Madonna* performs a technical and iconographic inversion, which I suggest can be described using the concept of ›counter-motif‹, since it is a visually identifiable motif and simultaneously its inversion. It is clear that *Madonna* is *not* a sculpture of the Virgin Mary; at the same time it doubly *repeats* Mary in its title and shape. In this case it is impossible to separate the iconographic visual inversion from the material one. We see the Annunciation reversed, precisely because the figure is a three-dimensional negative of a Madonna. As a concept, the ›counter-motif‹ captures precisely that inseparability and the fact that the material and the purely visual aspect (if there is such a thing) of images are two sides of the same coin. In analogy to the image-imprint, which is a counter-form, I define ›counter-motif‹ as an inversion as well as a demonstration of the reversed object.<sup>18</sup> *Madonna* repeats but also reverses and re-interprets a religious figure that already has a long history of representation. At the same time, this mobile sculpture does not convey or mean any one thing – it presents us with the one *and* with its reversal without affirming either of them in an exclusionary manner.

*Madonna* is an image-membrane that performs in time and restages the complex rhythms of the female body. Being both a representation of a pregnant virgin and allegedly a cast, *Madonna* points to two technologies for reproduction, one technical and one organic. The human, or more generally, biological reproduction allows one to formulate the problem of resemblance as related to transmission of forms.<sup>19</sup> Didi-Huberman argues that it is analogous to using the imprint as a means of transmission of form, involving physical contact between two agents necessary for the production of an image or another body. *Madonna* disturbs the logic of the imprint by literalising the figure of the Virgin Mary who, according to Christian doctrine, is considered an uncorrupted vessel for the transmission of (the imprint of) God into human form.<sup>20</sup> Malstaf's hollow *Madonna* brings the moment of Annunciation to its illustrative ex-

17 For an extensive analysis of the paradigm of the image-imprint and an overview of its use in art in different periods, medicine and science see Didi-Huberman, (1997), passim.

18 Counter-form or a matrix is an object that can transmit form by impression. Ibid., p. 39.

19 Ibid., 38.

20 There is a lot to be said about the way this mechanic sculpture not only succeeds those of its predecessors that have a religious function, but also those which claim to be avant-garde art. Being allegedly cast, it reduces the role of the artist's hand in the making of the work of art. Mondzain (2004) and Didi-Huberman (1997) have pointed to the proximity between the ready-made invented by Duchamp and the imprint. Both of them are related to the deposition of the creative hand of the artist. The ready-made subverts the role of the artist as indisputable author of his (in many cases it is a ›he‹) masterpiece.

treme: it is the moment of contact between God and a human body, where the latter, however, no longer is a receptive and passive medium. It is a moving image-imprint itself, an image with its own breath, rather than the result of a unique and original ›touch‹ of a pre-existing divine entity. In other words, through the described ›counter-motif‹ this installation problematises our implicit notions of medium as a receptive mediating surface of a (transcendent) original meaning. In *Shrink* we neither have a negative resemblance, a counter-form, a dissemblance, an imprint, nor a presence of the object itself nor its presentation. *Sandbible* as an *object transformed into an image* is a site of co-presence of multiple references: the bible story of Jesus writing in the sand. The artwork repeats the bible *and* reverses it. Thus, it can be read as both an inversion of *Shrink* and as a key for its reading – or, to be more precise, a key for just one of its possible readings – while *Shrink*, in return, may suggest ways of seeing *Madonna*.

### A Symptom-Image



Abb. 4: *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa of Avila, Marble, 1645, Rome Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria.*

The enigmatic *Madonna* conflates several motifs associated with representations of Mary's life and, as a result, appears as a generalisation of her figure. Simultaneously, the overlaying of multiple motifs opens it to associations with other female characters and turns it into a transformable image – just as the trembling book in *Sandbible*, which can be seen, but cannot be read, yet offers itself to seeing. Perhaps one of the most emblematic female figures that *Madonna* resembles is Gianlorenzo Bernini's sculpture *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the saint's body is penetrated by beams of light and expressed by the complex landscape of a garment which is so dynamic that it resembles a flame. What makes these quite different female figures similar, is the combination of the strong emotion they express and the dynamic surface of their multiply folded garments.

While in Bernini's sculpture the emotion is conveyed by the expression of the face and the flaming garment, in *Madonna*, it is both her flaming dress and the rhythm of respiration, which evokes either ecstasy or overwhelming sadness. Her emotion, which ›happens‹ on and through the surface of her transformable

21 Bernini, Gian-Lorenzo (1598–1680), *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa of Avila*, Marble, 1645, Rome Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria.

body, cannot be clearly interpreted. *Madonna* also places a mobile, transformable version of a familiar image from the past in a contemporary art gallery. The figure is an ›image-symptom‹, in the critical sense of Didi-Huberman's definition of the term – a return of the repressed that troubles our present. But a symptom of what? Certainly not of the madness of the represented figure, but rather, as I would like to suggest, of the madness of images themselves. *Madonna* is a symptom that indicates a double history: a history of the image as a master signifier of the female body, and a counter-history of the shared madness of bodies and images.

In his article ›Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm‹, Didi-Huberman argues that the symptom is at the heart of the temporal, bodily and semiotic models in the work of Aby Warburg. Especially his notions of ›pathos formula‹ (Pathosformel) and ›survival‹ (Nachleben) seem to be surprisingly relevant to the contemporary works I am discussing. They were introduced by Warburg as an attempt to adequately capture the polyvalence and plasticity of images and their ›life‹, or ›force‹ or ›impersonal power‹ in a history of images that consists of ›dialectic of rhizomes, repetitions, symptoms‹.<sup>22</sup> ›Survival‹ refers to the continuity, or afterlife of images and motifs throughout different historical periods, and describes the metamorphosis of bodily gestures expressing strong emotions. ›Pathos formulae‹ ›are ways of representing moments of high passion – life in movement – in art (and life) as recognisable signs of those passions and emotions.‹<sup>23</sup> ›Survival‹ and ›pathos formulae‹ allow for the capturing of the temporal and anthropomorphic over-determination of images in Western culture. ›Pathos formulae‹ are ›the visible *symptoms* – corporeal, gestural, presented, figured – of a psychic time irreducible to the simple thread of rhetorical, sentimental, or individual turns.‹<sup>24</sup> The notions of ›survival‹ and ›pathos formulae‹ also allow for the articulation of the complex positioning of images in time, and foreground the fact that corporeal representations – apart from having specific meanings in particular contexts – always have an unreadable aspect that resists univocal interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

As a work of contemporary art, *Madonna* is indisputably situated in a different context than the one discussed by Warburg. However, *Madonna* represents a female figure, repeats motifs related to the iconography of Mary and uses air and accessories in motion. The moving garment of *Madonna* cannot be considered as a survival in

22 Didi-Huberman, (2003a), p. 284.

23 Schoell-Glas, p. 187.

24 Didi-Huberman, (2001), p. 622, my emphasis.

25 As Didi-Huberman puts it: ›When Warburg rests his eyes on a pathetic Mary Magdelene by Niccolò dell'Arca, Donatello, or Bertoldo di Giovanni, it becomes clear that gestural ›expression‹ is only symbolic in that it is first symptomatic. Here, the gestural formula ›expresses‹ solely to crystallize a moment of intensity for the female saint, which appears, above all, as a veritable rupture in the symbolic order of evangelical history. It is the moment of a contretemps in which the unbridled desire of Antique maenads is repeated in Mary Magdelene's body.‹ Ibid., p. 624.

Warburg's sense, because the sculpture does not repeat a separate gesture expressing a strong emotion. Instead, the mobile sculpture appropriates the figure of Mary; the title is an additional indication that this figure represents, or in broader sense refers to the Christian saint. I would like to suggest that the literal presence of motion (caused by air-streams) does not *repeat* a pictorial formula, but rather *points to* the mediation of motion in still images (painting and sculpture). The literal presence of air in this case differs from representation in painting where it functions as a tool to set garments or hair in motion, which in its turn is associated with the expression of strong emotion. Seen in the context of the notion of survival, the element of air which normally stands for the Holy Spirit acquires another meaning – it is a force, which passes through things and sets them in motion. Air in *Madonna* is impossible to pin down to one meaning; it is the breath of the divine, but in reverse and simultaneously, it is the force of the figure, which exhales and thus makes its own breath exterior. *Madonna's* quasi-rigid surface is a representation of a garment – not a real one – but it is set in motion by a real stream of air. The combination of these two elements foregrounds the fact that the figure displaces a religious icon, placing it in the space of the contemporary art gallery, and turns itself into a comment on the history of representation of the female body experiencing and expressing strong emotion.

Apart from pointing to the history of representation of a female body in high passion, *Madonna* can also be seen in the context of another, more recent moment in the history of images. In his *Invention of Hysteria*, Didi-Huberman analyses the dark counterpart of Warburg's project, which demonstrates the power of images to invent bodies. Jean-Martin Charcot, who was director of the Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital at the end of the nineteenth century, made use of both photography and ancient iconographic inventories to literally invent hysteria. He used real female bodies as exclusively visual media of symptoms.<sup>26</sup> The bodies of the female patients in Salpêtrière were reduced to visual objects involved in a spectacle both fascinating and confusing for the medical eye. Didi-Huberman describes the process:

Whether by recourse to hypnosis, experimentation with electric-shock therapy or through the establishment of an 'iconography', Charcot's stake remained the same: he wanted to *master the differences* of the symptom. And this was only concretely possible by making the hysterics themselves more mad, making them conform to the images that preceded them in his artistic 'iconography'. Therefore, the symptom's differences could only be mastered through the development of an historical sophism, to which was added an iconographic sophism in which real, suffering bodies were forced to

26 Didi-Huberman, (2003b).

create themselves in the image of figures collected in atlases as ›proofs‹ of a definitively established clinical *tableau*.<sup>27</sup>

The hysterical symptom was invented by taking photographs during sessions of usually staged hysterical attacks. That ›objective‹ recording was the basis of isolating repetitive patterns of body movements, which were then found to correspond closely to representations of female ›bodies in passion‹ in different periods in art. Then retrospectively, the female patients' living bodies were directed to fit to the iconography of the hysterical attack, and therefore ›prove‹ the existence of the hysterical symptom. Sigrid Schade has argued that Charcot was Warburg's predecessor in terms of interdisciplinarity, by building iconographic inventories while using (and actually manipulating) the medium of photography in the observation of the body during moments of pathos.<sup>28</sup> However, Warburg's understanding of images of female bodies was essentially different from that of Charcot. As Didi-Huberman phrases it:

For Charcot, the hysteric is a master signifier to which everything – from the represented maenad to the present patient – must be reduced. For Warburg, on the contrary, *Ninfa* remains a floating signifier traipsing from one incarnation to another without anything trying to draw her limits.<sup>29</sup>

For Charcot, madness is a negative category, an illness of the body. For Warburg, by contrast, it is a positive aspect of the image that is related to the impossibility to reduce it to one fixed meaning, and to the fact that as a living part of culture, the image always carries an unreadable surplus of meaning.

I see *Madonna* as a work of art that situates itself at that crucial juncture between images and madness, where in one part of their shared history, images are used to invent the mad body and, in another part, they remain untameable, staying complicit with the transformability of the body. If for Didi-Huberman ›hysteria‹ is a term that stands for the terrible history of fixing the body to imaginary madness, I would like to use it in the case of *Madonna* in a critical sense: as hysteria not of the body, but of the image itself. *Madonna* is a ›mad‹ image, a mechanical object performing its gesture in a reversed and repeated Annunciation. The moving sculpture conforms to its master-signifier – the Annunciation scene associated with an ›economy incarnation‹ – but only to some extent. It also exceeds it because it repeats it negatively and points to the history that fixed the body of Mary as a medium of the divine. According to

27 Didi-Huberman, (2001), p. 630.

28 Schade, passim.

29 Didi-Huberman, (2001), p. 631.

Warburg, this history is intertwined with another history of representation of the female body in passion. Malstaf's *Madonna* is mad: it simultaneously shows the Virgin of the Visitation *and* that of the Annunciation and, refusing to stop there, becomes a floating signifier with multiple incarnations.

## Shrink. A Counter-Imprint

*Shrink* is designed to hold a person between the two vertically hung plastic sheets, and in some presentations of the installation the viewers are also invited to literally go into the artwork and experience being suspended between the two surfaces. Perhaps what the central ›theme‹ offers to the gaze, is not a particular object or even the living body suspended there, but the pressure, the *radical contact* that joins the two flexible and transparent surfaces of this ›canvas‹.<sup>30</sup> The installation presents what I would like to call a ›counter-imprint‹, because the artist substitutes the real imprint – usually left on an opaque surface – with the living body that is supposed to produce it in between two transparent surfaces. The result is enigmatic: it transforms the suspended body into an image and leaves it open to many potential readings. Yet at the same time it seems to cancel any particular interpretation. Thus, *Shrink* sends the viewer's gaze to visual models that, in this cultural context, one is currently accustomed to seeing.

This installation is centred upon a technical inversion in a stronger sense than *Madonna*, since it reproduces the very constellation required to make an imprint. Didi-Huberman points out that the simple gesture of making an imprint involves direct contact between hand and matter; it is one of the oldest technical gestures in human history, or a ›technical survival‹. The contact between hand and matter connects them in a process of work, as a chain of operations.<sup>31</sup> Considered in the context of the paradigm of the image-imprint, *Shrink* performs a double substitution, namely a temporal and a material one: temporal because it reproduces the *moment of making* the imprint; material because it substitutes the opaque support with an entirely transparent and flexible surface. Instead of being presented with a trace, which normally is interpreted as evidence that ›someone was here‹ or ›something took place‹, the viewer is confronted with the presence of a body transformed into a living and breathing image. It is no longer the loss of the body, its absence that is relevant – as would be the case with a real imprint; but neither is it simply the presence of the body. In *Shrink* the person who makes the technical gesture, or touches the matter, completely overlaps with the one who *is* the matter. The tension between the transparency of the plastic sheets and

30 I am discussing the installation as a viewer, as someone who experienced it visually, that is as an image.

31 Didi-Huberman, (1997), p. 27.

the opacity of the suspended body makes the exposure of the body *as* technology possible, but it also builds this image as a living, ›pregnant‹ screen. In that sense it resonates with the pregnancy of *Madonna* and points to two technologies for reproduction, or transmission of forms: one technical (the imprint) and one organic (the pregnancy). That transparent, pregnant screen, however, cannot possibly be part of a process that would form another living body – just as *Madonna* is not pregnant; it is just a hollow sculpture filled with a stream of air. At that point *Shrink* problematises resemblance as a fundamental aspect of visual objects. We are no longer looking at a negative resemblance, a counter-form or an imprint; we are confronted neither with the presence of the object itself, nor with its presentation. Instead, the installation presents what I would call an auto-figure, a *self-forming* body, an image that creates itself.

The artist's vacuum-packed body is not presented simply as a ›body‹, as the body as such. If it were, nothing of interest, nothing of the order of the symptom would be visible. It is, instead, transformed into a screen-image, and its frame is precisely the *contact* or the *force* of the contact. The pressure of the air between the two surfaces is an invisible element that frames and/or embraces the body, pointing to visual models that belong to different cultural contexts. One could see vacuum-packed food reproduced quite literally. And if it is a human body that we see suspended there, then this image hints at the possibility of consuming a body, of giving it to death, of sacrificing it. Thus, *Shrink* strongly foregrounds the theme of the Christian sacrifice, and points to a central iconographic theme – the crucifix. I would suggest that the second theme, which becomes visible here, is a ›reversed pregnancy‹. *Shrink* reiterates the pneumatic pregnancy of *Madonna* to the extent that it, quite literally, contains a body. In this case, however, it is fully developed adult body and the plastic sheet that build a transparent ›womb‹. This reading is perhaps disputable, since a straightforward relationship to the mentioned visual models is difficult to establish. *Shrink* and *Madonna* refer to Christian iconography through inverted resemblances, or what I called ›iconographic inversions‹. Several inverted themes are simultaneously present on the surface of *Shrink*, thus creating a montage, a constellation of images seemingly removed from each other. The installation is a place where all these themes overlap, yet it simultaneously cancels out each one of them, resisting a univocal iconographic reading. Where does this play of counter-resemblances and inversions send the gaze with the emphasis *Shrink* puts on the opposition between the opacity of the body and the transparent screen support? In *Sandbible* we see a self-deconstructing book that contains sand – the sand of flesh, as Lacan would have it. *Madonna*, then, suggests a virginal womb, the place where the Word becomes flesh. This virginal womb, in turn, is made transparent in *Shrink*, and thus functions as an ›interruption‹ of one of the intriguing visual formulae in religious painting – the pregnancy of Mary as invisibility invested with divine presence.



Abb. 5: Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1484–1485, Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

iterates very old cultural constellations of meanings associated with breathing – most generally life, but also soul and spirit.<sup>32</sup> This ›inverted wind‹ turns the installation into an anachronistic object because it reiterates an old pictorial formula. In his article *The*



Abb. 6: *Birth of Venus*: detail.



Abb. 7: *Shrink*: detail.

In addition, *Shrink* exceeds the logic of the imprint because it is a moving image. The way air and breathing are used, constitute one of the major inversions or ›counter-motifs‹ in the installation. The air, which is gradually sucked out of the space between the two plastic sheets, corresponds to the exhalation that gradually collapses the figure of *Madonna*. The literal presence of air in the two installations points to its expressive potential in painting and simultaneously re-

iterates *The Imaginary Breeze: Remarks on the air of the Quattrocento* (2003), Didi-Huberman shows how figures of air or wind in the art of the Italian Renaissance became central for Warburg's understanding of the ›pathos formula‹ and ›survival.<sup>33</sup> No matter how distant in time Botticelli's paintings and the installation I am discussing are, in my view they have something in common: air.

For Warburg, air or wind is the ›fluid par excellence‹, it not only ›profoundly touches the things it passes over‹, but constitutes ›means of figuration.<sup>34</sup> As Didi-Huberman puts it: ›It is a particular movement or a trembling, a particular disturbance of surfaces, a symptom, an index of strangeness that affects a single body and, by the same token, signals itself as a *spiritus*, a bearer of thoughts and the movements of the affects.<sup>35</sup> I contend, that the expressive potential of air as the fluid force that touches and moves surfaces, makes *Shrink* and Botticelli's *Birth of*

32 Also, curiously enough, the entry on ›Aesthetics‹ in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (1998) states that: ›*Aisthesis* descends from a word meaning ›to breathe‹, an archaic metaphor or perception as pneumatic [...]. Things, as it were, breathe themselves out, we, as it were, breathe them in, and on this etymological view *aesthesis* is of a piece with life itself.« (1: 428).

33 Didi-Huberman, (2003a).

34 Ibid., p.275.

35 Ibid., p.278–279.

*Venus* resemble each other: Venus' fluid hair, painted and thus made to freeze in a still image resembles the artist's hair locked between the two plastic sheets.

The air that is gradually sucked out of the space between the two surfaces in *Shrink* functions as a means of figuration, and simultaneously as a sculpting force. The pressure of the air embraces the body not in floating folds of a garment but produces a quasi-rigid sculpture. It acts on the surface of the body, the symptomatic location *par excellence*. But does the air in this case serve as an ›index for the movements of the soul? Perhaps all these frozen folds function as a symptom of the extreme tension between a frozen, sculpted image and the pulsating life of the body. In other words, they are a symptom of the tension between the still image – as the presence of an absence –, as something that mortifies its object, and the image as a living object which presents, announces itself and no longer simply re-presents.<sup>36</sup>

*Sandbible*, *Madonna* and *Shrink* are contemporary artworks, in which the body resurfaces, once again, as an object-symptom, a disturbing body. But the installations also disturb life in images through a constellation of ›counter-motifs‹ and intervene in the history of its representations. They show how religion or art try to gain mastery over the body by fixing it in images and at the same time demonstrate that the body's great transformability eludes master signifiers. *Shrink* and *Madonna* are not representations of the body in the proper sense of the word; they do not show an *image of* the body, nor do they define it as a *medium* of another image. Instead, the two works re-interpret the idea of incarnation, which is still implicitly present in our notions of ›medium‹. They present the body in its power to create itself, and no longer as the medium of an external, invisible, divine master signifier. In other words, the installations disturb the opposition between body and soul, flesh and spirit, which is so deeply carved into Western culture. By drawing upon the history of anthropomorphic representations these installations call for another way of both imaging and imagining the body as medium of its own image, in its power to create itself.

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