SKIN, TEXT, AND CORPOREALITY: MARY BETH HEFFERNAN'S PHOTOGRAPHY AND INSTALLATIONS

TEXT / JENNIE KLEIN

> Civilization carves meanings onto and out of bodies; it does not, as it professes, "enlighten the masses" by reason and education but instead ensures its cohesion through coercion and cruelty. ...Inscriptions mark the surface of the body, dividing it into zones of intensified or de-intensified sensation, spreading a libidinal concentration unevenly over the written-and-erotic living surface.
>
> —Elizabeth Grosz[1]

Mary Beth Heffernan's photography and installations contemplate the inscriptions that mark the body to render it coherent. For the past twelve years, she has been fascinated by language's ability to construct the body and by flesh that resists assimilation into recognizable categories of meaning. As such, Heffernan has explored what it means to be embodied, to negotiate a coherent identity.

Heffernan first began to examine these issues in the photographic series *Becoming*, 1993-1994. Intrigued by Judith Butler's ideas regarding the work/performance necessary to embody heteronormative bodies and by Thomas Laqueur's historical examination of the difference between sex and gender, Heffernan set out to construct bodies that would be provisionally human in spite of their manifest fleshiness.[2] These photographs showed a series of ambiguous, hermaphrodite genital-like sculptures surgically constructed out of turkey skin and viscera, which Heffernan then photographed with a 4 X 5 view camera. *Becoming*'s detailed images adopt a five-by-seven-inch format identical to nineteenth-century medical photographs, which were often produced as cabinet cards. The result is a group of profoundly disturbing—yet aesthetically exquisite—images that might be the enfleshment of Cal/Callie's genitals in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*.[3] Like the cabinet cards upon which they were modeled, the photographs in *Becoming* are small precious objects, fetishes to be collected or perhaps exchanged.

In *Replete*, 1995-1999, Heffernan enlarged her images of meat and skin to twenty by twenty-four inches. Influenced by mid-eighteenth-century Scottish anatomist William Hunter's medical engravings of the gravid uterus, Heffernan's series of twenty photographs replicates the format of Hunter's dissections/engravings of a pregnant corpse. In *Replete*, the photographed meat/skin sculptures invoke the theatrical excesses of the drapery that adorns Italian Baroque religious figures. This visual reference to drapery was not coincidental—while viewing Hunter's engravings at Harvard's rare book medical library, Heffernan was both fascinated and repelled by the image of the pregnant corpse, depicted with her legs amputated at mid-thigh. In the first engravings, folds of drapery hide the truncated lower body. These disappear as the dissection progresses, revealing the amputated thighs in all of their repulsive, bloodless, anatomical detail.

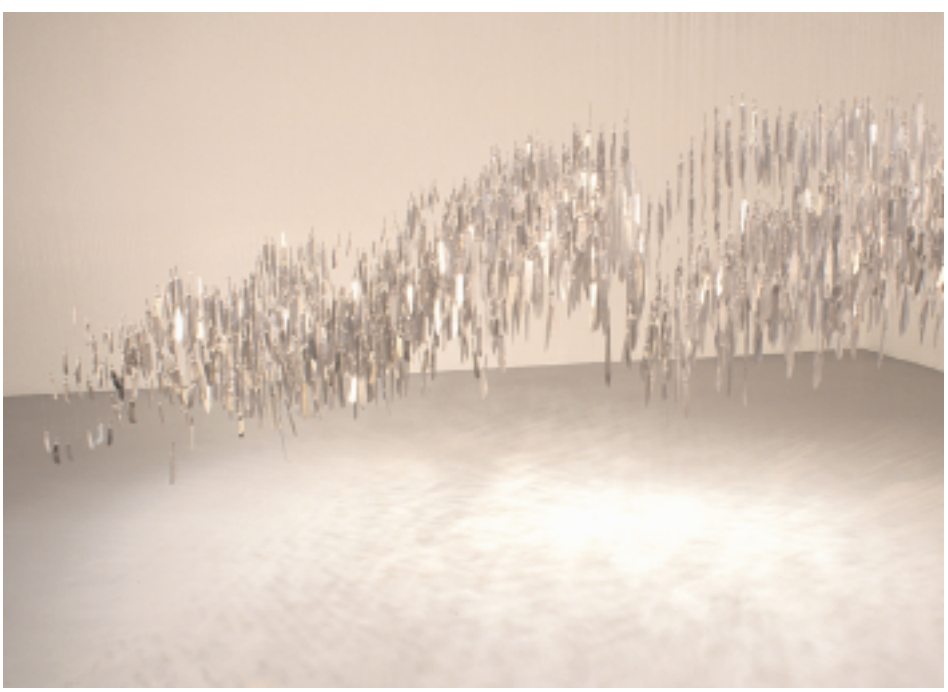
PAGE 1: **Mary Beth Heffernan**, *Owen McNamara*, 2006, offset press poster, 19 x 25 inches; ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mary Beth Heffernan, *Corpus Inductum No. 4*, 2001, gelatin silver print, meat and skin, 20 x 24 inches; Mary Beth Heffernan, *Corpus Inductum No. 6*, 2001, gelatin silver print, meat and skin, 20 x 24 inches; Mary Beth Heffernan, *Corpus Inductum No. 7*, 2001, gelatin silver print, meat and skin, 20 x 24 inches (all images courtesy of the artist)

Taking the drapery as her point of departure, Heffernan merged skin and fabric in a Baroque fervor that is simultaneously theatrical and grotesque. In *Replete*, Heffernan suggests the relationship between the medieval, ecstatic religious gaze and modern medical scrutiny, both of which are premised upon the idea of the mystery revealed and rendered coherent.

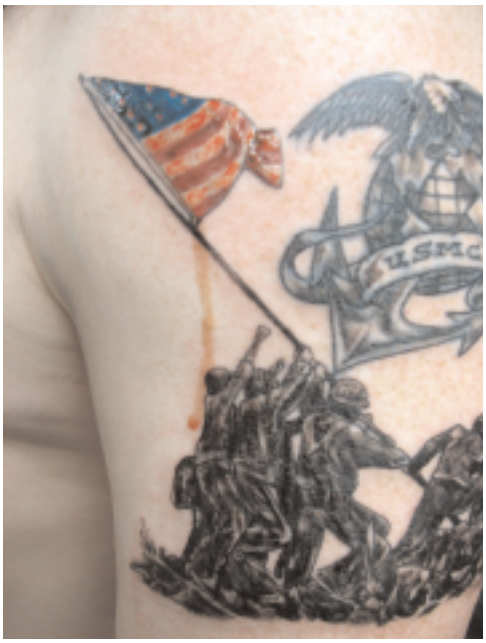
Raised in a devout Catholic family, Heffernan had always been perplexed by the notion that Jesus Christ was the Word made Flesh. In 1995, she produced *Band*, a group of photographs that attempts to imagine the emblem of Jewish masculinity—the cut foreskin of Jesus Christ. The details of pores and fat globules remind us that the small specimens are actual size at four by five inches, with the series' iconic "northern light"—identical to that of the *Becoming* and *Replete* series—suggesting nineteenth-century medical photographs. A synecdoche for the (missing) flesh/penis that made Christ human, these images' metaphoric and metonymic associations exceed their original religious signification. Paradoxically, this abject bit of flesh—coming as it does from Jesus Christ, who was the fleshy band connecting Judaism and Christianity—becomes a precious relic in Catholic doxology, especially in the myth of St. Catherine of Siena who is said to have taken Christ's foreskin as her wedding ring. In *Band*, Heffernan suggests that the masculine divine body is a paradox: something to be purified by cutting away, and something precious to covet.

For *Corpus Inductum*, 2001, Heffernan recreated Jesus Christ's loincloths with her signature constructions of skin and meat photographed in the style of medical photography. Puzzled by Christ's animated, excessively detailed loincloths in crucifixion paintings, Heffernan took as models Renaissance and Baroque depictions of Jesus in which the loincloths seemed to convey religious ecstasy, or corporeal tumescence.[4] *Corpus Inductum* conflates Christ's loincloths with his body, "literally creating the lamb of God out of food."[5] Printed on the same scale as *Replete*, *Corpus Inductum* is shot like a pathological medical photograph, or like the eerily animated but disembodied clothing in J. Peterman catalogues. Her adoption of the Latin title was equally deliberate. *Inductum* indicates both an influential introduction *and* a cloth covering. In addition, her use of Latin in the title nods to the deliberately obfuscating language of lawyers and doctors, who use Latin to invoke something precisely while hiding its meaning from a lay audience. For Heffernan, Latin "functions fetishistically, both hiding and flagging the site of anxiety"[6]—denying, despite the turgid loincloths, the castration of Christ.

After *Corpus Inductum*, Heffernan shifted her emphasis from bodies to the instruments that act on them, while continuing to explore language and physicality, and the gap between bodies and scientific visualizing technologies. Likening words to knives, Heffernan created *Knife Name (Maiden)*, 2004, an installation where thousands of tableware knife blades shimmer in a haze of reflected light, suspended from the ceiling by transparent filaments. Heffernan's placement of these knives was not random, however. Hung in what appeared to be a topographical formation or wave, they precisely replicated an enlarged spectrograph of Heffernan speaking her maiden name. Cultural theorist Kaja Silverman has demonstrated that, in the cinema and in psychoanalysis, the stakes are very high when it comes to maintaining the fictional alignment of the female voice with the female body. The very fiction of sexual difference is in play.[7] *Knife Name (Maiden)* initially promises—then withdraws—this vocal/corporeal alignment. Science's promise to reveal all—in this case, to bring to visualization the unseen vocal utterance—is indeed seductive. As viewers, we approach *Knife Name (Maiden)* hoping to discover an essence of Heffernan's true self. Instead, the promised portrait gives way to a graph, which morphs into a dazzling cloud as thousands of tableware blades gently twist and shimmer. The domestic tool silences science's authoritative language. The accompanying video projection, *Knife Kiss*, 2004, presents a similar conundrum.[8] Once again, Heffernan brings high-tech scientific visualization techniques



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mary Beth Heffernan, detail of *Knife Name (Maiden)*, 2004, installation: tableware knives and monofilament line, 10 x 6.5 feet; Mary Beth Heffernan, *Knife Name (Maiden)*, 2004, installation: tableware knives and monofilament line, 10 x 6.5 feet



to bear on ordinary kitchen tools, transferring her cook's knife to the physics lab to capture scanning electron microscope footage of the knife's edge. Progressively zooming in on the dangerous point—an imaginary touch or kiss of the knife—the video reveals the edge to be no edge at all but a jagged mountain, or the crevices of a glacial landscape. The scientific image shows that no edge is ever clean or clearly defined. It also infers that other conventional truths about intimacy are unreliable, unknowable, or unwittingly crude.

In her most recent project *Give and Take: Some War Tokens*, 2006, executed for High Desert Test Sites, a yearly art festival curated by Andrea Zittel in Joshua Tree, California, Heffernan photographed the memorial tattoos of Marines stationed at the nearby base in Twentynine Palms. These close-up photographs, which were turned into posters and given away to visitors, initially recall the tattooed denizens of the sex-deviant underworld photographed by Catherine Opie in the late eighties and early nineties. While Heffernan's *Give and Take* images are as beautifully shot and carefully framed as Opie's work, they do not so much portray the socially dispossessed as they depict virile masculinity. These tattoos' iconography is banal to the point of being kitschy, an often-formulaic version of the soldier's battle cross—half cross, half skeleton arrangement—or dog tags bearing the names of the dead. Despite their tired reliance on religious truisms and trite sentimentality, these tattoos are nevertheless poignant as they bear witness to these soldiers' grappling with loss and making sense of death. Often taken at the moment the tattoos were finished, with the raw, injured skin of the soldier swelling, reddening, and in some cases oozing blood on the newly minted tattoo, the body appears to be drawing itself.[9] A ritual injury that is both a reenactment and a rehearsal of eventual death, the tattoos inscribe mourning, loss, and vulnerable masculinity upon the hard bodies of these young soldiers, willing sacrificial lambs of U.S. foreign policy.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 34.
2. Judith P. Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge, 1993, was published at about the same time that Heffernan started working on *Becoming*. Laqueur's book is premised upon the notion that "sex, in both the one-sex and the two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power." Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, 11.
3. Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
4. The notion of the tumescent loincloth, which serves as a synecdoche for the humanity of Christ, was first explored by Leo Steinberg in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.
5. Mary Beth Heffernan, *Corpus Inductum*, unpublished artist's statement, 2001.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, 46.
8. *Knife Kiss* was originally created as a silent video. A version of *Knife Kiss*, presented at Pasadena City College in 2004, was accompanied by a soundtrack made in collaboration with composer Bruno Loucharian. Heffernan has since returned to the original version.
9. Heffernan also took photographs of the soldiers receiving the tattoos. Many of these photographs show the soldier's face, while *Give and Take* does not.

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mary Beth Heffernan, *Jesse Markel*, 2006, offset press poster, 19 x 25 inches; Mary Beth Heffernan, *Joshua Hall*, 2006, offset press poster, 19 x 25 inches; Mary Beth Heffernan, *Ken Bates*, 2006, offset press poster, 19 x 25 inches