

The Painter's Knife

Representations of Fragmented Bodies in Painting

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Abstract: *Many artworks, historical as well as contemporary, represent fragmented bodies, detached organs or dissected corpses. How may we read art's intense attraction to images of body pieces? How did so many incidences of cuts and beheadings find their way into painting? Is it mere coincidence that the painter's essential tool, alongside his brushes, is none other than a painter's knife?*

These types of questions have provoked the attention of art theorists and scholars such as Linda Nochlin and Julia Kristeva. This essay offers a critical reading of the views of these two thinkers on the dissected body in art and suggests an alternative solution from a Lacanian perspective. Basing my thesis on Jacques Lacan's concept of the cedable object, I argue that a painting is a product of an object that must be lost for representation to take place. Cutting away the object is exactly what makes painting possible, whether what is cut is manifested in the painting in the form of an image of a severed organ, or in any other way. It thus follows that the images of the fragmented body are intrinsic to painting.

Keywords: *Painting, Linda Nochlin, Julia Kristeva, George Bataille, Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Alain Miller, Desire, Cedable object.*

Decapitated heads, bodies without organs, eyes disjoined from their sockets – art history supplies countless examples of fragmented human bodies, bodies split into pieces, bodies missing organs, or bodies hollowed wide open. Each one of these cases seems to be justified by a certain narrative: martyrs like Saint Lucia or Saint Agatha, who lost body organs, protagonists and villains like John the Baptist, Holofernes or Louis XVI, whose heads have been decapitated, doctors providing anatomy lessons, and still life paintings with human skulls. In some cases, the narratives the paintings refer to do not involve a body being severed, yet the images in the painting still consist of a dismembered body or organs without a body, such as a head without a context as we may see in the copious images of Veronica's cloth imprinted with the portrait of suffering Jesus, or even in the broken classical sculptures and their drawings, which frequently appear on the art scene.

Yet, images of fragmented bodies are not the sole property of the past; contemporary art, after all, provides us with recurring and ample examples of encounters with dismembered and severed human bodies: Georg Baselitz's early paintings, Bruce Nauman's *From Hand to Mouth*, Maurizio Cattelan's *Spermini*, which consists of dozens of tiny portraits of the artist, are only a few in many more examples.



Francisco de Zurbarán. *Saint Agathe*. 1630-1633. 127 x 60 cm. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre.

Surprisingly, in many cases throughout history and today the severed organ is none other than the artist's own body. Carravaggio, for instance, paints his own head as Goliath's severed head, while Mark Quin casts his own blood into his self-portrait and then freezes it. How may we read art's intense attraction to images of the fragmented body? How did so many incidences of cuts and beheadings find their way into painting? Do the severed bodies necessarily signify horror, or is there another way to understand them? And finally, is it mere coincidence that the painter's essential tool, alongside his brushes, is none other than a painter's knife?

These types of questions have provoked other art theoreticians as well. In *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, for instance, Linda Nochlin, a feminist art historian, explores the representations of fragmented body parts in art.¹ Nochlin claims that the fragmented human body is a metaphor for modernity. She explores many instances in visual arts, from representations of severed heads during the French revolution, through the impressionist's trend to cut the picture frame in a snap shot manner, to artworks from the late twentieth century, which engage with fragmented body images such as the works of Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe. Despite the various interpretations given to any cluster of artworks, all of these works are eventually subjected to the same heading. Thus, for example, Nochlin explains that the many representations of severed heads by the guillotine do not necessarily directly describe actual horrific scenes, but rather present an ideological point of view. According to this point

1 Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

of view, states Nochlin, destroying the past or using its vandalized parts to recycle it, manifest revolutionary strategies: “the imagery – and the enactment – of destruction, dismemberment and fragmentation remained powerful elements of Revolutionary ideology.”²

Nochlin offers another reference to dismembered body parts in her analysis of the paintings of Théodor Géricault. According to Nochlin, Géricault organizes severed body parts into an aesthetical composition, which he then dramatically lights, so that the final painting is simultaneously elegant and appalling.³ This, claims Nochlin, is also the case with his paintings of severed heads. She states that very horizontal positioning of the head in the painting contributes to the objectifying attitude of the painter to the fragmented body organ, when he lays the most significant human body part as if it was a lifeless piece of meat on the butcher counter. Yet, she writes, “even more disturbingly, the heads have been arranged for maximum effect by the controlling artist: Géricault’s project here is an aesthetic one, involving formal intervention.”⁴



Théodore Géricault, *Severed Heads*, 1818.

Nochlin later discusses impressionist painting. These paintings, she argues, take on different levels of dismantling, from distinguished brush strokes to framing, like photographic images,

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 18.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

which occasionally exclude parts of the body. In order to theorize the dismantling aspect of impressionist painting, Nochlin turns to Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, and Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*. Marx, she claims, assumes that "dynamic destructiveness and self-disintegration [are] inherent in the capitalist system and bourgeois society."⁵ Baudelaire perceives the painter of modern life as someone "who concentrates his energy on its fashions, its morals, its emotions, on 'the passing moment and all the suggestions of eternity that it contains'"⁶

According to Baudelaire the modern life painter is situated in the crowded, in its constant yet transient movement. Nochlin uses Marx's and Baudelaire's theories, whose points of departure are radically antagonistic, to construct a thesis according to which the representation of the fragmented human body is interlaced with modernist conceptions. Nochlin turns to Van Gogh's paintings to explore another aspect in the conceptualization of the fragmented body. She opens with a painting from 1887 *Still Life with a Rose, Two Books and a Plaster Cast of a Female Torso* in which the statuette appears without arms and a head.⁷ Nochlin presents the possibility to view his interest in the fragmented body as a metaphor for sacrifice, which preludes in two years the real dismemberment Van Gogh will conduct on his own body, when he will cut part of his ear. Nochlin refers to George Bataille's article about Van Gogh and other artists who have literally disfigured their body. She shows that while art historians tend to skip over Van Gogh's act, Bataille's interpretation considers this act of self-mutilation as an inspiring act, inseparable from his art.⁸ According to Nochlin, Bataille bases his interpretation of Van Gogh on the supposition that "art is born of a wound that does not heal." Nochlin, then, refers to three manifestations of the fragmented body in art, which she knots together: fragmentation stemming from the pictorial narrative, such as the severed head of the king of France; fragmentation emanating from cutting the frame, like in the paintings of Manet and Degas; and a real dismemberment of a body part, such as the case of Van Gogh. May we indeed locate a common denominator for such different types of fragmented bodies? Although it seems that they are completely distinct forms of cutting, we can indeed mark a certain relation between them, albeit in a different manner.

Nochlin knots the representation of a dismembered body with an actual mutilation of the living body. Bataille's article, from which she quotes, revolves around real dismemberment and presents extremely gruesome clinical cases. These cases may teach us about psychosis, yet can we relate them to painting? Van Gogh, it seems, did not consider his act of self-mutilation as art, and indeed – his portrait with the bandaged ear outlines the veil, not the bleeding wound. In other words, artists such as Géricault, who fervently engaged with the representation of fragmented body parts, remained, despite their shocking paintings, within the safe and relaxing confines of representation. Van Gogh, on the other hand, who crossed this safe limit twice, both when he cut off part of his ear and when he committed suicide – veils this horror and represents the missing organ under a veil. In this sense, I would like to disagree with Nochlin and place a clear line of separation between representations of a mutilated body and an action beyond representations. Nevertheless, as I will later show, the psychoanalytic path to understanding the representations of a mutilated body brushes against this limit and challenges it. It seems as though there is no real relation between the other two aspects of cutting Nochlin ties together – a fragmented body and cutting the frame, a cut which we commonly ascribe to the birth of photography and the representational conventions, which literally derived from the photographic frame. For our

5 Ibid., 24.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 47.

8 Ibid., 53.

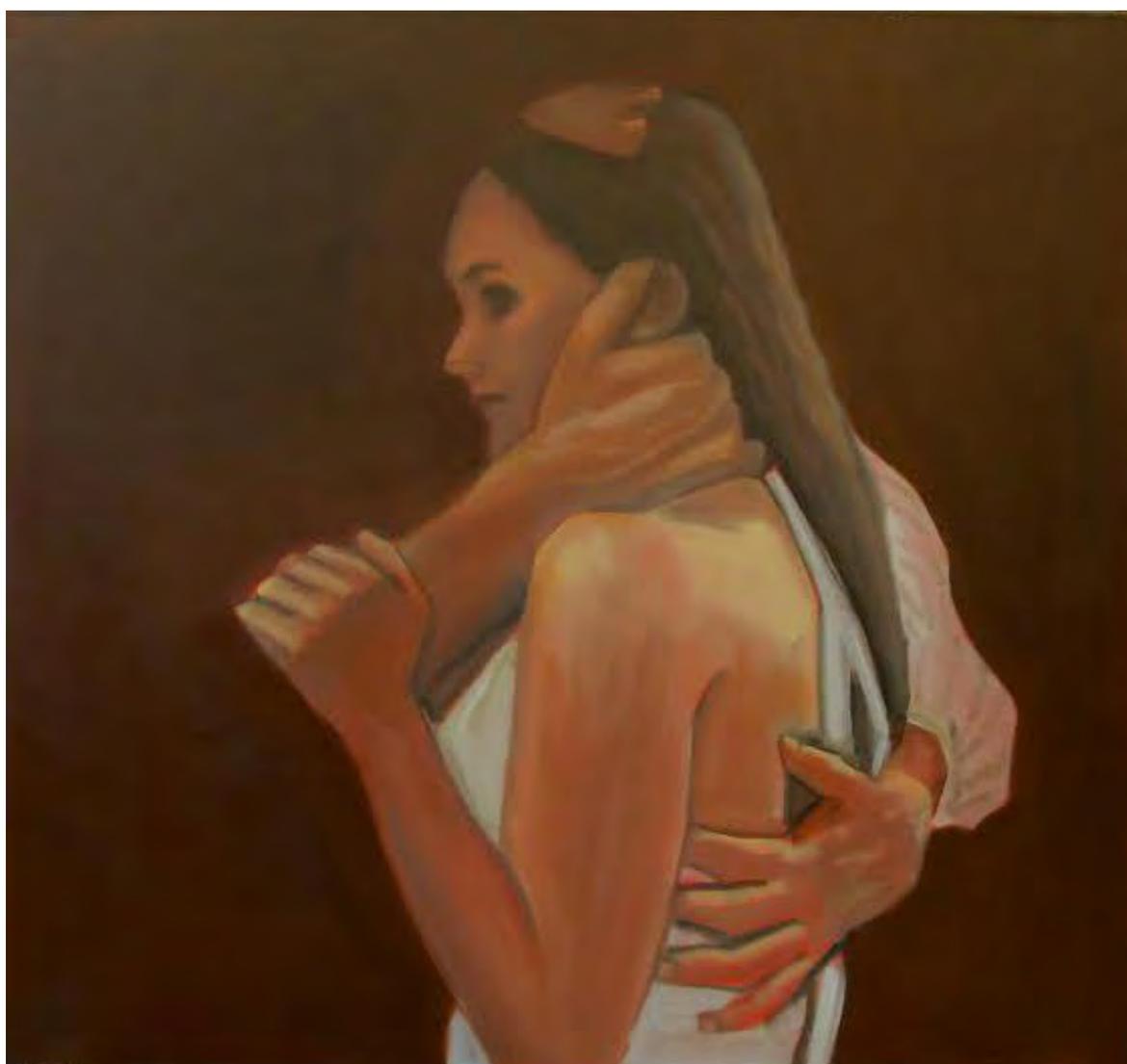
eyes, which have become so accustomed to the cut of the frame, this is not dismemberment but a metonymic image, whose represented part assumes the whole body. Every painting, after all, cuts a certain, abstract or concrete piece of reality, even the ones which do not involve an actual cut in the body.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889.

At this point, the paintings of two Israeli artists make it possible to illuminate from a different angle the somewhat haphazard connection Nochlin makes. The first artist, Yitzhak Livneh, engages with the intersection between representation of dismemberment, cutting the frame, and real cutting in his series of painting from recent years. Thus, the series visually embodies the relation between dismemberment and cuttings from different orders. These paintings were made on the bases of photographed images of pairs of lovers, whose organs are interlaced, yet the male figure was cut out from the shared photograph, and only parts of it, mainly arms and palms – appear in the picture. The act of cutting seemingly refers to a common place narrative of cutting

the lover, who has failed the woman, out of the family album; yet at the same time it also points towards an archaic belief that one can operate on the world through the image, or the thought of the magical power of the visual image. And here it seems that Nochlin's connection between the representation of a cut body, a cut of the body stemming from the cut of the frame, and real cutting now takes on meaning and validation: the cut at stake in Livneh's paintings can only be made on a photographic image, and the painterly repetition of the act of cutting constitutes a second generation of representation. The very act of painting emphasizes the pictorial past of the amputation, while turning both the act of cutting and the gap between photographic cutting and the actual cutting into the subject of the painting. Since the creation of the image is necessarily interlaced with an actual cut of a represented image, the painting conjugates these two distinct operations. And indeed, in one of the paintings from the series, the character in the painting, the one who supposedly cut the image of the lover who disappointed her out of the picture, holds a knife in her hand and cuts a salad. Furthermore, the series of paintings revolves around the relation between presence and absence, and the continuous visibility of the one who was banished from the photographs, while the palms of his hands continue to bustle within it, like bizarre creatures with a life of their own.

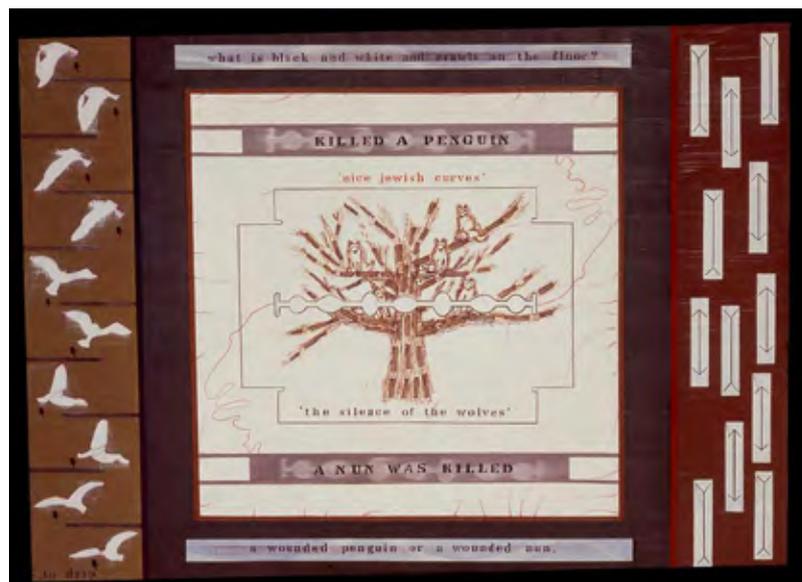


Yitzhak Livneh, 2009.



Yitzhak Livneh, 2009.

The second artist is Michal Na'aman, the most prominent artist of cutting, whose early works present an assortment of knives, penknives, as well as cuts that generate impossible combinations. In one of her works from the nineties, she draws the outline of a shaving knife at the very center. She then draws the image of the Wolf Man's dream, as it was painted by Freud's famous patient into the outline of the shaving knife. Without dwelling on every detail of this complex painting, the detail that relates to our concern is the dual use Na'aman makes of the image of the knife: the one that appears in the painting as an image, and the one that cuts the frame and which reflects the scene of the tree with the wolves. That is, Na'aman shows how the cut of the frame and the cut of the knife are of the same order, while both are immanent to painting.

Michal Na'aman, 1991. *The Wolf man Tree with Jewish Profiles.*

While Nochlin's theoretical debate knots together three essentially distinct types of amputation in a contrived manner, Na'aman and Livneh's paintings show, albeit in extremely different ways, the complex relation between the three types but also their essential relation as it surfaces from the painting itself rather than from theory. This point, then, raises a question: how may we be able to conceptualize this relation? In what follows I will offer a theoretical conceptualization from a psychoanalytic position, which will explain both the ubiquitous manifestations of amputated bodies in art and the complex conjugation between different types of cutting.

However, before I turn to psychoanalysis, I would like to examine another theoretical discussion: Julia Kristeva's debate of the fragmented body and its manifestations, with an accent on the severed head.⁹ Unlike Nochlin, who identifies the representations of the fragmented body with modernity, Kristeva claims that the fragmented body and its representations have circulated since the birth of culture.

Kristeva's point of departure for the severed head is not the horror it exudes, but rather a comforting memory: her mother's miraculous talent for drawing, which she used to demonstrate the possibility to transport an idea to its realization, in the speed of a blink of an eye. One drawing was etched in her memory. In this drawing her mother painted a snowman whose head was on the brink of toppling over because the sun had melted it. The drawing was meant to demonstrate the idea that "only speed of thought can exceed the speed of bodies."¹⁰ This drawing, claims Kristeva, conjures the power and ability of thought and does not only visually demonstrate it.¹¹

Kristeva states that there is a fundamental relation between the severed head in culture and the act of drawing. Drawing is "proof of a maximal concentration through which the most subjective intelligence, the most intense abstraction, makes something exterior visible... The drawing: crucial evidence of humanity's subtle mastery of the exterior and the other."¹² Kristeva supposes an imaginary moment in the history of visibility, a moment wherein human creatures were no longer satisfied in copying the world around them, and turned their attention and ability to think and represent the invisible, "make visible that subjective intimacy itself."¹³ To reach this place, they had to begin by representing the loss of visibility, the loss of the physical framework. Assuming that the representation of thought is the fundamental image that humanity created for itself, may we not assume, asks Kristeva, that this representation would pass through "an obsession with the head as symbol of the thinking living being"?¹⁴

Kristeva, then, supposes that the act of drawing embodies a contemplative reflection, which it thinks and formalizes. The locus in which this observation takes place is the head. It is in this place that Kristeva locates the great interest of drawers and painters in the severed head, since it is a crystalized embodiment of human thought.

Kristeva follows with a survey which begins from archeological worship objects involving different types of skulls and cave paintings representing parts of the human body. According to her, worshipping skulls and devouring heads are two common phenomena in the dawn of human culture.¹⁵ The severed head, she writes, is also present in modern social events, as the expression "to lose your head" during an especially good party reveals.¹⁶

9 Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*. Translated by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

10 Ibid., 3.

11 Ibid., 1-2.

12 Ibid., 1-2.

13 Ibid., 4.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 10.

16 Ibid., 20.

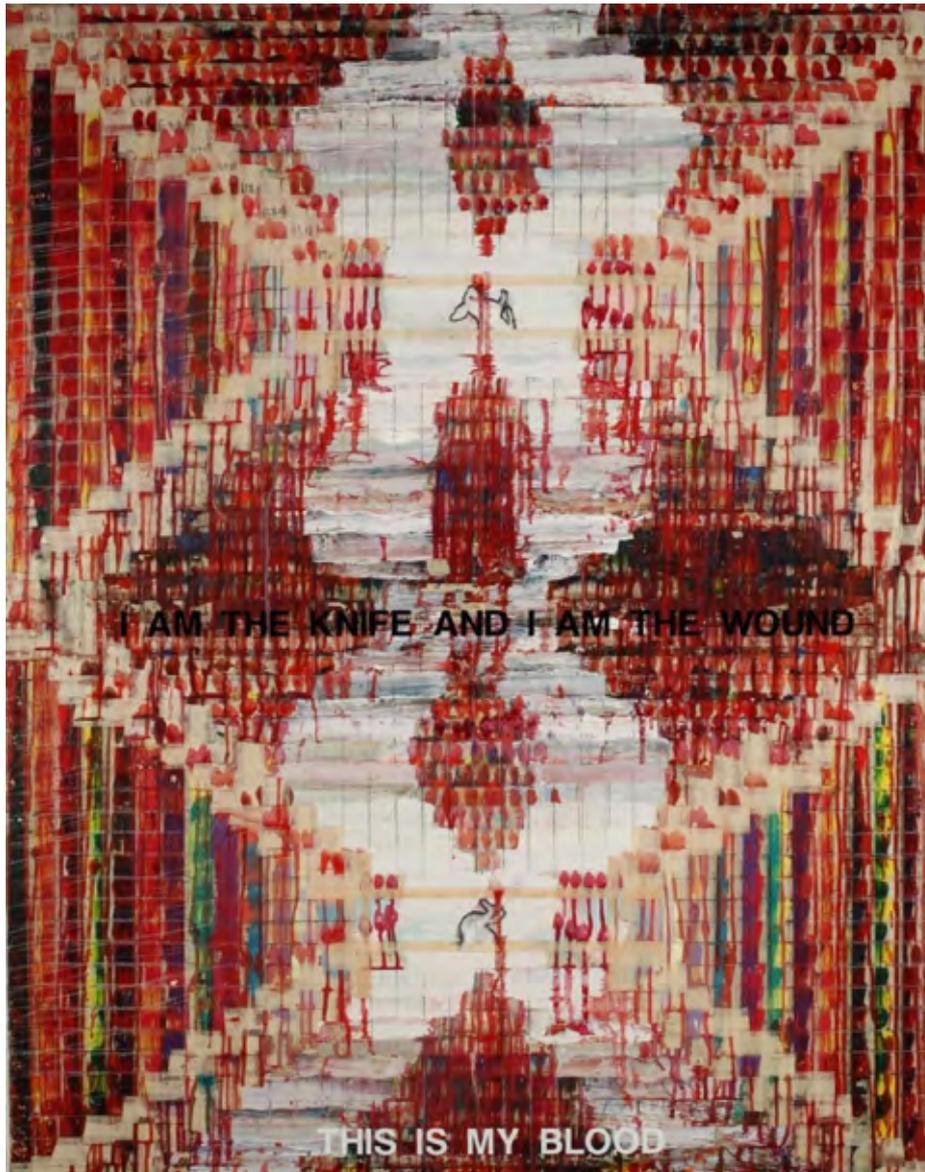
Like Nochlin, Kristeva also marks a transition from cutting to cutting on a different level, one which is not purely narratological or descriptive. This cut is immanent to painting; although it remains within the confines of art, it grazes the real cut. While Nochlin knots between two essentially antagonistic forms of cutting – Kristeva focuses on the one cut, on the cut that is not narratological, and does not represent, in the common sense of the word, even if its pictorial manifestation stems from the represented narrative. This cut originates from amputation or separation. This is not a cluster of random private cases, but rather an overall underlying form, immanent to the human being. The very cause of this representation touches upon the constitution of the subject.

Kristeva also points to the complexity of the relation between the dismembered organ and the whole: at first she relates to the severed head as a manifestation of the self-reflexive thought. This means that every drawing of a severed head necessarily relates to a thought or consciousness of the artist who draws himself, while the severed head is not distinguished from the one who draws or paints it. If in the beginning of this article I stated that quite a few artists painted their own decapitated head, Kristeva shows how this activity takes place even when the artist's features are not overtly identified in the severed head's face.

Another aspect of the complex relation between the representation of the severed organ and the artist who creates this representation surfaces later, when Kristeva uses Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to mark the ambivalent position in culture to the act of decapitation: on the one hand a violent and annihilating act, while on the other an internalization of the opponent's strength, for instance by eating the remains of his skull. Thus, she emphasizes anew that the severed head is both external and internal to the subject.

Who then, does the cutting, and who is being cut? I would like to suggest that a different painting by Michal Na'aman may direct us towards a possible answer. At the center of a painting from 2008 appear the words "I am the Knife and I am the Wound," and at the bottom the sentence "This is my blood." The words appear on a background, which has become the hallmark of her paintings from the last twenty years, of dripping paint dripping beyond layers of masking tape. The painting might not represent a decapitated organ on the register of the visual image, yet by fashioning the painting, the complexity of the layers of masking tape that cover the paint dripping through them, Na'aman explicitly refers to an act of cutting, whose result is melting, pasting, or bandaging over dripping paint. The combination between the way in which the painting is manufactured and the words on its surface, makes it possible to illuminate the conceptualization I wish to unfold.

The words themselves are borrowed from a poem by Baudelaire, with a small change. Baudelaire writes: "Je suis la plaie et le couteau!" (I am the wound and the knife). That is, the passive action, or result, precedes the causing action. These words echo the statement Nochlin attributes to Bataille, according to which the origin of art lies in a wound. For Baudelaire, who precedes Bataille, not only does art originate from a wound, but the artist is simultaneously the wound and the knife that inflicted the wound. For Na'aman the order is reverse: the cut is the primal act, the artistic object as its wound is its product – and they both emanate from the artist and constitute an inseparable part of her. And indeed, in a lecture she recently gave at an art-school, Michal Na'aman stated that the "history of the Western painting is invested in the theology of the wound (of the holy wounds), and each wound consists of a cut and bleeding, leaking." Hence the line and the stain: the two formal elements of painting, the line is the cut, the stain – the bleeding wound.



Michal N'aman, *I am the Knife and I am the Wound*, 2008

Unlike Nochlin, who considers the fragmented body as a metaphor for modernity, or Kristeva, who reduces the fragmented body to the severed head, this formulation shows that the act of cutting is a necessary act for painting, whose manifestations are as versatile as the number of artists embodying it. Yet, how may we theorize the necessary relation between cutting, painting, and representations of the fragmented body?

Psychoanalysis allocates extensive space to the image of the body, as it is reflected for the subject through the mirror or the eyes of those surrounding him. This is the imaginary body: a supposed body image given to the subject from the exteriority, and yet, it is essential for the subject in order for him to grasp himself. As Lacan shows in his seminal article on the mirror stage, there is always a gap between the way in which the subject experiences his body and the body image as whole, which is given to her from the exteriority. This gap is a manifestation of the split of the subject, between an ego as an imaginary, coherent conception of the body, and the unknown unconscious.¹⁷

17 Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience." In *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by A. Sheridan (New York and London: Norton and Company, 1977 [1949]), pp.1-7.

Later in his teaching, Lacan claims that alongside the reflections of the mirror, there is also something that can never be represented by it, which he calls *objet petit a*, object cause of desire. The concept of desire refers to the subject's driving force, which is libidinally charged yet distinguished from sexual passion. The object cause of desire is essentially an object of lack; it is not present in a concrete manner but rather appears at the moment of its loss, and is hence the cause of desire- that which in its lack drives desire. The *objet petit a* is a cedable object, and the way to grasp it, states Lacan, is as part of a body which is external and internal to the subject.¹⁸ Unlike the common assumption that at the moment of birth the baby is completely separated from his mother and from hence forth functions as an independent creature, Lacan shows that the separation between the mother and the baby is not univocal, and does not necessarily take place at the moment of birth, that is, at the moment in which the umbilical cord is severed, it can, for instance, take place when the mother's breast falls out of the baby's mouth.¹⁹ Beyond the implication that the boundaries of the body do not necessarily correspond with anatomy, this also means that the human creature sustains a complex relation with an object that is both external and internal to it. As Jacques Alain Miller states: "the *objet petite a* is characterized by what is most myself from the outside, since it is cut from me."²⁰

Lacan explains this relation, which is both internal and external, connected and disconnected, through the biblical significance of the Hebrew adjective "arel" (foreskin), during the circumcision. The word, says Lacan, does not concern the piece of skin that is removed, but signifies a separation from a part of the body, a sort of appendix, whose relation to the body is symbolic and alienating, and is essential to the subject.²¹ The separation from the ceded object, such as the foreskin or the breast, operates as the condition for the possibility of representation in the unconscious, that is, for the constitution of the subject as a speaking or painting being.

The term "cedable object" receives an additional significance in light of one of Lacan's breathtaking insights regarding desire. In his seventh seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states that the only thing a subject may be guilty of is in ceding on his own desire.²² The interesting point is that in both cases, both in relation to the cedability of the object and in relation to ceding on desire, Lacan makes use of the verb "to cede" (in French: céder). As Richard Boothby claims, the subject cedes on the object but does not cede on the empty space it leaves in its wake, that is, on desire.²³ These two Lacanian concepts of ceding, and the way Boothby interprets them, shed new light on the horrific paintings discussed so far, or at least on some of them. In terms of psychoanalysis, any object of art is in a way ceded from the body of the artist who had to renounce something in order to make representation happen. In other words, any representation of any sort necessarily involves departing from what precedes it, and it is this renunciation that guarantees desire, essential for any subjective activity such as art making.

The pictorial manifestation of the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire, is the gaze, something present and absent that surfaces from the painting in its relation to the one looking at it, the one who seeks to locate in the painting what is held from him. At the same time, the painting makes present the desire of the painter, a desire particular to the painter, which drives him to keep painting, to invent the painting anew. The painting, then, is a product of an object

18 Jacques-Alain Miller. *Introduction to Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety*. (In Hebrew, 2007 [2005]).

19 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*. Translated by A. R. Price. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014 [1962-1963]), pp. 233-234.

20 Miller, p. 94.

21 Lacan, *Seminar X*, p. 213.

22 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Dennis Porter. (New York: Norton, 2014 [1962-1963]), p. 319.

23 Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), p. 248.

that must be ceded for representation to take place – and it is this object that drives a desire, which ethically cannot be ceded. Cutting the object is exactly what makes the painting possible, whether what is cut is manifested in the painting in the form of a severed organ or not, one cannot cede on this cut without also ceding on desire. It thus follows that the images of the fragmented body are intrinsic to painting, be it if they appear in it on the level of the pictorial image, or if they are present in it in the form of a stain or a line, or any other act of art.

In what sense then could one find any remedy for the act of ceding, and its consequences, if any? One of the early descriptions of the practice of psychoanalysis was “a talking cure.”²⁴ In this sense, we can look at these severed bodies in terms of remedy and resolution; that is to say, psychoanalysis resists offering promises for harmony, salvation and integration, promises that in the psychoanalytic view are mere imaginary illusions. Yet, one of the ways in which the “talking cure” functions is by returning to the subject her own desire, and hence reduce her suffering. The fragmented body parts, perceived as embodiment of the essential act of the desiring subject in action, can be conceived as a subjective way of keeping up with desire, continuing to create, to reinvent art and to take part in its discourse.

Acknowledgments

I thank Wikimedia Commons (fig 1), Wikipedia Public domain (fig 2) National Museum, Stockholm (fig 3) and the artists Yitzhak Livneh (fig 4-5) and Michal N'aaman (fig 6-7) for having given me the permission to publish their photos.

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24 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, 2001[1893-1895]. “Case Histories.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume II (1893-1895): Studies on Hysteria*, p. 30.