

Script for Amanda Couch: *Books as Bodies* 2019, Performance-Lecture

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Introduction

Karin Littau writes in her book, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania*, that ‘apart from the human body, the book is the longest serving medium for the storage, retrieval and transmission of knowledge’. Mary Carruthers believes in the human body **as a** book, as a ‘support for cognitive memory-work or recollective work’. In Carruthers’ research on memory in Medieval culture, she explores reading which was viewed very differently than it is today. It was believed that a person had not “read” a book until they had made it a part of themselves, through the practice of memorizing. She writes, ‘memory was a sign of an ethical person, and one of humanity. It was a sign of what one did with information after receiving it’.¹ Book or text inscribed into the body.

As I have not memorised this text you may consider me not to be an ethical person?

PAUSE

Littau argues that ‘readers have a voluptuous relation to books, and in handling texts, they initiate the fantasy of touching and being touched by those people affiliated with a book’s narrative world, particularly the author or a fellow reader’.²

In *Bodies and Books: Reading and The Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*, Gillian Silverman extends these ideas, recalling Walt Whitman’s Epigraph in his 1860 collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, that whoever touches a book he has written, touches him.

PAUSE

‘This is no book

Who touches this, touches a man [...]
It is I you hold, and who holds you
I spring from the pages into your arms'.³

This recalls our Medieval ancestors' 'cor-por-real' relationship to the book, 'its experience sensuous, quite apart from issues of aesthetics. Hair and flesh sides of folios had distinct feels, [and] readers subvocalized [...] Reading was, in short, a bodily performance'.⁴

Cor-por-ral language is embedded in the description of books, its anatomy, and in its materiality. Terms such as spine, footnotes, headers, appendix, and in the case of manuscripts, - the hand, in Latin meaning *manu*, is written into its name. Then there is the vellum or parchment pages and leather covers made of actual skin.

Through this evening's performance-lecture, *Books as Bodies*, we will together explore some of these ideas through words, images, actions and materials.

PAUSE

CHAPTER ONE: SKIN, TISSUE AND THE APRON

Skin and books are inextricably linked. Our skin is our conduit to books, through the senses, the act of touching them, and materially, as books, as I just mentioned, were, and still sometimes are, made from skin: leather covers, parchment and vellum pages of the codex, rolls and scrolls.

Skin is our largest organ, belonging to the in-teg-u-mentary system. It is our main connection to the external environment and is the body's first line of defence, safeguarding immunity, protection against pathogens and excessive water loss, as well as regulating

temperature, providing insulation, enabling sensation, and the regulation and/or production of some vitamins.

According to writer Steven Connor in *The Book of Skin*, 'there is very little attention paid to the skin in early medical conceptions of the body', the primary purpose of which is a 'covering that keeps the body inviolate',⁵ i.e. 'free or safe from injury or violation'.⁶ Early modern anatomists considered the skin as a superfluous covering with little value: An obstacle, preventing knowledge of the inner truth of the body and of knowing God through the workings of the body. Hence the multiple images we have in anatomy books of the period of *é-cor-ché* or flayed bodies. Here the skin is often playfully depicted either peeled or pinned back, worn or 'lifted like an apron'⁷, hanging or torn off, or not visible at all, like in Vesalius' *Epitome* which we will discuss later.

PAUSE – COLLECT APRON AND SHOW

I have made an apron which depicts the flayed man of the 17th century engraved frontispiece for Thomas Bartholin's *Ana-to-mia Reformata*. The original is on display here. The image enlarged and printed on cotton-linen fabric has been fashioned into the form of a domestic apron, which may also bring to mind those worn by printers and bookbinders, nurses and surgeons. Here I will wear it as an extra membrane, an (α-) egis to protect myself from the messy subject of bodies and books.

PAUSE – PUT ON APRON

The historical correlation between skin and fabric is explored by art historian Mecht-hild Fend in her recent book, *Fleshing Out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650-1850*. She claims that the term 'tissue' which we recognise today to describe 'organic matter' and especially skin, is 'itself a metaphor, [...] deriving from the realm of textiles. It was introduced into the language of botany and later medicine only in the middle of the seventeenth century as advances in the technology and uses of the microscope changed the

ways in which the structure of organic substances was seen and put into words'.⁸ French anatomist Joseph-Guichard Duverney described the composition of 'the most interior part of the skin' as 'a very large number of fibres that interlace and cross all directions, and form a particularly dense tissue that is nevertheless very flexible and spongy'.⁹ Such textile metaphors paint an image of woven fabric or felt. But also point to the legacy from the time of Galen and Plato where skin was described as a 'fisherman's net', a porous material, a boundary enabling exchange, and at the same time, containing the body within.¹⁰ And of course, fabric is an integral part of the body of books themselves, the cloth lining to form and support the spine, and the Buckram or cloth laid covers, employed in mass-produced books which were common place by the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹

This frontispiece image on my apron acts as the frontispiece of this performance-lecture, which is a kind of book in itself. The etymology of the word frontispiece, as well, has its origin in the anatomy of the body, coming from the Latin *frons* meaning "forehead".

Connor recalls the appeal of 'the flayed and abstracted skin' for the ancient Greeks: an 'object of fascinated attention [...] [and] often the bearer of specific powers'. He writes, you could be made more entire, more yourself, by taking on another's skin'.¹² Wearing this apron (a-) egis, I hope to enter into another's skin, to transform through the assumption of the knowledge of this body of work, and to meaningfully share it with you this evening.

PAUSE

CHAPTER TWO: BIRTHING AMULETS

Don Skemer, curator of rare manuscripts and books at Princeton University Library argues that 'despite the overwhelming triumph of the codex, the late-antique roll format survived and prospered during the Middle Ages' [...and] 'One of the least known and rarely surviving examples was the amulet roll'.¹³ A written or textual amulet, prayer or charm, offering protection due to the power of the words used, was written, by hand, or printed on a length

of papyrus, parchment or paper. 'Their use can be traced from the age of magical **pa-pie-ri** (pa-py-ri) until the Printing Revolution'.¹⁴ 'Like private prayer, he writes, 'and relic possession, written amulets seemed to offer medieval people an active role in seeking personal protection, good fortune, and well-being'.¹⁵

Many were used by women for medical purposes. In particular, the birthing scroll, girdle or belt one of the earliest medical practices currently known was intended to protect against the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. 'Medieval women used birth girdles of sacred relics associated with powerful Christian virgins, especially the Virgin Mary'¹⁶, and St. Margaret of Antioch, as well as mother and child saints, Julietta and Qui-ri-cus **Kwi-ri-cus**.

'So powerful was [the] legend [of St. Margaret] that the mere act of reading [her] life or placing a manuscript account of it on a pregnant woman's abdomen or chest were believed to ease pain and facilitate safe childbirth'.¹⁷

There were also more magical sources which could include spells, divinations, magic words, symbols and palindromes such as the *Sator Arepo* formula. 'One requires having the woman eat certain letters along with the *sator arepo tenet opera rotas* palindrome written in cheese or butter; another specifies a string of letters to be drunk with the milk of another woman'.¹⁸

Such a charm, I performed a couple of years ago, when I was preparing for the first incarnation of this performance, and to facilitate its gestation. I incised the *sator arepo* palindrome into the surface of some butter, read it out a loud, spread it on to a piece of bread, before ingesting. I documented it in two images, publishing on Instagram. Today printed versions form the covers for the small pamphlet that you will have found on your seat when you first arrived, which we will be using later.

Peter Murray Jones, and Lea Olsan, in their essay *Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth, 900-1500*, argue that such a ritual was understood to be a communicative act. The term "rituals" (or "ritual acts") includes verbal charms, benedictions or blessings, as well as stipulated actions, such as eating or drinking words, and touching, wrapping, or tying

things to the body'.¹⁹

For example, the birth scroll, which 'directly referenced the belt or girdle of the Virgin's own birthing girdle, a relic that she purportedly dropped to St. Thomas at her Assumption'.²⁰

There are, I believe, three specifically names birth scrolls in the Wellcome Library's collection, one dedicated to Saints Qui-ri-cus **Kwi-ri-cus** and Julietta, and two of which refer to the life of St. Margaret. We have one of these, despite its age and fragility, on display here this evening:

EITHER:

Birth scroll containing the Life of St. Marguerite, 1485? (MS.804A)

Birth scroll with prayers and invocations to Saints Quiricus and Julitta, 1500? (MS.632)

All of these amulet rolls have inspired the making of my own birthing girdle to facilitate and support the 'safe' and 'painless' passage of this performance-lecture here this evening.

PERFORM:

UNROLL OF THE SCROLL & READ AN EXTRACT FROM THE SCROLL ABOUT ST. MARGARET

Scribed in true 21st century style from Wikipedia.

BINDING AROUND ME: Describe what is happening/or could happen - that the whole length of the roll or specific images to be laid over a woman's belly and/or to be girded about her person.

ONCE ON ME:

The creation of any new piece for me, and many artists, can often be a painful process. Admittedly, more psychological rather than physical, but also the stress and anxiety of the process always manifests as tensions in the body. But also corporeal, when the activities involve sitting at a computer researching, reading and writing, or making by leaning over a table top, kitchen surface or bending on the floor, which coupled with long hours of working

to a deadline, the neck, shoulders, upper and lower back, and digestive system amongst other parts of the body hold on to the pain and tensions throughout the process, from conception, gestation, through to birth.

This piece was no different. I was haunted by its form as well as content, desperate to find the right balance between performance and lecture, between information/text and action/object, between the personal and the universal, as well as deciding on the particular artifacts from the Wellcome library and my own work be to act as the axis or anchor for each chapter.

PAUSE

I am also wearing an amulet on my left hand. It is an apparently effective ritual for 'to speed up difficult delivery' that 'requires lines from Psalm 115 to be written on new parchment *Thou hast broken my bonds; I will offer thee a host of praise and invoke the Lord's name.*²¹ Following instructions as described by Murray Jones and Olsan, this was read over the head (which was done earlier with my one), and tied with a seal and bound to the large joint of my finger with a red silk thread.

- SHOW FINGER

Like I said, the ritual is evoked for speeding up birth. I wore the amulet when working on the preparations for the piece and to help me to finish in time. I am also wearing it this evening through the birth of this piece to aid in my time keeping, and to make sure I don't run over time.

CHAPTER THREE: RUMINATION - READING - MOUTH

In his essay, *The Existential Reader: Or Reading, Ruminating, and the Classics*, James Sloan Allen discusses Nietzsche's complaint 'that people no longer kn[o]w how to read. They may

be literate' Nietzsche's writes, but they have "unlearned most thoroughly" how to "practice reading as an art", ...[which] 'requires "something for which one has to be almost a cow and in any case *not* a modern man: *ruminatio*n'.²² Despite the abundance of the printed word in our contemporary world, Allen states that then as much as now:

'We seldom read with rumination. For this requires chewing and swallowing and chewing again, pondering and repondering the import of a statement, the resonance of a line, the associations of an image, fathoming implications, pursuing insights, following to its utmost consequences the trajectory of an idea'²³.

'Rumination' he goes on 'should induce us to search out the meanings, the implications, the consequences of words and ideas for our existence. It should prod everyone to ask, with Nietzsche: "'What really was that which we have just experienced?' and moreover: 'Who *are* we really?'"²⁴ Rumination, therefore should be a form of self-reflection.

I have been mulling over this kind of rumination, particularly considering Nietzsche's deliberations in relation to the ruminative practices of medieval reading as explored by Mary Carruthers in her book, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, arguing:

'... The medieval scholar's relationship to his texts is quite different from modern objectivity. Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers. Reading is memorized with the aid of *murmur*, mouthing the words subvocally as one turns the text over in one's memory.'²⁵

PAUSE

In the nineteenth century, social commentators warned that the dangers of too much and frenzied reading would have negative consequences on the physical health of readers, especially women.²⁶ Dr. Hugh Lenox Hodge, in his medical treatise, *On Diseases Peculiar to Women*, cautions such an overconsumption of 'novels, romances, plays,' may result in

‘undue excitation’ consequently ‘hasten[ing] the development of the nervous system and the phenomena of puberty’²⁷ and for older woman it ‘could result in accelerated maturation.’²⁸ Fast reading ‘will often break down the powers of life, and thus give rise to the whole tribe of dyspeptic and irritable disorders’ which could include an ‘irritable uterus’.²⁹

Karin Littau explores these moral associations connected to reading further in her book, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania* through the metaphors of book eating, writing of the ‘gluttonous’ consumption of the ‘tasteless’ novel, against that of ‘wholesome’ ‘nutritional’ works of literature.³⁰ Kant saw ‘thinking – whether in the form of *study* (reading books) or *reflection* (mediation and discovery) – is a scholar’s food’.³¹ And Carruthers reminds us that ‘the custom in monasteries for reading whilst eating is an explicit literalizing of the metaphor of consuming a book as one consumes food’.³² These ideas of ingestion and digestion as a metaphor for learning is of great interest to me as a teacher and is at the heart, or rather, the stomach or belly, of how I articulate my being-in-the-world.

Jan Purnis, scholar of early modern literature recalls actual consumption of books during the French Wars of Religion.

‘When the leather had all been eaten, however, “people turned to trying parchment ‘not only white blank parchment, but also letters, title-deeds, books printed and hand written, having no difficulty in eating even those a hundred or a hundred and twenty years old.’ They were soaked, chopped, boiled for a day and a half, and then they were fricasseed like tripe, or cooked with herbs and spices”.³³

And there is the biblical example of Ezekiel eating of a scroll in order to then communicate God’s word to the people.

PAUSE

The word for tongue and language is the same in many cultures. And although in English, the words don't sound very similar, the English word for language can be traced back to its roots in the Latin for tongue, i.e. 'lingua'.

PAUSE

Remember I spoke of Michael Camille at the beginning of this piece? He wrote that for the medieval literate 'every turn of the page [was] an act of intense interpenetration one resonant with sensations, from the feel of the flesh and hair side of the parchment on one's fingertips to the lubricious labial mouthing of the words with one's throat and tongue'.³⁴ This was, in part, because reading was a cor-por-ral event, a 'bodily performance'³⁵ or as it was also once considered, like 'physical exercise'.³⁶

In ancient times, the dissemination of knowledge was oral through the public lecture, relying 'primarily on sound, dialogue and public debate'.³⁷ And in Classical Greek and Latin manuscripts, and right up to the early Christian era, written texts were employed predominantly as memory joggers or cue sheets where the reader would already know the contents. The texts were written in a continuous script when there were no spacing, separation or punctuation for taking a breath between words, and so reading out loud was essential for 'readers to comprehend a script' so one was able to 'listen where breaks might occur'.³⁸

From the eleventh century onwards reading became 'silent and visual', and 'less cor-por-real'.³⁹ No longer were words heard by the ears and explored in the architecture of the mouth; shaped, tasted or felt through murmuring and the movement of the tongue, jaw and lips.

Whilst we are not able to eat here, nor do I think we would get away with orally consuming the Wellcome library's collection, let us use our tongue to explore our own tongues and language for a moment.

Everyone should have the booklet that I mentioned earlier with the butter amulet image on the cover. Inside you will find two pages of text printed on wafer paper. I propose that we all read together out loud from these pages.

Whilst you are saying repeatedly, **lubricious labial lips mouthing medieval murmurs** try to feel the shape of it in your mouth. Observe which part the space of the mouth the tongue touches to make each sound. What shapes do your lips make? Can you feel them change or see them as they extend in front of your eyes? Does the tongue pass the threshold of the lips to the outside or stay within the space of the mouth?

lubricious labial lips mouthing medieval murmurs REPEAT, x5?

Then let us silence these texts. As they are printed on wafer paper, and are 100% edible, gluten free, kosher certified and suitable for vegetarian and vegans, made from potato starch, water, vegetable oil I hope that you all might tear one page out and orally ingest it. Dissolve this glossary on your own *glossa*, or tongues.

CHAPTER FOUR: FLAP ANATOMY & INTESTINES

BRING PILE OF ECORCHE TO THE PLACE

In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau speaks of an 'unfold[ing] of the interiority of bodies' on anatomy tables of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, bodies 'as surfaces laid out before our eyes'. He makes a direct connection between the geographic cartography of the age and anatomical mapping:

'the frenzy of knowing and the pleasure of looking reach into the darkest regions and unfold the interiority of bodies as surfaces laid out before our eyes'.⁴⁰

Such connections are beautifully illustrated in Vesalius' musculen or é-cor-**chés** figures that are depicted in living poses, seemingly voluntarily revealing the secrets of their interior.

UNPILE PAGES ON TABLE AND EXHIBIT

To accompany his famous seven-volume, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Librorum Septem* or On the Fabric/Workings of the Human Body, Vesalius' created *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Librorum Epitome*, which was intended to act as an introduction for the novice in medicine.

Vesalius viewed it as a pathway beside the highway of the much larger *Fabrica*.⁴¹ It has two parts: the first contains a written summary of the larger volume and the second is illustrations, diagrams with keys and legends. It allows two routes or journeys:

1. 'The reader may start at the beginning of the book and read through the text', 'building the body from the bones upwards to the skin'.⁴²
Or,
2. By turning the pages and unfolding the book backwards, from the male nude towards the beginning of the book, 'the reader could follow the order of dissection, with the layers of the male nude gradually being removed'.⁴³

Through the technology of the codex, the turning of pages, to reveal subsequent images, illustrates a topographical approach to learning about the body:

'leaf by leaf, the skin is removed to expose the first layer of muscles, followed in succession by progressively deeper layers until little more than the skeleton remains'.⁴⁴

Towards the end of the book one encounters a pair of sheets that allow the reader to become more active in the process of anatomical discovery, and of unfolding the 'fabric' of the body: a paper mannequin, consisting of a full-page sized 'figure of blood vessels surrounded by images of individual organs and some veins [... which] were to be cut out, glued together and pasted onto a base figure of arteries and veins, to make a layered manikin'.⁴⁵

Through this 'flap anatomy' the reader is able to engage in their own act of dissection in the cutting of the organs and veins from the skin of the page: (the etymology of dissection coming from the Latin *dissecare* to "cut in pieces", from dis- "apart" and *secare* "to cut"⁴⁶). Once glued the internal organs, capillary systems, and bones can be peeled back to peek at 'nature's secrets' contained within the interior body.⁴⁷

In such technology Vesalius offers us knowledge about the three-dimensional body within the two-dimensional page.⁴⁸ The layers of folded paper and cut-outs, which I cut with a surgeon's scalpel on the cutting mat earlier in the studio, mirrors the act of dissection on the anatomy table in the theatre.

Flap anatomy has been used in a variety of medical text books since *Epitome* and some of its descendants are on display here this evening.

PAUSE

Today, topographical anatomy also includes the use of techniques such as X-rays, ultrasound, computed tomography (CT), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which now employ a system of topographic coordinates based on the principles of global cartography. Lines of latitude and longitudes are assigned to the surface of the human body corresponding to the Greenwich Meridian (zero longitude). Mapping the body before surgery and other clinical procedures such as biopsies enables a virtual unfolding of the interior body.⁴⁹

PAUSE

For some time, in my own bookmaking work, I have been imagining the folded book and particularly the leporello, accordion, or concertina form, as an embodiment of the digestive system. For me it connotes the diagrammatic image we have of the alimentary canal with its nine metres of twists and turns inside the abdomen.

Intestinal undulations, the folds of villi and microvilli, are also echoed in the stitches that craft a sculptural piece I made in 2014, called *Entrail Troyen*, a tubular piece of French knitting, articulated loop by loop of threads which are pieced together from a collection of salami skins and sausage casings, originally intestines themselves which evolved as concertina book of the same name.

UNFOLD / OR ALREADY UNFOLDED ON TABLE TO ZIGZAG

The word 'fibre' which references wool and knitting, aptly reflects the material origins of the piece, *Entrail Troyen*, coming from the Latin *fibra*, meaning 'a fiber, filament; entrails'. The etymology of the word 'entrail' reveals that as well as meaning the 'internal parts of animal bodies' or 'inward parts, intestines', it is also an 'entanglement', or 'fold', with the verb, to entrail, meaning 'to interweave; intertwine', and so also refers to ideas of text, writing, as well as textiles; yarns and storytelling.

So *Entrail Troyen* in both forms for me is a script: a text, as well as textile, formed from one long line composed of fragments of fibre or in the case of the concertina book, the life-size scan of the 152cm sculpture.

LIFT HORIZONTAL

In creating the image, it was important that it was not a photograph made with a single click of the camera shutter, but rather imaged on a horizontal flatbed scanner, the light of the bulb passing across the bed, and over each of its sections, like a CT scanner surveying the body. However, unlike the complex multiple imaging techniques I described earlier, my scans retained manifold imperfections; blurring, changes in hue and tone, mismatching between sections, all of which heighten its bodily, living quality, and implying questions around notions of truth and objectivity in Western science.

As sections of the original sculpture are stitched from casings of charcuterie; sausages, saucisson, chorizo, bresaola, with their diverse colours, transparencies, weights and

strengths, so the sections of each scan retain their differences, and the different pages are printed on different fibres, tones, and weights of Japanese papers; Kozo, Mitsumata, Inbe, Okawara.

GO TO BOTTOM OF BOOK

At the bottom of the book, image returns to the material body, with collaged salami skin which continue the photographic depiction line of the fibre.

TURN IT OVER

These are then threaded through the folio cover, and held with a wax seal depicting my anus, a kind of a full stop.

PAUSE

CHAPTER FIVE: SKIN & PALIMPSESTS

Finally, we will return to skin. Like I stated at the start of this piece, skin and books are intimately bound. In the past, it was the very material of an animal's skin that formed a new body, a book.

The production of parchment began around the 3rd century BC from the skins of sheep, cattle, goats, donkey, antelope, and vellum being the finest quality of parchment. And there are even examples of books made from human skin. We have an example here this evening, a 16th century text on virginity that was apparently rebound in human skin in the 19th century, by Ludovic Bouland.

PAUSE

Often the only skin that would be evident in early modern anatomical books would be the

materiality of the membranes of the pages themselves. However, as the invention of the printing press and the (development of) and widespread use of paper took off, parchment or vellum would be less part of the 'fabric' of the body of the book, leaving the leather covers and bindings as the only instance of skin present. And as the process of tanning was used in the creation of leather, these hides would lose their natural elastic qualities through the contraction of the collagen and elastin fibres, making them seem materially less skin-like.

Art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, in an essay on skin and autographic writing, categorises skin in two possible ways. He asks, 'is it "tegument," that which merely covers, or is it "dermis," that which is uncovered and sensitive".⁵⁰ I.e. is it a surface that separates, or one that is alive, able to feel and communicate?

PAUSE

In the recent book, *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey articulate skin as the latter, 'a boundary-object, and as the site of exposure [and] connectedness'.⁵¹ Gillian Silverman re-iterates this idea of connectivity through touch (and arguably skin) in the body of the book object itself. Remember 'Whitman's lines, which I spoke of in the beginning?:

'This is no book,
Who touches this, touches a man,
(Is it night? Are we here alone?)
It is I you hold, and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms'.⁵²

Silverman interprets that;

'The tactile dimension of the book (experienced both through [Whitman's] own touch and the [anticipated fantasy] touch of his reader) creates the conditions through which self and other establish a mutual "hold" on one another'.⁵³

It is the materiality of book that is the vital 'unmediated' conduit between reader and writer creating an erotic bond between the two.

Michael Camille also writes of the erotic desire of encountering the corporeality of books; marrying their bodily material reality and the many bodies (human and non-human) who have previously encountered them, disclosing;

‘When I open a medieval manuscript, and this is different from opening a printed book, I am conscious not only of the ‘manu-script’ the bodily handling of materials in production, writing, illumination, but also how in its subsequent reception, the parchment has been penetrated; how it has acquired grease-stains, thumb-marks, erasures, drops of sweat; suffered places where images have been kissed away by devout lips or holes from various eating animals. In short, humans, animals, and insects have left the imprints of countless bodies upon it. Every book is a relic of countless bodily ejaculations’.⁵⁴

PAUSE

A couple of years ago during a period of mental instability, triggered a feeling of overwhelmedness, and an inability to concentrate, I felt the need for a futile, repetitive, physical task, an action that brought me back to the body, my body, away from the turmoil of thoughts in my mind, but also to the material of the body, to skin and hair, an attempt to counter a dominance in my life of the virtual and the screen. I started sewing strands of my hair into sheets of parchment palimpsests. (The process eventually developed into a durational performance piece, *Acts of Evocation: Re-Writing Skin and Hair* which was part of a show, *Housework/Artwork* in a bathroom in a house in Tulse Hill for the Artlicks Weekend in September 2017, and the palimpsest object is here.

HOLD UP PIECE OR PASS AROUND

Such a connection between mental illness and the skin is apt, recalling the fact that in the nineteenth century, ‘the skin began to be associated with the temper of the mind’, functioning as ‘a reserve and restorer of nervous energy’.⁵⁵

Using old indentures, legal documents where land or property is bound to bodies, the manu-scripts, or hand-writings, are scrubbed away, through an act of erasure, of washing the membrane, to create a palimpsest. Palimpsests are manuscripts made of parchment or vellum, which, through the action of scratching, scraping or washing enable the surfaces to be re-used for new writing. Layers of the past, erased, but not without leaving histories embedded and embodied in the skins. The process of washing the vellum, for me, is an act of self-care, mimicking the touch when bathing my own body. As it is submerged, the membrane is resuscitated, quickly absorbing the water, its elasticity returns, smooth and soft. As I cradle and caress it in my hands, I am summoning the *cutis*, Latin for 'living skin', from the *pellis*, the dead, flayed hide.

Piercing the wet skin, I take a needle threaded with a length of hair pulled from my hairbrush, found on the carpet, or shed on my clothes, and make a tack, and another, and another, across the 'page' until the length can be passed through the tegument no more, and so another length is thread and so on. Each is like a word, the running stitches like sentences, a manu-script, a literal hand-writing inscribed in the palimpsest.

PAUSE

As for the birthing scroll I've been wearing throughout this event, I re-used an old piece of parchment in the form of the 1871 last will and testament of a William Shrubsole of Hampstead, Middlesex. Through the act of erasure, of lovingly washing the membrane, I reflected on the life of William Shrubsole. The ink seemed to dissolve quickly in the soapy water needing little pressure from the sponge. But despite this gentle scrubbing, the evidence of a past hand will not be fully rubbed away. Even if I was able to clean the ink from **(on)** the surface what I am unable to do is wash away the impression, the imprint **within** the surface. With every stroke and application of ink, a layer of skin has been removed. The writing is true in-script-ion, in-scribed in the material. This trace of the action is ever present, changing the skin's topology and later I found, ever so slightly, affected the flow of the new hand as the nib navigates the undulations of the terrain. The body, that of the parchment/skin upon which was written the body of a life - of William Shrubsole's will - is washed away leaving a 'feint echo' of his life, and makes space for the writing of other

lives of the Saints Margaret, Julietta and Quiricus, to facilitate the successful 'giving of life' of another body, a body of work of this performance-lecture that you have all shared with me this evening.

THANK YOU

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⁴ Warwick Frese and O'Brien O'Keeffe, 1997, xiii

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¹⁷ Skemer, 2001: 201

¹⁸ Murray Jones and Olsan, 2015: 408

¹⁹ Murray Jones and Olsan, 2015: 408

²⁰ Murray Jones and Olsan, 2015: 427, (footnote: 60)

²¹ *"dirupisti vincula mea tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis et nomen domini invocabo"*
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