

‘Is there anything on me that doesn’t speak?’¹

Jenny Hval

What can a body do? This is a question I pose to the book-object. This paper argues that such an object, long considered passive and constrained by its bindings – the finished product – has the potential to move outside of these boundaries. I will explore how book-objects challenge prevailing definitions of subject and object by working performatively. Looking at the artwork and journals of Helen Chadwick alongside some of my own projects, I wish to suggest that object-things have a certain material agency. As such, I rephrase my initial question: *what can a book-body do?*

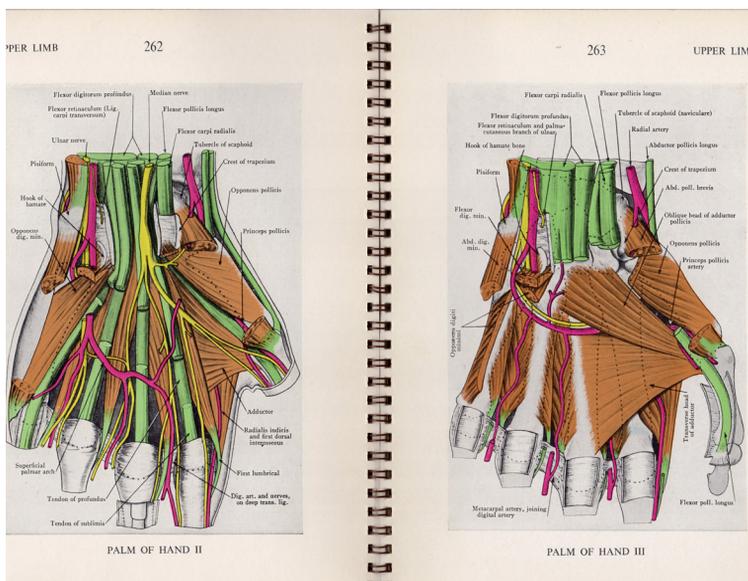
In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political theorist Jane Bennett considers the possibilities of treating molecules as ‘lively’ or ‘vibrant’. She argues that such an ontological shift in thinking releases the protocols of the ‘body’ and the ‘organism’ from its presiding biological definitions², effectively exploding its material edge. I’m stimulated by thinking of the book-body as sensate, as being part of a lively ecosystem, and how this in turn effects the ways in which we perceive objects. I am situating these ideas within New Materialism, a network of theory which reconfigures agency beyond the privileges of human subjectivity and ontology.

When the human body gesticulates in dialogue with others, or when marks are rendered on the pages of a book, we assign a cause and implication; they act as performances of an event

1. *Illustrations of Regional Anatomy (Section VI: Upper Limb)*, E. B. Jamieson, M.D., 1936

or occurrence. Both of these examples are ‘actants’, this term belongs to the French philosopher Bruno Latour, they are ‘a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things...produce effects’³. This goes beyond our understanding and meaning we attribute to objects, and the symbolism they impart – it attends to materiality. As the conduit of both inside and outside, I will be looking in the gaps between to decipher the material and gendered boundaries of the body as a book, and the book as a body.

1. The Body Undone



I want to talk about the making of boundaries and how the threshold is formed. Within my practice as an image-maker I often utilise the framework of ‘how-to’ guides, as a result, I have cultivated a large collection. My most recent being *Illustrations of Regional Anatomy*⁴ which are illustrated guides for the lectures of the anatomy teacher; Dr. E. B. Jamieson. In these guides, the body is undone into its heterogeneous parts in

order to doctrine the body-complete. You must collect all the fragments of the body in order to put it back together. There were similar diagrammatic texts in my house whilst growing up – which fascinated me and were vital in my understanding that the image of my body extended beyond its mirror-reflection. Here, the fantasy of the inside of the human body cannot be reaffirmed without being opened-up, the unfurling of the skin allows for biology to rush in.

The revelation of the many parts underneath confounded my understanding that my skin contains me. Echoing feminist theorist Donna Haraway's question in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*: 'why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?'²⁵. This disruption of the membrane marks the realisation my body does not end or begin at the skin, instead, I am an assemblage of multiple parts. Each stratum of this threshold befits a new perspective of the body – between the skin – my mirror-image is just one version of embodiment. Utilising these 'how-to' frameworks within my practice is a gesture to re-perform these productions through the making of the book. Encountering the body, as well as the book-object, is to destabilise boundaries.

2. Skin-Syntax

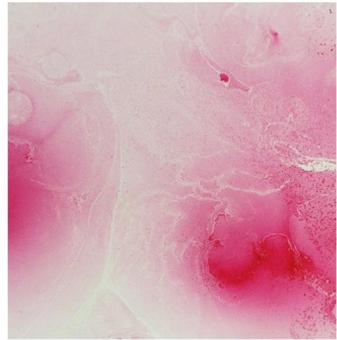
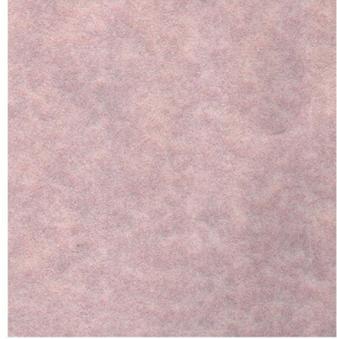
The body as assemblage coextends to the book-body. On first inspection the condition of the book is a contained and coherent vessel. Yet we can think about the many layers and parts required by the narrative or illustrative arc, as well as the material components and processes which go into its making. These assemblages provide a scaffold around which performative narratives develop. In his book *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, art historian James Elkins suggests that despite the absence of human bodies: 'we embark on a search for body metaphors – for bodily lengths, weights, colours, textures, shapes, and movements' ⁶.

Books and images, like bodies, perform an inside/outside:

a membrane. We often interchange human and nonhuman characteristics, for example, skin that is ‘paper-thin’ and commenting on a person’s spooked-demeanor as being as ‘white as a sheet’. The bookmaker’s syntax often borrows structural analogies, such as the spine of the book which allows the object to stand and withhold its form. There is an intimacy of fabric against pages – cloth, dust jackets – the book-object gets ‘dressed up’: its insides censored. There are also erotic associations, the book-body folds into itself, books perform desire. A spread in print terms are two pages together in an open book, a term which extends to the splaying of body parts, or the spreading of a virus. Like bodies, books are inhabited, lived – and indeed – reproduced. Over time papers age and become liver-spotted, spines bend with wear and collapse.

Jane Bennett’s theory of ‘vital materiality’ is applicable to the book-body. Calling for political theory to recognise the active participation of nonhuman forces in events, she establishes how a material animacy is braided throughout and across bodies – human and nonhuman – intractably connecting forms of life and nonlife. Bennett talks about things as having an inside ontological experience to outside things: which gives them ‘thing-power’. Bennett performs ‘thing-power’ by listing elements within a pile of litter she comes across one morning and how, what initially seems inert, begins to evoke a liveliness when put in relation to one another⁷. Following this, I want to unpack the ‘thing power’ surrounding the materials which make up one of my bookworks. The book cover is made up of the following materials:

- 2 x sheets of latex
- 1 x page of pink paper
- 14 x blue inked letters
- 1 x sheet of red-pink marbled paper



The latex sheet has immediate bodily connotations. Here, like the membrane, the latex is a boundary-object which negotiates the inside/outside. The blue ink, visible through the latex, brings my body back to me in the guise of blue veins swimming underneath my skin. The marble echoes the ebb and flow of bodily fluids in response. The inks seemingly bleed into the paper – a suggestion of cut flesh – whilst the porous grain of the pink paper is a fluffy-hole-tissue throng; perpetuating the narrative of the wound. Returning to the blues of my partly vitreous hand, I envision the membranous film is a pond. This threshold submerges my thoughts towards the acceptance of a whole world underneath; inside.

If you imagine encountering these materials in isolation,

there isn't anything particularly lively about them except their relationship to the handmade. However, it is *stuff* itself that holds our attention in its own right, 'as existents in their association with human meanings, habits or projects'⁸. In bookworks such as *How to Make a Body* – which this paper stems from – each paper stock is an illustrative decision, the combination of more than one enters a dialogue with one another, speaking in tongues and unfolding concealed narratives. Elkins describes this interplay as: 'to see is to be seen, and everything I see is like an eye, collecting my gaze, blinking, staring focusing and reflecting, sending my look back to me'⁹. These materials perform in response to my gaze, they read me in return. This is achieved by thinking of the book's assembled materials as sensate, the envisioning of fingers touching latex – a secondary, other, skin – and the stream of ink-fluids bring me back to the anatomy manuals: a view of the body undone.

Much of Elkins writing surrounds his proposal that 'all pictures are pictures of bodies'¹⁰. Rather than a picturing of the body, Bennett is interested in rethinking material agency, and how materials or things can be lively in their own right, regardless of our projections of selfhood onto objects. Instead, she asks what other kinds of relations and effects do materials have on each other, on humans, and on the environment? Part of the issue here, or why we treat materials as trash once their use-value has deteriorated, is that they fulfil the lifespan we give them¹¹. Whereas, in fact, materials often live beyond our human experiences of them in terms of chemical effects and how they disintegrate. We might consider how natural latex and paper begin their life cycle as 'lively' organic materials before being farmed and pulped for human consumption, in this particular case, for books. Latex – as a natural rubber – is a compound material with polymer micro particles and is another kind of assemblage. Latex is so much more than a surface or material, it's a space of production.

It's a container for a condensed history of various mechanical processes, material compounds and ascribed value. What is then interesting is how we see ourselves through this historical object. Latex, like paper, is a 'lively' material. I propose there is an animate presence already in situ when approaching materiality, the liveliness derivative from organic materials. It is in the hands of the reader the body-assemblage is unified, the book performs in response to being seen and touched by the body it encounters.

3. 'Before I was bounded, now I've begun to leak...'¹²

I have discussed the ways in which the book-object can be materially 'lively' and as an assemblage of materials can produce the image of a body. I would now like to discuss the reverse-mirror-image, the ways in which the human body transforms into the realm of a book-object. The artist Helen Chadwick worked with sculpture, photography and installation. She was known for challenging tropes surrounding perceptions of the female body politic. Her gendered representations forge a sense of ambiguity and a disquieting sexuality, in hopes of blurring the boundaries.

Chadwick's journal writings – and journals more broadly – are a synecdoche for the interactions of the body with its environment, negotiating inside/outside, personal/impersonal, private/public, drafting/reflection. Pages, like skin, are markers between interfacing states: invitation/violation, sanitation/infection, facilitation/disruption. The writerly effect of journals, in regard to a feminised body politic, is often exercised in liquid-speak. Women are habitually described in terms of fluidity in their ability to menstruate and procreative, as well as tropes surrounding emotional reserves to over-share or gush, and in contrast via their lack-of fluids, through analogies of menopause to dryness and thus sexlessness. In Chadwick's work, there is a reclaiming of female fluids, as well as a reimagining of them.

3. *The Oval Court*
(detail), Helen
Chadwick, 1986
Photographic
Credit: Edward
Woodman



In Chadwick's *The Oval Court*, the body as book is undone and rendered fluid, utilising a photocopier to spread her image. Chadwick's skin-image appears to be just under the surface of an amniotic blue pool, with water lilies in the guise of gold spheres upon the surface. In these paradisiacal assemblages, her image is dunked in decaying materials such as fruits, vegetables, and animal matter. These putrefying materials suggest contamination, as well as transgression of bodily integrity. In her journals, Chadwick queries, 'what if

dangerous fluids were to spill out, displacing logic, refuting a coherent narrative, into a landscape on the brink of I. Beyond description, beyond the symbolic, in the realm of direct sensory experience¹³. Far from the conventions of social reproduction, Chadwick recognised reproduction as a form of feminist appropriation, she writes: 'I discharge myself, time and time again'¹⁴. In place of affirming the notion of fluid as instability, this leakage signifies a new sovereignty.

This point returns me to the conveyable syntax of the book and body discussed earlier. Like the viral connotations of a 'spread', the photocopied image spreads-out, gaining traction in its multiplicities. Here the self becomes a ubiquitous fraction, no longer bounded by its corporeal form, through the photocopier the female body takes up space.

4. 'Pulse-like jumps'¹⁵

In this paper I have hoped to illustrate what the book-body can do. So much of what binds the membrane between the body and the book is the sensorial exchange through touch. It is the feeling of skin touching paper, the lively materiality of the pages' skin, that conjures bodies. The vessel of the book performs as a conduit for the self through the skin. Returning to Bennett's provocation, which is, why do we treat materials as trash once their use-value has deteriorated, I posit the following questions – what are the implications of seeing the book as sensate, or as a political agent? How does it change their value? If as established, the lifespan of these material assemblages continues to unfold past the turning of the page, in this sense, their image spreads.

Primarily, I have hoped to conjure bodies where they were absent, as well as books where bodies are present. The anatomy manuals are objects of contemplating the body-undone into a threshold object, whereas bodies are constructed in *How To Make a Body* through a system of relations. Chadwick splays the skinscapes of her journals through photocopied reproductions,

rather than exact copies, they are open possibilities. All of these images connect to the viral, none of these examples are exact replications of the body, but instead they are reproductions with a difference; they are material echoes. These examples indicate how materiality performs in response to being seen and touched by the self, the conjunction of these multiplicities moves towards the making of bodies through assemblages.

This mode of thinking endeavours to establish the realm of artists book as an ontological and posthuman field of enquiry, one that puts the body in direct lineage with the material-skin of the nonhuman body of the book, the artist book is a performance of the body. These material threads can bring us into profound contact with bodies and extends the limitations of flesh and imagined gendered embodiment. I'd like to close in celebration of 'lively' material fragments, as Chadwick does in her Soliloquy to Flesh: 'If I exist, it is as discontinuity, a transient state of inter-relations, pulse-like jumps in the illusion of things unfolding into fabricated space...pages turning in associated time'¹⁶.

