

Bioautography and Carolee Schneemann's *VULVA'S MORPHIA*

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The word of life it is my meat.

Anne Bradstreet, "The Flesh and the Spirit" (1678)

Body double

In 1997 Granary Books, a US publisher known for its lavish textualities, produced thirty-five copies of Carolee Schneemann's *VULVA'S MORPHIA*.ⁱ At the library rare books room where I first encounter it, *VULVA'S MORPHIA* arrives in a large grey box, a plexiglass slipcase 9 1/8" wide, 11 1/2" high, and 1 3/4" deep. Inside the box, the book presents its blood-red velveteen cover, with no words or letters on the front or back. Thus the first paratext or bibliographic code is tactility and color saturation, as though you aren't handling a book so much as a blood-colored work of thick velveteen wall art or portable sculpture. The book title is embossed on the spine, and when you open the book you see and feel that its 11" by 8 1/2" inner pages are stiff, with tight fuzzy grey paper. It's as though the spine is a backbone, while the coloring and touchy density of the pages proposes the grey matter of the brain in relation to the cover's red matter of oxygenated blood and soft tissue. The book has twenty-two thick and unnumbered pages, really page-boards, whose width, rigidity, and heft compel attentive movement, not swift turning as with normative codex paper. I turn the pages as though they were stiffened vellum, and this carefulness is motivated not only by the rare books room, with its panopticon fustiness, but by the book's intensely made quality. The tactility and body colors of *VULVA'S MORPHIA* bring into physical consciousness, even over-determine, what can often be a physically unself-

conscious approach to a reading situation. A performed argument, enacted with book arts materials, precedes and prepares for the book's graphic and linguistic interiors.

One historic echo is sentimental literature, in the positive eighteenth-century sense of the "body in the mind" and "thought beating in the heart." The book's body is an argument; the book's conceptualizing is emblooded.

You open the book onto its back and spread it out before you. Especially given the book's obsessions, the inner title page is legible as labia minora, with the inner folds coming after text body and page lips have been opened. The first softly grained photographic image (see Figure 1) features three fingers spreading a vulva, labia majora and minora illuminated in blue light. The credit at the end of the book calls this image "Saw over want," a "self-shot" from 1982, and the text underneath this first image is "VULVA READS BIOLOGY AND UNDERSTANDS SHE IS AN AMALGAM"[.] We can thus read the image in relation to text that posits VULVA as an anthropomorphized, or at least personal-pronounced, organ-consciousness. The distributed cognition of the body extends and shares its wet electric thinking activity with the organ formerly known as "the house of excrement" (W. B. Yeats). In Schneemann's vulvar organ-actor we might recall the modernist poet H. D. asserting that "The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important" and asking "Should we be able to think with the womb and feel with the brain?"ⁱⁱ (H. D. also calls the womb the "love-region," extending its capacities to men as well as women.) Other precursors and compatriots keep company with what Schneemann is doing here, including Yoko Ono, who, as Schneemann notes, was also performing body art in the 1960s. The reading and understanding introduced on *VULVA'S MORPHIA*'s first page eventually come to encompass artistic as well as many other behaviors—atomizing, burying, fucking, explaining, worshipping—with an

emphasis on embodied spiritual activity. In a decidedly updated version of a literature of sentiment, Schneemann writes in a 1963 entry of her notebooks, “I decided my genital was my soul.”ⁱⁱⁱ That decision is one that conditions her life works up through and beyond *VULVA’S MORPHIA*.

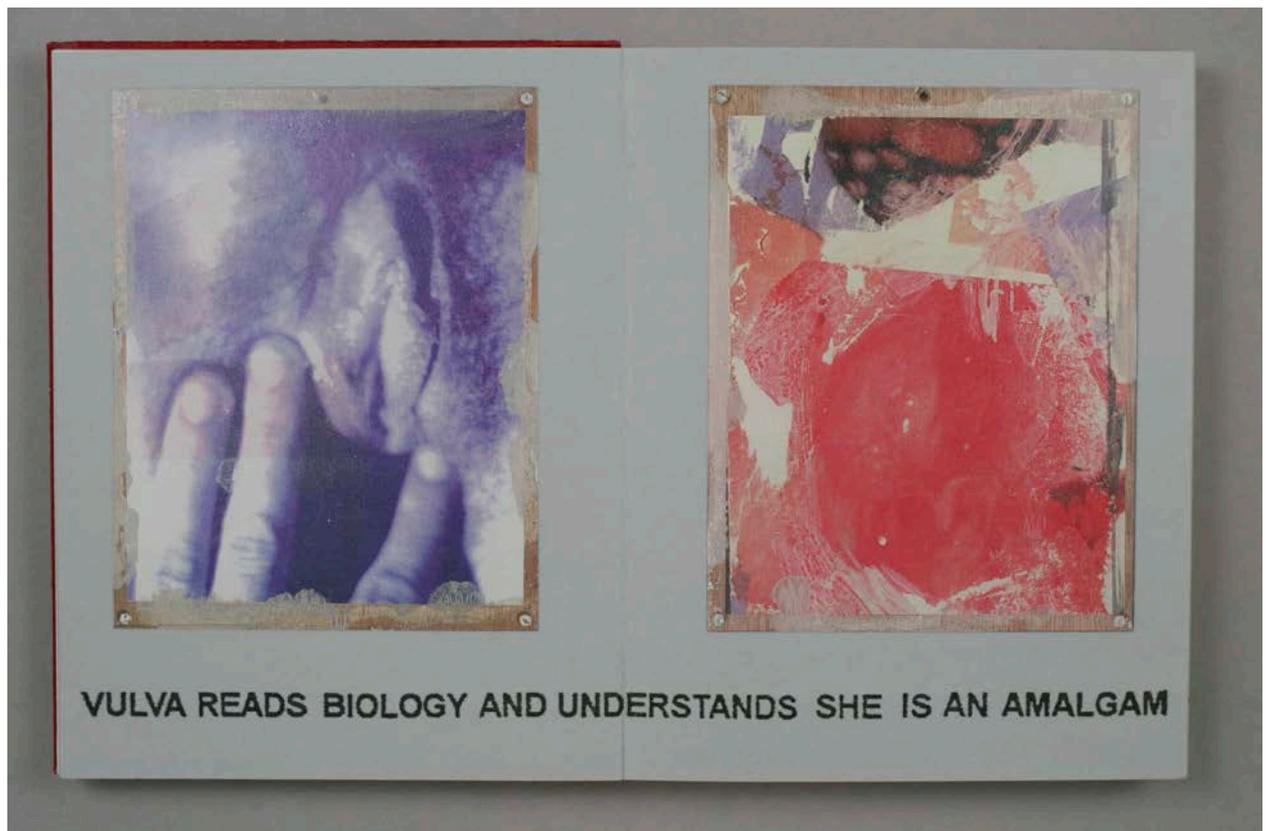


Figure 1

The self-shot nature of the vulva photograph in Figure 1 pushes this work inward toward the author, and the biologically performed and theorized self-telling aspects of *VULVA’S MORPHIA* are this essay’s main focus. Those aspects constitute Schneemann’s version of what I call *bioautography*. This critical neologism inverts the normative term “autobiography”: instead of the “self-life-writing” order of the term autobiography, the term bioautography gives primacy to the bio-life in self-

writing.^{iv} It also means to shift the syllables from their Latinate references to their morphemic quotients: bio-auto-graphy is bio-logical-/auto-matic and auto-nomic-/graphing. As term and concept, bioautography emphasizes three particular shifts: first, we move from the customarily abstracted cultural or character lessons of autobiography to the biology in “bio,” hence to the body of the living person who makes the work. Second, the term means to emphasize two valences of the prefix “auto”: the degree of non-control that obtains in autonomic systems that motivate and sustain life, and the automatic, matters of instinct, and as it were negatively the question of the will, involved in behaviors or events. This second emphasis includes not only responsive body-life and unconsciously regulated (or, for shorthand, “autonomic”) body events but also the interruption of conscious control held up as a value in so-called “automatic writing,” in which the writer makes an effort to loosen control of message and style within the writing process.

Third, and in a manner that could also be beckoned in the word autobiography, bioautography emphasizes the syllable “graph” as pointing to the plural potentialities of signage. Signage includes visual images with and without, as and not as, visual words. It also includes the signs of the body of words, the letters and other marks within layouts (lines, sentences, and more) that correspond and conjure with literate comprehension. Operating within a fundamentally written area—which is the primary though not exclusive signage of an event we call a book—bioautography emphasizes signage, recognizing writing as one type of sign within the embodied dimensionality of life writing. In a sighted environment, words themselves are of course graphemes, visual signs. Conceptually, graphing also refers to imagining relations among parts, the lines of blueprints and meta-mathematical equations, the lines of consciousness distributed throughout the human body. Bioautography can refer also to performance

writing, even as this essay focuses on the codical framing of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*.

Bioautography, then, means body life + focus on the accessible and inaccessible self + making as graphing. As a genre swerve, it extends and differs from my earlier use of the term “autography” to describe Lyn Hejinian’s book *My Life*.^v The features of bioautography in Schneemann’s book are not entirely unique—that is not the point of my focus on this particular book—but instead are indicative of a turn in writing to viscerally specific biology of the identified self. The somato-psychic knowing and explication involved index a widespread change in imaginative languages of the body self, and here of the vulva. We know for example *The Vagina Monologs*, whose first run was in 1996, a year before Schneemann’s book; we know Schneemann’s earlier work *Interior Scroll* (1975), a performance later remediated in video versions of Schneemann standing naked on a low table, pulling a long thin text from her vaginal canal and reading it aloud, the text issuing like umbilical cord language. Indeed, a shot from *Interior Scroll*, “the Cave,” appears in *VULVA'S MORPHIA*, one of twelve photographic images of Schneemann’s anatomy among the thirty-six images of the book. The inclusion of images from earlier work within the pages of *VULVA'S MORPHIA* is an index of the mutually enfolding and cross-referential nature of Schneemann’s oeuvre and its bioautographies. The body life is both accessible and the perfect horizon of the inaccessible self, which is always interior, even—or precisely—to life writing’s investigations.

In this sense, bioautography presents a different facet of the concept of an author’s “oeuvre.” (Here “author” stands in for someone doing any artistic making, including writing and performing and videoing and more.) We might be familiar with author studies focused in knowing the created works and knowing the artist’s life in terms of serial social events and contextual connections. Knowing the author as a

body is another way to conceive the work, as a body doubling with the author's body. For example in titling her essay book *Bodies of Work* (also 1997), Kathy Acker (re)announces the self-conscious performance of an organ- and limb-level embodiment of knowing in her writing. Bioautography's body double is also another way of thinking about epistemologies of the reader, about the literal anatomy of readership, as the human reader approaches the proffered human maker's work. Reading does not incur an invasion of privacy nor, usually, a literal exchange of touch between author and reader, though bioautography adds to the potential implications of physical fetishization such as author signatures and first-hand work performance.

Such first-hand performance is an acute topic of bioautography in the digitas, whose body works are called up online by our hands on devices and perceived through our eyes and/or ears and/or overall sensoria. The urge to split the atom of digital separation—to splay the body-self and invoke the body-end-user—pertains to many digital body-telling works, from Teresa Wennberg's *Brainsongs: Welcome to My Brain* (2001) to Choy Ka Fai's more socially distributed *Prospectus for a Future Body* (2011). These latter examples lack the visceral self-intimacy of Schneemann's work, an intimacy we see increasingly in online image-texts such as Laura Mullen's videographic self-tellings. Still, you cannot render a digital version of a work like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) with real bodies performing in real time, and the simulacra nature of digital platforms is far from handling the hard-to-find artist's book of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*. But Schneemann's images are online too, and the *idea* of the body interpenetrates with its actual fluids and tactility. The difference is one of degree in a map that is always both body and idea.

In other words bioautography emphasizes the body of the person writing herself even as it, conversely, reminds us that the personal body is always *conceptual*.

Consider the second image of *VULVA'S MORPHIA* (also in Figure 1), a recto image that appears quite abstract compared to the verisimilitude of the opening vulvar self-shot. This second image's visual abstract presents a red patch with white swirls around it: the painted-over-collage effect above it looks a bit like paper and dermis tissue. Perhaps paradoxically, the book and the body arguably merge more explicitly in this second image than they do in the first. That is, in this second image the body's verisimilitude in representation and the book's textuality as fabrication are blended together in a way that challenges any notion that either is simply conceptual or simply physical. This blend is a version of the membranism that characterizes bioautography: the wet interface between artist and work, between concept and embodiment, and between work and reader. Here again, as in sentimental literature, the "body in the mind" is an emphasis that extends from an Anglo-American-Australasian culture of sensibility to possibilities for present-day body theory, with many nuanced permutations in between, in histories outside this essay's scope. My epigraph from Anne Bradstreet, for example, indexes a seventeenth-century view of split body and mind, or "Flesh and Spirit," even as I am drawn to the line of her poem that actually mashes together meat, text, and soul. A century later Friedrich Schiller's much-referenced essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Literature" (1796) indexes the split and relation between embodied (naïve) and embrained (sentimental) imaginative writing. My bioautographical reading of Schneemann's work seeks to conceptualize the crucial dimensional entropy that obtains and intertwines "between" one interface and another. To emphasize the body in the mind is still a needed counterbalance to the rational suppositions that dominate interpretations and expectations of abstract semiotics such as language. It may be that the overall cultural need to stabilize sign systems—for legal, identity, and monetary reasons—means that readings of entropy

and interface, such as bioautography, are permanently in the position of counterweights that need rearticulating.

Body triple

The dialectical implications of such interface conjure another way to perceive the bioautography of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*. An end note tells us that the second image of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*, in Figure 1, is also a photo-work by Schneemann, this one titled “Triptych—Impressed.” The image title emphasizes the visual art work and the conceptual body turned to religious art. Triptychs originated as religious, and especially medieval, visual trilogies of telling, often in central positions in church arrangements such as altars. The three folds proposed different temporal moments in a given typology, a customary, familiar, and implicitly narrated religious scene. In Schneemann’s image, the triptych has been brought into one panel. The image “impresses” a triptych relation—the telling of the body, the work, and the activation (seeing or reading *VULVA'S MORPHIA*)—into a single frame. The self and book are further melded, further inscoped in a shared membrane.

Of course, the vulva can be seen as a triptych as well: open the side doors of the labia and the central panel is revealed. Art triptychs can be seen as opening bodies, as perhaps the gold standard of surviving triptychs, Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490–1510), reminds us. Bosch’s *Garden* is enclosed within a case whose outside bears an exterior world Creation image; you open the large doors to witness the three panels “moving” left to right, shifting from innocence to experience (though ambiguous signs characterize the distinctions between those states) to hellish penetrations (less ambiguous). If we could imagine Bosch’s three panels “impressed” together, we might posit the visual consequence, and its

conceptual provocations, as similar to those posited in Schneemann's second image.

Here I am thinking of the meaning quotients of Bosch's well-known triptych in relation to Michel de Certeau's insight about "ratios of fabrication": the reading of and as artifice, the *poesis* of interpretively impenetrable surface, demanded by the mimetically irrealist energies of Bosch's *Garden*.^{vi} If the triptych is a dimensionalized work, beyond and within its boxed structure, then all the visuals can be seen as simultaneous intra-impressions, commenting with each other. In Bosch's case an impress of all three panels might mean the panel of pinkish innocence would meet its oils with the central panel of circulating people-ish bodies, both in turn blending together with the dark skewerings of the hellish right panel. Put it together—close the panel doors—and it makes a blended world. This is the kind of thing I mean when thinking of Schneemann's triptych as coextensive with its embedded alternatives.

In other words, Schneemann's images work like book-bound biological sculpture whose accompanying language renders their import culturally clear though not denotationally circumscribed. You could say it works the other way around, too; maybe the images are what we want to call additional, but the intensity of its book arts and visual arts can make the verbal language of *VULVA'S MORPHIA* seem at times superadded. (This essay's Appendix quotes the 151 words that constitute the main text of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*.) Compared with the semiotic multi-dimensionality of the book's images and artist book rarity, its language can seem informational and anchoring, only lightly determining how we might interpret the visuals and haptics. As with the title of the photo-work "Triptych—Impressed," the words encourage us toward a conceptual or even neo-ekphrastic reading of the body images.

At the same time, the physicality of the words is in resistant relation with some customarily abstract expectations readers can bring to verbal semantics. In

VULVA'S MORPHIA, the running text underneath each image is printed in all caps. The font is an impressed and richly black text with edge tremor. It looks like blown-up newspaper or typewriter font. The words have an inset quality like black inky canyons you can feel when you run your fingers across and into the typeface. This is “inner” text, impressed into and pushed below the page surface, text that is immensely touchable, all of which is another stylized expression of the condition of inwardness of VULVA and her book. The layering of image, image title, principal running text, and book art form structure a dimensional enactment, language plus embodiment, as this essay has already suggested. In the case of the “impressed” typeface, its tactility reminds us exteroceptively of the embodied practices of people of the book, from the touched-smooth surfaces of the lower parts of the Wailing Wall to the effaced images of holy personages in books touched thousands of devout times to the chiseled stone of inset words in grave markers, replicated in turn in the US Vietnam Memorial names made into inner text. The touch of text is critical to its processing, another counterweight to its presumptive abstract investiture.

VULVA's overt character reading underscores this situation in a negative perspective. The autonomic aspect of bioautography is emphasized, for example, in the book's first sentence, printed across three pages: “VULVA READS BIOLOGY AND UNDERSTANDS SHE IS AN AMALGAM / OF PROTEINS AND OXYTOCIN HORMONES WHICH GOVERN ALL / HER DESIRES....” (ellipses in text). This opening sentence is both true and not true, in the Nietzschean sense, given the combination of “reading” with “hormones.” The interaction of reading, an acquired artifice of cultural transaction, is blended with the experience of being infused with hormones like oxytocin. Reading and being infused with hormones are made explicitly co-equal; the artificial and the natural are perfused together, therefore

not “all her desires” can be governed by the autonomic or unconsciously regulated.

The import of the language here allows us to see the slippage or deferral of its communication and pushes us toward reading other parts of the text for life meaning and work import. The language indicates a frame that also and simultaneously slips.

The arguments I’m making here about the overall perfusion of body and mind, bio-life with abstract concept, text as image and image as text, take a different direction from Donna Haraway’s assertion of a non-identity between the genetic apparatus of “the human” being and the accompanying genetic apparatus “not human” that is within the same human body. Haraway writes:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90% of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company of these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.^{vii}

The final sentence makes the best fit with the emphases of bioautography, which would want to query Haraway’s description of a “I” split from resident others. “I” is not restrictively equivalent to human genomes any more than one’s experience of an object-event is separable from all other describable aspects of that object-event. With its corrective swerves towards a notion of the body fully in mind, the concept of bioautography includes these elements together. The autonomic is that which exceeds in relation with genetic expression or putative semantic will. In this way a connection between the fabrications of the emblooded body and the fabrications of semiotic

excess in language can be seen as functioning, in part, autonomically. Body triple adds to bioautography's body double (body of author + body of work) the infinite body of otherness we can associate with what Schneemann calls her genital soul. The conceptual connectivity of infinite interpretive potentiality is (also always already) physical. Body triple's dialectic is within a circle that performs semiotically the interconnection of the living bioautographical author with the body, signs, and contexts that all co-make her work.

Body tropological

The *MORPHIA* of Schneemann's book title beckons us to consider forgetfulness, what is forgotten by VULVA, as well as the active agent, the drug ("morphine") of VULVA. VULVA's drug is desire, and it is also the relation of thinking and desire to sight. The artifice combinations of life presented as VULVA's experience exceed the biological apparatus of a vulva, which has no literal eyes to read. No eyes, that is, unless she operates with and as a new semiotics: in Schneemann's book, VULVA becomes language and reads, interacting the biological with the cultural, interacting the autonomic—or the unconsciously regulated machinations of our bodies—with the willful. The word morphia has also the word "morph" within it, and the morphing from one form to another is part of the desire-drug indicated by the book's title.

VULVA's morphia is to exceed the physical body by not operating within its normative biological constraints. Rather than the threat of the female anatomy in the folklore images of *vagina dentata*, we have the anatomically active morphing into *vagina oculus*, vagina with eyes, a blend of the gazed-upon with the empowered gaze.

This sighted vagina partakes of an old comparative: we see it for example as a culminant observation in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," when the summary

of Alisoun's relatively empowering experiences includes the line "And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye" (line 744). In that case the nether eye is part of a skewering of the men bent on having sex with Alisoun. In *VULVA'S MORPHIA*, the seeing and reading VULVA is a more explicitly dimensionalized agent: she experiences herself in landscapes, in the flesh, and as a passive and active agent in contests for art and power. *VULVA'S MORPHIA* is full of photographs and other images that emphasize transcultural and perceivable (trans-semiotic) vulvar forms in landscapes, urban objects, abstract forms, and religious iconography. The extrusion of bioautography into psycho-geography is well indicated in the work that Schneemann does with vulvar forms. Across these gathered images, VULVA moves like a trans-self between concept and apparition in the vulvar morphings of Schneemann's book.

Perhaps especially given the contortions involved in these kinds of conceptually anatomical morphings, we also want to consider pain, and *MORPHIA* as the drug that dulls pain. This is the kind of pain theorized by writers such as Elaine Scarry (in *The Body in Pain*), J. G. Ballard (in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and other works), and Kathy Acker (in most of her novels). How is VULVA pained? As a consequence of her cultural position, Schneemann's book proposes, and it is a position entirely stitched in with the physical position she occupies. One bioautographical image shows a treated photo of Schneemann as a naked toddler in a swim tub, a photo that was (according to Accreditation #30 in the end pages) scissored by the ten- or eleven-year-old Schneemann, who cut off the bottom half of the photo in what was presumably a fit of self-conscious shame. The adult Schneemann, the composer of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*, restores the image in and as art (see Figure 2). The genital and leg area is drawn back in, with coloration both arcane and artful. It's arcane because we can see the drawn-in portion in terms of its photo-

coloration, used especially in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to intensify photographic information, to make photographs look more fruity and lively, to artificially import so-called “natural” color into black and white photographs. It’s artful because here the coloration combines so-called natural color (green for grass) with highly symbolic color (red for the extirpated then restored lower half of the young child’s body).

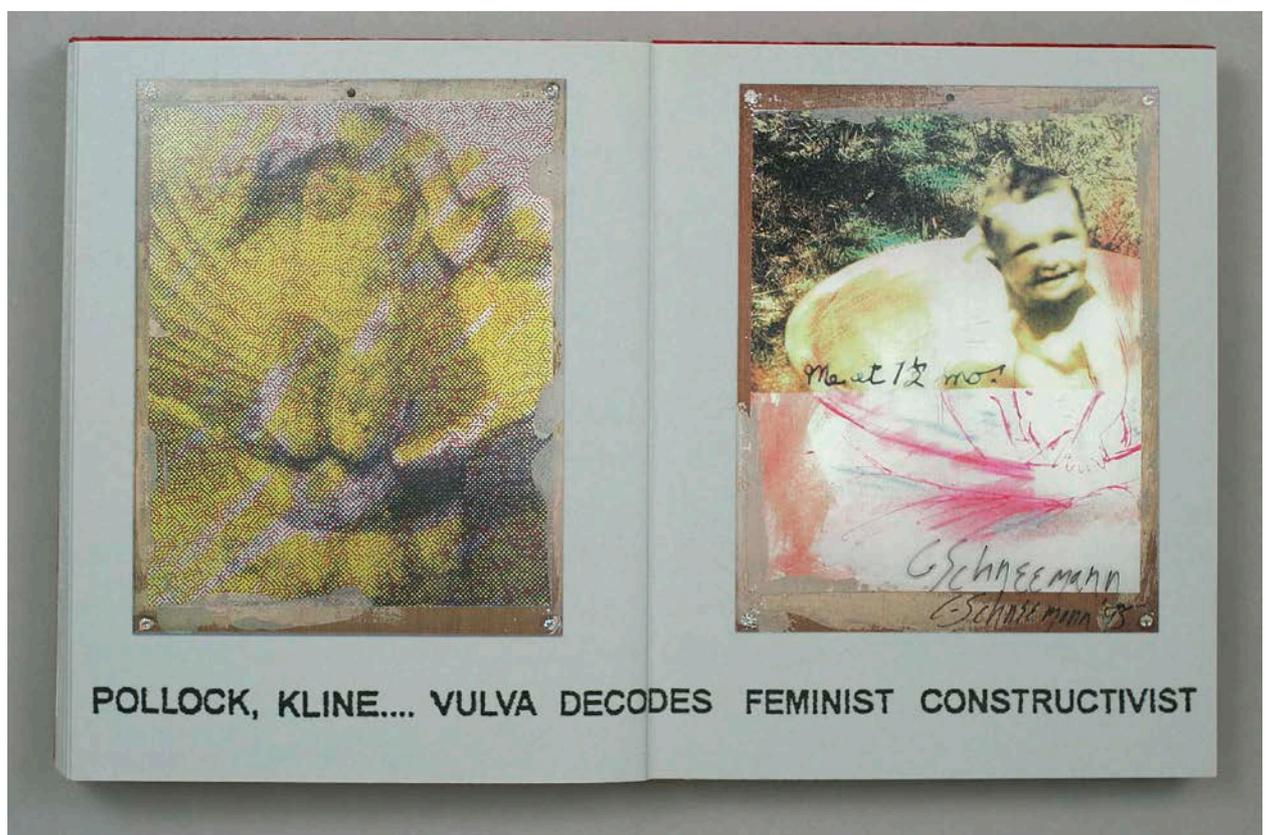


Figure 2

Here the morping entailed by the book’s title has been violently scissored on the genital area of the depicted author-as-child figure. That semiotic wound has been healed by the bioautographical author, whose signature is explicit on the altered photo, as well as by her avatar, VULVA, within this book. Part of the semiotic

healing is the blend of the mimetic with the tropo-mimetic, specifically the tropo-metonymic, the blend of the half-body of the natural child with the half-body of the conceptual, spiritual child. The healing registered in Figure 2 is not in rendering sutures imperceptible but in allowing semiotic cross-fertilization to both show and mediate that wound. I derive this idea of the tropo-metonymic from the medieval fourfold interpretive model echoed ever since: the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. In Schneemann's case, the tropological—the quest of the spirit—is perched within and as the vulva. The tension between suppositions about genitalia and questing souls is part of the bioautography of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*.

As a textual character, VULVA is mostly aware of these issues and in pain as the simultaneously aware and oppressed educated version of herself. The text does not permit escape from the constructed scenes of VULVA's self-awakening. About two-thirds of the way through the text

VULVA STRIPS NAKED, FILLS HER MOUTH / AND CUNT WITH
PAINT BRUSHES, AND RUNS INTO THE CEDAR / BAR AT MIDNIGHT
TO FRIGHTEN THE GHOSTS OF DE KOONING, / POLLOCK, KLINE.

The mouth full of paint brushes is yet another morphing of VULVA into a mouth, or into a vulva with a mouth that is then turned to a body + art vulva-like opening once again when filled with paint brushes whose bristles (presumably of non-human-animal hair) perform a family resemblance with human genital hair. Meanwhile VULVA is also described as having a cunt that is also filled with art tools (paint brushes), in a replicative doubling or self-metonymy that intensifies the linguistic dialectics. This complex report of a genital-dialectical action-self unfolds across pageboards whose images are also and already intensifying depictive dialectics. The bioautography acts as a self-telling pressured in pluri-dimensional apparent

dumbness: here the filled state of VULVA's mouth—filled with the tools of art—also renders her unable to speak. We are made to experience the bioautographic message across all the book's signs rather than as a report of a deputed speaker, since although printed words are part of this book's semiotics, VULVA as a posited character never speaks. Her "voice" is suppressed, as even in this rebellious moment VULVA double-brushes art with a painting mouth (in the face) and a painting mouth (in the genitals). At this textual moment VULVA also, of course, stands in for the live embodied organism in relation to ghosts of dead art.

The woman artist "becomes" VULVA, analyzing politics, for example, as the final end note indicates, according to what is good for VULVA. At one of its limit points, bioautography thus has the body in effect stand in for and as the entire "self." *VULVA'S MORPHIA* is an organic continuation, in book arts form, of the artistic ethics articulated in Schneemann's *More Than Meat Joy*. Explaining her 1963 work with "Eye Body," Schneemann writes:

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.

I write "my creative female will" because for years my most audacious works were viewed as if someone else inhabiting me had created them—they were considered "masculine" when seen as aggressive, bold. As if I were inhabited by a stray male principle; which would be an interesting possibility—except in the early sixties this notion was used to blot out, denigrate, deflect the coherence, necessity, and personal integrity of what I

made and how it was made.

In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved **enough** like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men. (The only artist I know of making body art before this time was Yoko Ono.)^{viii}

Schneemann's use of the word "votive" in describing matters of the will can also apply to the tropo-metonymy of *VULVA'S MORPHIA*. Having engaged the materials of the entire body for decades, Schneemann here concentrates on its spiritually core element of the genitals. The book's photographic image of human copulation, featuring a tumescent penis upright inside a vagina, is arguably an example of VULVA being "inhabited by a stray male principle" and thus an image of conversation, medial apotheosis, even an acknowledgment of the male genitalia as being along on the book's spiritual quest. The conversation is particularly clear when we see that image as also looking like the vagina has grown a penis depending downward; the morphing impetus so prevalent in *VULVA'S MORPHIA* transforms into an Escher-like blend. In that interpretation of the book's copulation photo, at the level of the human genitals VULVA brings the "male principle" along to ask the question that ends "VULVA'S SCHOOL," the autodidactic feminafesto that closes off the book: "Vulva learns to analyze politics by asking, 'Is this good for Vulva?'"

Limit case

So is the bioautographic body also hierarchized, or is it entirely distributed? There are things to say about the positive aspects of a re-decline in the ideology of personal

bodily modesty in western thinking, though that topic is complicated by necessary attention to privacy matters. But I want to end by emphasizing the limit case of the vulva as bioautographic locus. The vulva here, in the majority of the book's images, is the topographic aspect of the vagina, visible "on" the moving body and in sculptures, flower heads, and the book's other *hors-corps* images, whereas much of the vagina (both biological and as pictured in *VULVA'S MORPHIA*) is interior.

Partly, as indicated in the brush-mouthed VULVA passage quoted above, this genitally bioautographic locus is a matter of sound and voice. The evidently language-less, that is, speech-less, VULVA stands in for the evidently language-less body, for whom language functions as apparatus—an acquired addition to the body's natural or rest-state sounds (circulatory and nerve-system in origin, thumping and high-pitched) and to the articulate sounds the voice box can make even without language. We can imagine the absence of speaking parts for VULVA, in a book dedicated to her expressive and political work, as indicating the book's desire to throw into question the relations of anatomical authenticity with artifice. The languaged, but not speaking, VULVA inhabits a tense region of balance and displacement between abstraction and embodiment. Moreover, the absence of speaking points to an emphasis on the expressive and communicative power of body semiotics without language, of expressive and communicative composition as non-explanation. In other words, it points to one important feature of bioautography: its performance of the interpretively impenetrable, or infinitely *potential*, semiotics of body-life.

In this sense Schneemann's book is a descendent of one of the earliest female-authored English-language manuscripts, *The Booke of Margery Kempe* (c. 1440). Margery's book is set up as narrated by a woman to a male scribe; it thus posits Margery as having a second-order, displaced voice in the midst of a drive toward

embodied spirituality—tropological flesh. Margery’s unsettling “roaring” and frequent spiritually-induced tears can be read as another version of the excessive, dripping female body in and as a book that stands, in turn, for a self conceptualizing spiritual intensity. Margery’s book is a very early example of controversial bioautography, with a displacement between concept (abstract language) and flesh (voice).

It is trans-semiotic displacement that makes the connection here. The complex semiotic rendering and questioning of the power of language in *VULVA’S MORPHIA* is in part a result of the cooperative subordination of the words to the body of the book and its many visuals, a result of images that bristle and copulate silently, whose activity points to what is not there (sounds, past events, other places). The body of the bioautographical writer cannot be present and yet is made—conjured as—present. This semiotic pain is at once a register of insistence and impossibility: a semiotic wound that has to remain continually open in order to be continually healed. This is one point where we might think about the nature of distributed bioautography. Yes, the body’s largest holes—mouth, eyes, ears, nose, anus, vagina, meatus—are hierarchized as entry and exit points for the body. Yes, *VULVA* is metonymized as a paradoxically whole active agent in this book. The bioautographic distribution happens at the level of interface with what is outside the body. This is the distribution of bioautography with and across its art form. It exceeds the boundaries of the body via the holes, bringing in the world and pushing the body out as the world. This insistence is part of the intimacy of bioautography, whether accomplished with a focus on the holes of the eyes or mouth or vulva. As de Sade understands with the constant artifice-reset-button he pushes in a book like *Justine*,^{ix} the customarily unseen genitals can be a faster conduit to responsive attention in the rupture between

the seen (we see what we think we know we see) and the unseen (we suddenly look at the genital other-as-same). The dialectical distribution here is with the world rather than within a set-apart body. The most intimate or private part of the body acts as a sign and conduit for the connection of the self with all that is outside the self.

A related limit point is that imagining VULVA as and with a language puts us in the position of thinking explicitly about where semiotics works in terms of desire and power. The presumption of what comes first is inverted in the shift from “autobiography” to “bioautography.” Leading with the body, rather than with expository and narrative language about abstract identity, is leading with unset meaning. In that sense it is more overtly rupturing. Not only because it is the body per se—any “being” might perhaps do this kind of critical work—but because, in the matter of self-telling, leading with the body is leading with quiddity. The body does not stand, or lie down, or open up *for* or *to*; it stands, lies down, looks, opens. But *VULVA’S MORPHIA* goes further than that in what I am calling its tropo-mimesis: the tropo-metonymy of VULVA standing in as the self works in relation to the spiritual iconography that Schneemann unveils. To put the female genitalia in the position of the spiritually seeking self is bioautography with a vengeance.

Appendix

Full principal text of *VULVA’S MORPHIA* (not including inner title page, two appendix pages and colophon):

VULVA READS BIOLOGY AND UNDERSTANDS SHE IS AN AMALGAM /
OF PROTEINS AND OXYTOCIN HORMONES WHICH GOVERN ALL /
HER DESIRES.... VULVA DECIPHERS LACAN AND BAUDRILLARD /
AND DISCOVERS SHE IS ONLY A SIGN, A SIGNIFICATION OF THE /

VOID, OF ABSENCE, OF WHAT IS NOT MALE.... (SHE IS GIVEN A /
PEN FOR TAKING NOTES....) VULVA READS MASTERS AND JOHNSON /
AND UNDERSTANDS HER VAGINAL ORGASMS HAVE NOT BEEN /
MEASURED BY ANY INSTRUMENTALITY AND THAT SHE SHOULD /
ONLY EXPERIENCE CLITORAL ORGASMS.... VULVA RECOGNIZES /
HER SYMBOLS AND NAMES ON GRAFFITI UNDER THE RAILROAD /
TRESTLE: SLIT, SNATCH, ENCHILADA, MUFF, COOZIE, /
FISH AND FINGER PIE.... VULVA STRIPS NAKED, FILLS HER MOUTH /
AND CUNT WITH PAINT BRUSHES, AND RUNS INTO THE CEDAR /
BAR AT MIDNIGHT TO FRIGHTEN THE GHOSTS OF DE KOONING, /
POLLOCK, KLINE.... VULVA DECODES FEMINIST CONSTRUCTIVIST /
SEMIOTICS, AND REALIZES SHE HAS NO AUTHENTIC FEELINGS AT /
ALL; EVEN HER EROTIC SENSATIONS ARE CONSTRUCTED BY /
PATRIARCHAL PROJECTIONS, IMPOSITIONS, AND CONDITIONING....

ⁱ VULVA'S MORPHIA began, and exists still, as a 36-image installation work (1995). Total 8 x 5 feet, each image 8.5 x 11 inches, text strips 2 x .58 inches. See <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/vulvasmorphia.html>.

ⁱⁱ H. D., *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919; City Lights 2001), which performs, in the words of Susan Stanford Friedman, "a modernist gynopoetic" (*Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.'s Fiction*, Cambridge 1990: 11).

ⁱⁱⁱ Carolee Schneemann, *The Notebooks 1963-1966*, in *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings* (McPherson 1979): 55.

^{iv} The relative emphases I perceive between autobiography and bioautography might be gestured to by examples: the first resembles André Malraux's *Anti-Memoirs* (Henry Holt 1990, trans. Terence Kilmartin) while the second resembles Kamau Brathwaite's *Ancestors* (New Directions 2001) or Nathanaël's *The Sorrow And The Fast Of It* (Nightboat 2007). But then one would have to be familiar with those examples. If I'm asked, as the *CR* editor is kindly asking, how I would contrast autobiography with bioautography, I would have to point two clunky hands in two directions, understanding that there are many works in between. One hand goes toward clear expository language in which socially real persons attempt to understand how life has shaped them, and they life, over some period of their lived and reported experiences. That's autobiography. The other goes toward multi-dimensional signage, from cross-genre to multi-media to performance to more apparently imperceptible differentiations in how language can speak a self, with an emphasis on the defined and feeling body of the querying maker of such work. That's bioautography. But the latter, it is to be hoped, will be more clearly delineated in the essay than this endnote can hope to be.

^v Lisa Samuels, "Eight justifications for canonizing *My Life*," *Modern Language Studies* 27.2 (1997): 103-19. "Autography" means to recognize the primacy of the written self, the languaged body, in some forms of life writing. A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Autographies: the "I" of the text* (Notre Dame 2012), applies this model of autography to readings of relevant medieval texts.

^{vi} Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume 1: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago 1992, trans. Michael B. Smith): Chapter 2, "The Garden:

Delirium and Delights of Hieronymous Bosch.”

^{vii} Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minnesota 2007): 3-4.

^{viii} Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings* (McPherson 1979): 52.

^{ix} Marquis de Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791, Oxford 2013). See Roland Barthes *Sade Fourier Loyola* (California 1989, trans. Richard Miller) for Barthes’s comments about semiosis in de Sade.