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W / holes

The space between sides

w / holes

The space between sides

‘What’s inside a body? More bodies. Body wholes, body parts, body fluids.
We are already inside-out but we don’t know it yet. We still can’t recognise our
bodies in ourselves’

- Brophy in Longhurst

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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2023

ABSTRACT

W/holes: The Space Between Sides is a practise-based research project completed during a two-year Master of Fine Arts qualification. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the outputs of this creative practise include textiles, wearable sculptures, live art, video performance, digital collage, and projected moving image. Beginning with the body as the site for these investigations, the work explores embodied experiences and the tension between the tangible and intangible matter of bodies. This project also examines the fluid and shifting nature of bodily boundaries and identities, informed by Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection. Moving outward, the investigation then considers the body's relationships to other bodies, materials, objects, and technologies, framed by the principles of affect and phenomenology.

W/holes: The Space Between Sides explores affectual and embodied experiences in a series of performed responses that reimagine and reassemble matter's relationship to the body. The works consider how textures, textiles, and imagery, shape this relationship, and facilitate knowledge of the body. The creative outputs are a collage of fabrics, fluids, spaces, and performed bodies to bridge the gap between visual imagery and visceral response. Considering the spatial relationship between insides and outsides, this collaging method is applied to disrupt and highlight the slippery nature of bodily boundaries. This project subverts dichotomous positions, using the framework of abjection to seep past borders and stitch together new wholes.

My creative practice is foremost an investigation of bodies — their materiality, their depth, their affectual qualities, as well as the wider social inscriptions that bind them to wholeness. Preparing this exegesis has allowed me an opportunity to think introspectively about what drives this investigation. There have been, and continue to be, moments of my lived and embodied experience where the mental/physical body dynamic is taut with friction.

I was raised in a vigorously Christian household and attended Catholic girls' school, both of which are arenas of physical and spiritual tribulations. As a young person, where I could go, what information I could consume, and what I could do with my body was dictated by both family and school. In reflection, these influences generated a lot of tension between the matters of body and mind such that a narrative of 'mind over body' was instilled as a normative way of being. I came to understand my body as a fabric of immoral impulses; sins of the flesh. I grew to sense that my material form needed regulating and conquering, as well as disciplining in excess. If I read the wrong thing, or behaved incorrectly, I most certainly would have opened myself up to a corrupting outside influence. My thinking self was at battle with my feeling self. This division of body and mind caused an early opposition within my identity.

I have found that this 'mind over body' positioning also formed a toxic attitude around 'overcoming' mental health. My own experience of mental illness manifests corporeally. The illness in my mind and my physical body are inextricably connected. Depression leaves me fatigued and weak; trichotillomania finds me pulling out my hair impulsively and uncontrollably. There is no amount of mental strength, staunchness, or discipline that will resolve these issues; they are my chemical and inherently embodied experiences.

Years later, I have come to understand this is only one way of being in the world. I went on to study spatial design at an undergraduate level, where I trained in the practice of designing, fabricating, and materialising spaces. I learned the principles of phenomenology and embodied experience, understanding that different combinations of materials, people, and non-human factors facilitate different emotive and affectual experiences in space. When I reflect back on my upbringing, I can see the application of phenomenology in church spaces. The groups of people performing actions, the heightened experiences of music and sound, even the lighting qualities; they are all persuasive spatial tactics.

Subsequently I hold a heavy scepticism of spirituality and related power structures. I now feel a need to understand my corporeality further. I firmly reject binary morals that were inscribed onto my corporality as a young person. I believe in the material world, and the affectual power of matter.

A pivotal discovery in my studies has been that of the abject body through the written works of feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva. Her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* serves as a framework for my investigation. She describes abjection as the process of casting aside, the forceful action of rejecting matter that cannot be defined as subject nor object. Abject matter is unbound, loose, and fluid. It cannot be assimilated or merged to completeness. It is familiar yet strange, unable to be placed and unrecognisable. The abject is the tangible and intangible ambiguities between firm sides and definite borders. Kristeva's language creates evocative mental images of this movement through space:

Subject and object push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again. Inseparable, contaminated, condemned at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. (Kristeva, 18)

Reading this text for the first time, I felt a joyous kinship between her writings and my own experiences. I finally had words to put against the frictions and divisions in myself. In Chapter Five, Kristeva discusses how abjection becomes an internalised process from a Christian standpoint. Pitting one's own body against mind, changes the location of the abject, 'inverting the pure/impure dichotomy into an outside/inside one.' (Kristeva, 114) I can relate to this internalisation, the location of the abject becoming myself, my own body.

My creative practice investigates my own physicality within my socio-political and cultural context as a Pākehā, queer woman. I bring my own history and belief systems to this exegesis and my artworks. I do not assume to know or represent any other embodied experience of this world besides my own. However, I can hope some might feel a kinship to my practice just as I have through studying the writing of Kristeva.

This exegesis takes the form of four chapters, set out as follows:

In Chapter One I will discuss a live art work developed in the first year of my project entitled *Operating the Hole*. In relation to this work I will examine the affectual implications of body images and drawings. I will also consider the organisation of a body, asking some initial questions about how one might subvert a body accordingly.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the first video performance I completed during the second year of this project, entitled *Pulling Threads*. Here I will unpack the process of collage and its relevance to the abject, as well as the application of collage in my own material treatments.

In Chapter Three I will discuss a series of experimental performance clips entitled *Balaclava Test Works*. I will briefly contextualise these works within the project, while reflecting on the role of technology as a stepping stone toward the final work.

In Chapter Four I will discuss the work presented for examination entitled *Scope*. I will detail my processes of filming and performing, with attention to body/camera relationships. I will also briefly speak to the qualities of the final installed work.

Chapter One

A BODY THAT FUNCTIONS

[Link to video work](#)

Operating The Hole

A MDF wall stands in the centre of a dark room dividing the audience and a performer, positioned on opposite sides. An exaggerated anatomical image is projected onto the audience-facing side of the wall. This digital body is collaged from a range of representational styles; hand-drawn sketches, digitally generated drawings, and photographs. These drawings render an imagined and fictitious set of interior systems — nervous, digestive, expiratory and reproductive. The wall is physically punctured with a series of holes, each aligning to a projected orifice as suggested by the collaged body depicted. The performer methodically enacts a motion and a material through each of the holes, disconnecting the centre and then working in succession from the head down.

Operating the Hole is a live performance piece that was developed during my first year of Masters study. This work is where some initial strategies of performance, body imaging, and material treatment begin to emerge in my practise. Spatialising a body apart from my own allowed me to consider surfaces and sides, especially the movement of material between these sides. I explored how this movement might transform material and space into abject and affective experiences. I had also been researching artist Carolee Schneeman during this time. I found her transition from painting to performance art inspirational, particularly the way she harnesses her understandings of the canvas and applies these principles to space and live experience. I aspire to her subversive abilities, defying conventions and expectations. Entering this course immediately after undergraduate spatial design, I was already thinking about how I might apply my skillset to new outputs, defying my 'box'. I began navigating toward uncharted spatial-designer/artist territory.

A smile crosses my lips as I bring hammer to wood. I can't remember the last time I exerted my full strength in this way. Many swings later, sweat beads and muscles protest. Knees hard against the concrete floor, I chisel away at exposed edges. A hole emerges. I bash on.

I pulverise a waxy lipstick, blood red. Soap slips forward in thick globs, its vessel wheezing as I command the last drops out. I mix and aromas swirl. Mad-scientist cum mad-artist? These are mad rituals.

Body and tools prepared, I don gloves out of audience sight, elasticity snapping to skin. Gloved hands emerge through holes, smearing fluids, performing faux excretions. A stitched rubber tongue waggles and flaps, nipples ooze a minty fresh fluid. Familiar orifice, strange ritual.

I think about Carolee Schneeman writhing, flesh of chicken and flesh of fish mingling against her own. She asks, can the body become a canvas? I ask, can this canvas become a body?

Reducing Images

Whilst collaging the body that is projected in *Operating the Hole*, I thought of early childhood books that mapped out the interior spaces of my body, helping me to understand my physical, human make-up. Simplified drawings communicated to me the unimaginable complexity that are the nerves, fats, and tissues within. Are these drawings simple in order to make the information accessible? Or are they simplified because the photographic information becomes too close, too visceral, too felt? The different graphic abilities of anatomy-capturing technology facilitates an interesting intersection between art and science. This intersection is a slippery space where interpretation fuses with documentation; objective intention meets subjective outputs. One might even consider this intersection a border.

In a course of studying spatial design, communication through drawing is an essential skill. I sell my concepts in plans, sections, and convincing renders. The purpose of these drawings varies, and their graphic qualities and visual conventions change accordingly. Technical line drawings inform on materials and construction, perspective renderings communicate atmospheric conditions through light simulation and texture while considering their emotive and affective language. When I consider images of the body, I apply this thinking. Anatomical drawings serve as outlines and assemblies, much like a plan. Their clean lines communicate the thickness of skin, the direction of blood flow, the spread of nerves. They depict the access points and interior systems across a number of scales, micro though to macro. Photographs serve similarly to renderings, providing information you might feel. A photo could show you the roughness of my skin, the puckered scars from where it stretched too quickly, protruding rough hairs bristling from my armpit. I manipulate these images toward my visceral intentions as I collage.

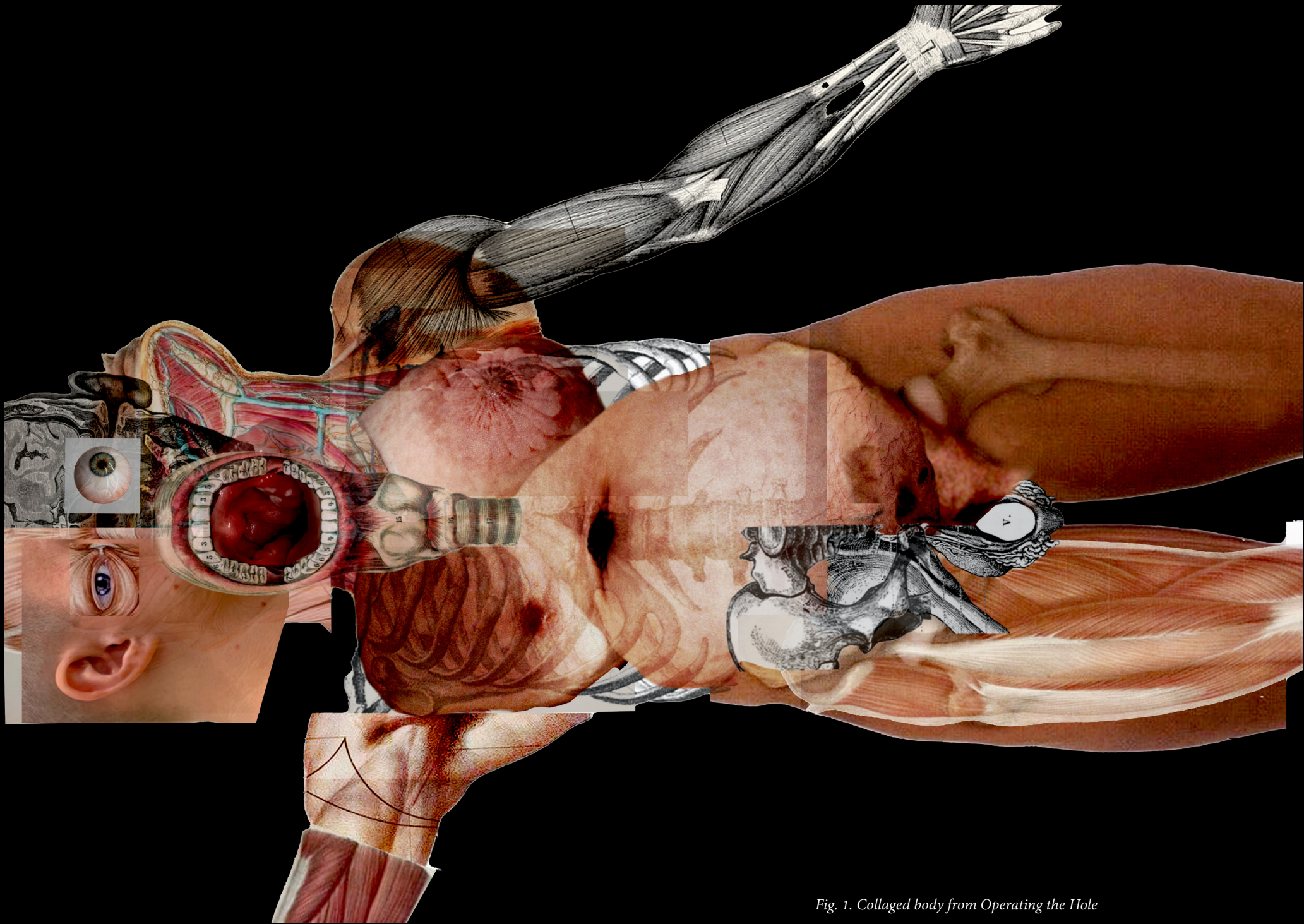


Fig. 1. Collaged body from *Operating the Hole*

The children's game, *Operation*, and its central character *Cavity Sam*, were a key reference point while creating this particular work. Sam's exaggerated cartoon body is the gameboard surface, from which players remove faux body parts. The mix between clinical operation and comical application are uncanny and memorable features of the game. Reducing a body to a mere set of objectives removes the true visceral reality of an operative act. The goofy and simplified depiction of Sam's body allows for a disconnect. It stops an audience from thinking about this body as a subjective person and more of a body-adjacent object. *Operating the Hole* riffs on this object/subject provocation, this time framing the 'operation' against the manual operating of an object, i.e. making something function. It reduces a human body to purely its functions, as if it were object or machine, is an impossibility. But completing these tasks from inside a faux body jabs at this mind/body ordering, subjecting the material and image of this body to behave exactly as my mind commands.

This operational approach to performance art can be seen in the works of London-based artist Rosie Gibbens. Her 2021 performance show *Soft Girls* consists of various soft sculptures and uncanny humanoid objects that she performs to, with, and alongside. A particular moment in this work references the Anatomical Venus, a wax female body that was used for surgical training in the 18th century. Lying on a hospital bed, Gibbens appears to be performing an operation on herself. Fabric tongues protrude from her nipple, while she wears woolly brains on her head and a neat set of knitted guts are stitched atop her abdomen. 'Gibbens interacts with the sculptures like puppets, pulling ropes and pulleys to help them to perform deadpan routines and enact euphemistic gestures.' (Zabludowicz, 1). The simplified graphic nature of the sculptures, combined with her methodical performance evokes a humorous, uncanny experience, not dissimilar to that of *Operating the Hole*.

I look at Gibbens' work and what I miss is an unsettling feeling, the aura of disgust. Her actions (like being squashed by an enormous tongue) are so bodily yet do not evoke a visceral response. Her use of soft materials and sanitised graphics keeps *Soft Girls* from crossing into the abject, deferring just as it approaches the border. The collision between objects and subjects does not happen, both sculpture and performer remaining firmly intact and identifiable. No disastrous abject mess is left in its wake, and this is where the intentions and affect of our work differ.

Subversion is a Spatial Act

The abject mess in *Operating the Hole* takes the form of dripping fluids, waxy smears, and swollen wet wood. The materials used in the performance are all related to rituals of bodily upkeep in some way; ranging from sponges to toothpastes. My subversive action was taking them from their 'clean' contexts and thrusting them into the realm of 'dirty'. Dirty in the sense that the wall-body was left in need of regulation, of wiping back at the end. Its MDF skin remained coated in the excretions, still dripping as we all left the room. This clean/dirty, subject/object juxtaposition is reflective of my initial ideas and strategies around subversion. Caught in the instinctual habit of binarising, the work demonstrates a rudimentary approach toward undermining normative body knowledge systems. Taking images and drawings of a body and animating them to evoke visceral response seems like an obvious first step to me. How do I make a static body live? Make the drawing bleed, shit and cry.

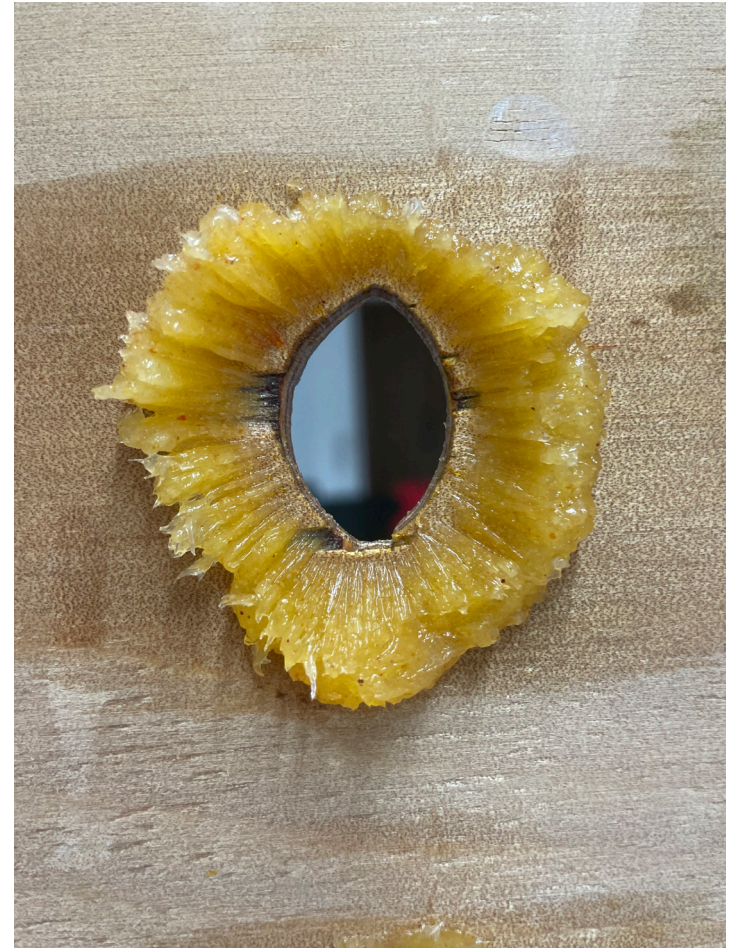


Fig 2. Material detail from *Operating the Hole*

This space between subject/subject, object/subject and object/object is constantly shifting. My identity is always being negotiated, shaped and influenced by the tangible and intangible world around and inside of me. My body is constantly rebuilding itself and transforming in response to my affectual environment. My brain cells make new connections on a microscopic level and my understandings grow. I eat, digest, excrete, and my body shrinks or grows accordingly. I am in a fluctuating state of completeness, and the excretions are the discards of this process. Elizabeth Grosz's writing on corporeal feminism are a framework I keep coming back to when thinking about the body. She says '...excretory acts are akin to continual renewal of self and unified body image (Grosz, 13)'. Meaning that while we discard and expel matter away and out from ourselves, we are firmly saying – that is not me. Simultaneously we are reaffirming who we are, sans expulsion. These processes of leaking, bleeding, crying, sweating are affirmations-of-life processes. They are not some set of distanced operations, enacted by another intangible 'me' that lives in my head. I feel beautifully and inextricably connected to my body in these acts and processes.

Initially I thought that the fluid materials in *Operating the Hole* were the most successful aspect, but I also see something interesting happening in spatial arrangement of the performance. Placing myself (the performer) behind the wall, my own skin is now contained behind the skin of the wall-object and the projected body. There is a discomfort in the scale, and this rearrangement of bodies. Its interior systems are being displayed outward toward the audience. If the surface of the wall has become the skin, the internal systems are now projected on top. The boundaries are twisted in a Möbius loop. Perhaps the wall-body is now excreting inward, and the audience positioned inside? Kristeva says body fluids have a corruptive abject nature, and I agree. However, I'd argue that their spatial relationships have an impact on just how horrific their abject affect is.

For example, I know that I am full of blood, but where it emerges from causes different levels of concern. Blood from vagina — tolerable, known, a period. Blood from a nostril — slight concern, I'm probably tired or sick. Blood from an eyeball — unknown, horrific, I could be dying. While bodily fluids have the power to be corruptive, it's their relative positioning to my body that renders them horrifying or abject. It is all about the relationalities, contexts, and assemblages of matter and meaning. Manipulating positions, disrupting expected orders, and redirecting flows are where true discomfort lies. Elizabeth Grosz explains this corporeal organisation:

'By body, I understand a concrete, material, animate organisation of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness and organisation only through their physical and social inscription...'. (Grosz, 243).

So what are the inscriptions made into my body to render me whole? To inscribe is to draw – I ask which lines have been drawn and where. If this is the case it will take more than a simple crossing-over or a switching between poles to subvert. Boundaries need to be upheaved. I can't just 'bring down' this instilled position of mind over body, for the mind is not atop anything. If I am a set of interwoven physical and social systems, seemingly housed by the walls of my skin, how can I be deconstructed, reorganised, and reassembled? Can I poke holes to create new wholes? Here lies a provocation that piques my spatial sensibilities.

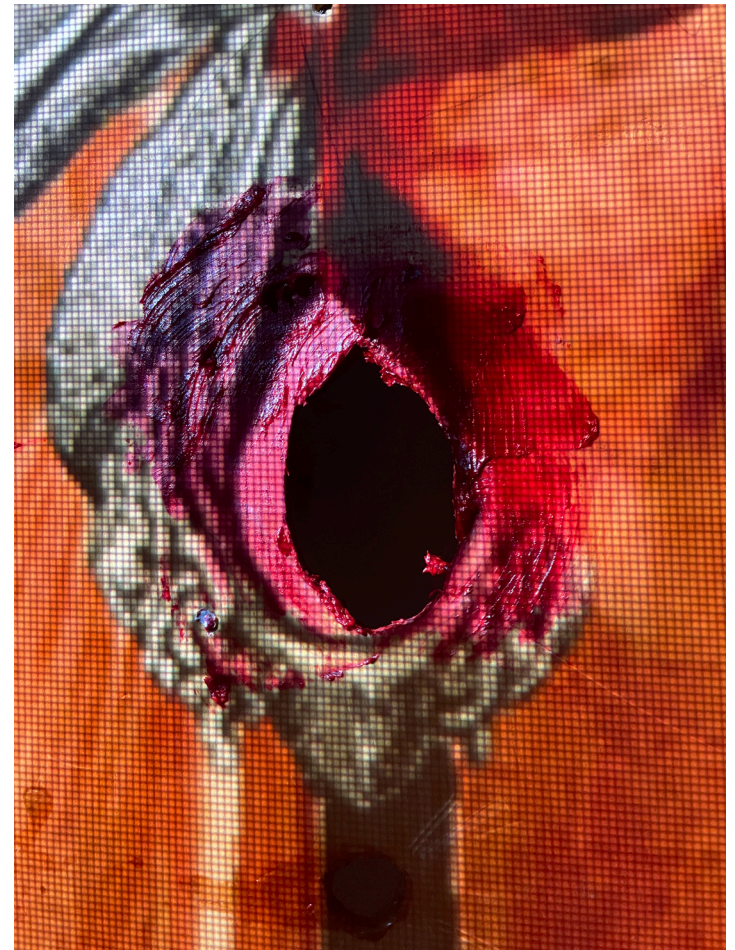


Fig 3. Material detail from Operating the Hole

Chapter Two

WEARING INSIDES OUT

[Link to video work](#)

Pulling Threads

Pulling Threads is an eight-minute video work in which a performer pulls multiple wet threads from a faux appendage/covering worn across the breast. The video documents the process of pulling, tugging, and squeezing the contents of this appendage, until it is drained and deflated. The performer enacts this task in differing proximities to the camera and hard, cold light situated just behind. Projected onto three connecting floor-to-ceiling screens, each channel plays three slightly different edits of this performance footage. The positioning of these screens envelops the audience from front-on and both sides, the scale of the projected body looms and fills the otherwise dark space.

This performance piece was the first work to emerge from the second year of this project. At this point I made a key decision to focus on creating video performance outputs. My selection of materials and making processes shifted towards dress and collage, creating wearable pieces to perform. This shift felt like a way to bring my own body back into the investigation, an important factor as the project is framed around my own embodied experiences. Thinking through making became an integral facet of my creative and generative process. Examining how materials are organised and identifiable creates space to reflect on my own body's material qualities whilst also working through some wider theoretical positions.

The room is quiet. The materials feel soft and wet against my cold, exposed skin. I attach the garment to my body and pat down, adhering the viscous contents to the form of my breast. Not unpleasurable, not uncomfortable, I swallow the squeamish feeling. I approach the camera, gloves on, and reveal, teasing the neatly protruding threads. My pace is slow as I pull the first thread. Hands pressing firmly, goop squeezes. There is resistance and slippage as I force the unwilling matter toward awaiting permeations. I move back and display the lengths pulled so far — dangling. I think about the length of the matter still packed tightly underneath. Could it span as far as untangled intestines? Or the length of an unwound cell's DNA? My hands busy and my mind occupied, I become calm. I focus on the task of pulling these insides out and my pace increases. As the material warms to my body, its resistance wanes. Care discarded, chunks of thread and gunk clump together, sliding across the border. I move closer to the light, the camera, the focus. Are you seeing this? It's juicy.



Fig 4. Still from Pulling Threads

Collage as an Abject Strategy

As I discussed in the previous chapter, dismantling, undoing, and reorganising can be understood as subversive actions. At this stage of the project, I began to investigate these actions through my material treatment. Considering the materials as bodies in their own right, I understand them to also be charged with wider social inscriptions. Their individual textures, colours, and configurations form material identities as well as their intangible inscriptions. I also investigate their material-human relationships — what connections and associations might a person make with this material? These affectual potentials are something I keep at the forefront of my making process.

Pieced Together: Collage as an Artist's Method for Interdisciplinary Research, is an article by PhD student Kathleen Vaughan, in which she outlines a similar process between making and researching. Using cloth as her source material, Vaughan describes in detail her physical actions of undoing, while reflecting on intangible histories and stories that are embedded in the material's make-up:

‘The strands of unravelled warp retain the memory of the cloth they constituted. The strands are crimped by the woof threads ...beaten into position against neighbouring cross-yarn. ...They allude to their past and suggest a readiness for a future in which they will be rewoven, integrated with other strands, other textures, other fibres in a new design, a new fabric’ (Vaughan, 35).

When I read this, I couldn't help but think about the red strands of wool in *Pulling Threads*. These strands began as a five-dollar thrifted jumper, now a Vaseline-coated clump of threads dangling in my studio. All it took was one snip and the secure, whole object 'jumper' had now become 'tangle of red noodles', a new whole object, a whole new inscription. But the bends in each thread (the noodling as it were) were a tell-tale sign of their former connection, crippled from the years enmeshed as a covering. What new meshing potentials did they have? I consider the material's visceral implications and associations; wool — warm and covering, lace — decorative and permeable. How do these materials feel, how could they make me feel?

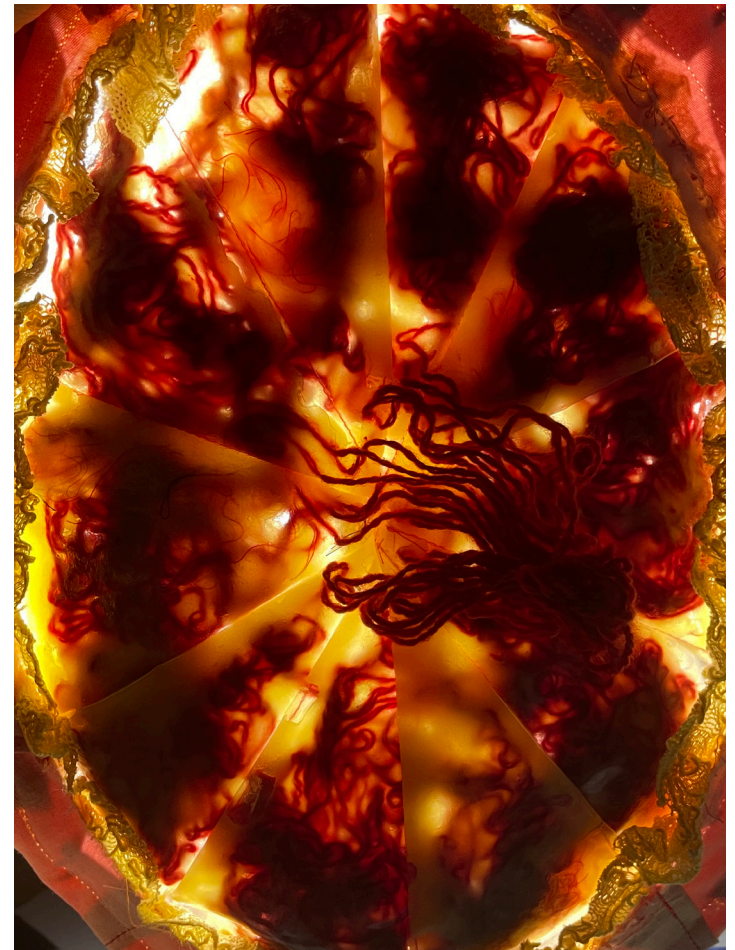


Fig 5. Material detail from *Pulling Threads*

Do I assume you by wearing you? Will you be corrupted toward my own visceral intentions? Who is wearing who? My examination begins. I rip apart your seams, tear open your pockets, and methodically unravel your fibres. I strip you from wholes to multiples. Like a body placed adjacent to its limbs or hair littered below a bare scalp, your openings laid out beside you. I place you against my body and interpretation churns. Right sides stitched to wrong sides, your edges frayed and exposed. Could you puncture my throat? Can I draw your guts from a silk sack?

Collage bridges the gap between concepts and materials in my practise. Tangible materials and intangible meanings become reassembled into new contexts, simply through the act of reorganising. I take an interdisciplinary approach to this process, assembling material-body-space collages. It is a liberating strategy, allowing me to hold together multiples, exaggerations and even contradictions — such as wearing my insides out. These contradictions are also apparent in Vaughan's process:

'I exaggerated shapes, materialised the invisible, embellished with the uncomfortable and I aimed to make sculptures that are both beautiful and grotesque ... ruined articles of clothing.' (Vaughn, 34).

These strategies offer a paradox which hums with an impossible tension. I believe this tension acts like a sticky abject glue in our collaging practises, holding the pieces and layers together. The unreconcilable nature of two things, their refusal to become one or the other feels akin once again to the writings of Kristeva:

[the abject] neither gives up nor assumes prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them. It kills in the name of life... it lives at the behest of death. (Kristeva, 15).

Abject matter has the ability to hold contradictions and seep past boundaries, connecting the unconnectable. In the last chapter I discussed the need for the upheaval of boundaries, and I believe that collage facilitates this. Vaughan shares similar thoughts:

'Thus, collage—with its overlappings, juxtapositions, and shifting centers and margins—can be seen as a transborder practice with epistemological implications' (Vaughan, 32).

Collage so easily crosses and connects borders because it makes no pretence of being whole. You can see the exposed edges, the tears, the planes where image and material overlap. Right down to its aesthetic qualities, collage embraces the rough and the haptic. Outputs remain in a varied state of completion, with new potential lurking. The work is ever-evolving.

In *Pulling Threads*, the collaged appendage is 'complete' at both sides of the video — depending how you view the objectives of the task. The neatly tucked threads between skin and breast are one complete assembly, the exposed threads and drained appendage a complete mess. The Vaseline that lines the breast appendage behaves like the abject glue between completions. It is wet, viscous, and transgresses every boundary in the performance. It was on my hands and breast, the floor and filming equipment, slippery and slightly vile to the touch. Its sickly yellow colouring pushes it from a somewhat recognisable substance into a realm of ambiguity. Its new context against the body hurls it even further.

The performance of this work draws from my own impulsive experiences of pulling. I contemplate the visceral itch that makes my scalp tingle, and my hand instinctively reach for my head. I contemplate the concept of hairs, their depth beneath the skin, the fact that they are expelled, dead cells. When is it that they move far enough past the scalp to not be 'me' any longer? The threads in this video remain tethered, yet long and wet enough to clump together and take on a new form. Are they still of the appendage? Of body?



Fig 6. Material detail from *Pulling Threads*

The tugging of these threads increases in aggression as the performance moves on. I want to wince as I watch this video back. The threads became more tangled than I had hoped and this aggressive tugging was the only way to continue on. My processes are once again in dialogue with turbulent, abject action:

Abjection is not a soft process, it is forceful... (Kristeva, 5)

The text goes on to describe this force like the action vomiting. Involuntary and uncomfortable, it is not something I do for pleasure. But I do think about the sudden post-vomit relief after spending an entire morning hungover and feeling the steady return of my appetite. Perhaps it is more horrific to linger in pending discomfort, than it is to simply face the music and retch?

Chapter Three

RESKINNING SHIFTING OPENINGS

[Link to video work](#)

Balaclava Test Works



Fig 7. Balaclava still detail

The next set of works are a series of test clips compiled into a single seven-minute video, *Balaclava Test Works*. The installed work was projected across an entire wall, testing scale and image composition in the space. Each clip experiments with different lighting conditions, sounds, and image-masking techniques. The performer wears and performs two separately crafted silk and mesh balaclavas. Cinched and zipped openings are the focal areas of the investigation. The performer drags the balaclavas and their respective openings across and around their head, exposing and covering different areas. In the first two minutes, footage has been overlaid with a black mask in post editing, creating an effect of darkness. The latter five minutes have little to no post editing and were filmed in dark conditions with a single small stream of light.

This series of test works were filmed as I approached the final semester of this Masters project. They were the next big leap in my work following *Pulling Threads*. Still feeling a connection to the repurposing of garments in my work, I moved my body focus toward the head. This is the site I experienced hair loss, and I touch to this tension site daily. I had also been watching a lot of Cronenberg films at this time, ingesting the body horror genre at a rapid rate. In this set of work particularly, I was focused on experimenting with my use of filmic language. Reaching this point, I had been creating video outputs for about two years. Building my rapport with the camera had been slow; we are still getting to know each other here.

My breath hangs in the single stream of light, evidence of the air's biting chill. Pulling downward, the mesh slips across scalp. Together we strain past the catch of protruding ears lobes. Unable to discern outlines, everything fuses. I locate the light by the burning sensation in my eye, shifting in place. Relying on the feeling, together we move from disfigured to refigured. My eyelashes are buried between skin and silk, vision blurred and tinted red. Is this what my blood cells would see, if they could peer outward past my skin?

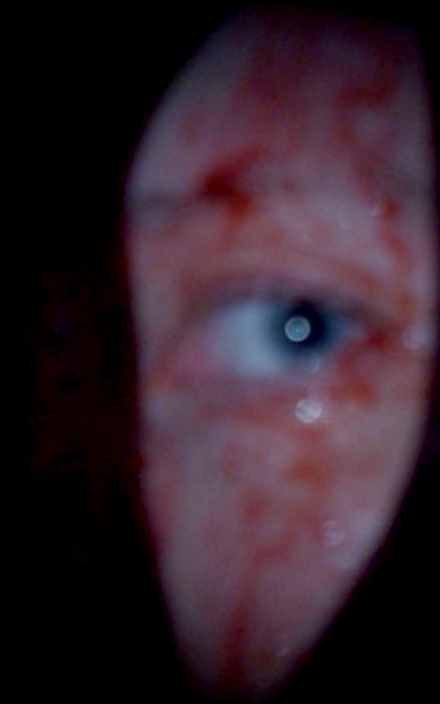


Fig 8. Still from Balaclava Test Works

Previously through my work I have examined internal/external body relationships, as well as body/material relationships, considering their affects and abject capabilities. In this section I fold in a final key relationship, that of technology's relationship to the body. As touched on in Chapter One, I am interested in the way that technologies facilitate our knowledges of the body. The further I move through the project, the more prevalent this has become, particularly in the way I use the camera to create videoed outputs. Theorists Nicki Sullivan and Samantha Murray introduce this idea in the text *Somatechnics*:

‘.. the body, technology, and the relation between them, is the notion of a chiasmatic interdependence of soma and techné: of bodily being as already technologized, and technologies as already enfleshed.’ (Sullivan, 3)

The text goes on to point out that technology does not just mean the mechanical, but epistemic. I interpret this to mean technologies are a knowledge system. The use of the word interdependence in the quote also indicates a flow between both bodies and knowledge systems, each generating and informing one another. What might I learn from the technologies in my work, how can this relationship shift into a reciprocal space? I know that images have affect, and the bloodied eye emerging from the dark in this clip certainly does too. But there is something in the assembling of these moving images that is yet to be teased further. Comparing the two different lighting conditions across these test videos, I am instinctively drawn to the ones filmed in the dark. There is deeper play between the lighting conditions and the lens interface. Struggling to focus on my form in the dark, these clips evoke a more ambiguous sensation and an unsettling affect.



Fig 9. Balaclava still detail

Chapter Four

ASSEMBLING THE FRAME

Scope

Scope is a nine-minute video work presented for examination. Projected in a completely blacked-out space, an eye and a mouth emerge in succession from the darkness, shifting in brightness and focus. A single stream of light illuminates the performer's facial features, framing the aligned mouth or eye. The performer moves inquisitively toward and away from the light source and audience, to capture differing edges of their eye/mouth within the light source. A subtle white-noise differing in softness, reverb, and echo responds to the shifting light and focus qualities of the projected image.

Camera

While filming this final piece I had an epiphany regarding the role of the camera in my work. It's one I wish I had made sooner as my approaches between making and filming felt fairly separated until this point. I found the processes of manipulating material engaging and haptic — ones I could feel, touch and see. I felt adept at reading and crafting material language, but somewhat illiterate in my grapples with the filmic. Normally I perform in front of the camera, watch back, adjust accordingly, and then repeat the process. I do not see my body and performance imaged in real time; the camera and I are delayed and disconnected. In this way I understand the camera to have had a more passive role in earlier outputs, always documenting. It also resulted in choppy pieces of footage, or a hesitancy in my commitment to the performance. I can see this hinderance overtly as I review my process. This whole time I have been thinking about spatial relationships, arrangements, and assemblages but had not applied this approach to the filming process.

On this occasion, I completed this same clunky process for several hours and felt more frustrated than creative. I decided to place a mirror behind the camera, tilted enough so I could just about see myself and the frame at the same time. Without donning any of my balaclavas or masks, I simply sat in front of the light and the camera, observing the frame in the mirror. My performance now became attentive, observant, and responsive. I dialed the light's brightness and shifted the camera's focus, my body's proximity shifting as well. Instead of performing to an object, positioning the mirror allowed for a reciprocal relationship between myself and the camera. I understood the camera as not just an item documenting this process, but also as an active member of this performance. The results were transformative and exciting, a refined investigation between the qualities of light against the material of my body. It's here I realised that light is just as valid a material in the work as any of the fabrics or fluids.

By shifting my arrangement, I broke past a block between myself and the technologies of my practise by drawing on this idea of somatechnic interdependence. Allowing my tools to inform and shape my body's performances, I used light to dilate pupils and focus to shift across edges. This work calls back to all of the times I have used recording devices, torches, and mirrors to investigate my body. I've flash-photographed the back of throat asking, is it tonsillitis? I press my armpit right close to the mirror, meticulously examining a bump, is it a pimple, a skin tag, or something more sinister? In all of these instances, trusting the feeling was not enough. I need visual confirmation, assessment, and a mode of comparison.

The process of filming Scope allowed for a more genuine performance on my part. I was excited in the moment, snapping the features of my face to the edge of this light. Stripping my practise back of all the layers and the noise resulted in a selective and restrained final output. I also believe I was able to prove to myself here that I can evoke a sense of abjectness and bodily discomfort through simple and refined practises.

Moving in and out of the spotlight, I align the bounds of my lips to the edges of this light hole. I move closer and the light envelops my whole throat —lips lost. The definite border of 'mouth' slips into the darkness. Focus flickers and details shift. More than a single leap between in/out, light/dark, focus/blur. There is depth and dimension to this investigation. A shifting between planes and surfaces, their definitions slipping as I myself shift in turn. An unknown distance spans from lens to uvula. How far away are you, the viewed? How close am I, the viewer? Who is viewing who?

The darkness cloaks definition, acting as an ambiguous disguise. Skinned together, the viewer and space are tethered by this absence. Contradiction swells. The darkness laps away at what is visible, casting suspense as it ebbs. Unable to see one's own edges, the hole of light becomes the only visible border in the room. The darkness is a membrane, fusing together the felt and the physical.

The work dips from exhibitionism to voyeurism with a slippery ease. There's an exchange of gaze between audience and image. In one moment you are glared at, eye wide (an accusation?!), the next, your eyes scour the blackness. The severe spot of light scopes the back of the throat, focus thrusting the uvula forward _ pulled from the inside out. Lips blur and purse. A flesh coloured hole teases its way across the space, traversing from clinical to intimate in a moment. Imaged or imagined?

Conclusion

Much like a piece of abjected matter, an offensive 'non-object', I have been thrust forcefully through space and time over the duration of these last two years, sometimes by my own momentum, sometimes by the firm shove of an upcoming deadline. Every time I have turned up, scaring myself and others with a slippery newborn piece of art. The day before showing my work, *Pulling Threads*, I really thought I might have taken it too far this time. (My supervisors will recall my panicked email well). I was about to subject my classmates and supervisors to the experience of not one, but three, copies of a revolting Vaseline-slick breast, several meters tall, enveloping them in space. The studio visit was one of my best though, and it reminded me that I thrive in these spaces of risk. My passion is searching for the line and finding a way to sneak past it. I love a scrunched nose, a fake gag, an involuntary panicked noise as the videos begin to play.

It is never the purpose of the work to be 'liked'. Above all it is about the discomfort. Existing only in spaces of comfort fosters complacency. Change can be scary, hard conversations can be scary, but I scare myself often and well. I see my practise as an ongoing endurance training in that way. If I can persist in spaces of discomfort, maybe I can become a better agent of change. Not just in relation to discourses of the body, but in all areas where progress is called for. In this way, my work is an open invite for an audience to endure alongside me.

The video work *Scope* is where I press pause on these investigations for now. It's a work I am particularly pleased with. I experimented with many materials and modes on my explorations of the visceral, but I admit the filmic work did not come easily. This work achieves a simplicity and level of refinement in my practise that I've struggled with in all my years of study. I like the mess, I like the muchness, and I want to hold it all. I've said on many an occasion, I'd have a finger in every theoretical pie if I could. In this exegesis I have tried to remain in ode to Kristeva, for it's her writings that set me on this path. I've put my whole fist in this pie, rummaged beneath the crust, and pulled out its viscous blood red contents in my wake.



Fig 10. Collage of stills from Scope

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The dividing wall that I used in Operating the Hole remains in my studio, standing sentient to all my messiest moments of this past year. It's holes are still coated with materials in various states of decay from the year it's been left unkept. I think about all those positioned around it, those who leaned or sat against it:

Thank you to the MFA squad for the camaraderie, the laughs, the Vines, the memes, the openings, the love. This has been a year of friendship that I won't forget.

Thank you Meg for your support across the last six years. My practise would not be anywhere near as daring without your influence.

Thank you Catherine for the constant support and sharp references (and an even sharper sense of fashion).

Thank you Julieanna, Shannon, and Hemi.

Thank you Lucy for your snores of support.

Thank you to my family x

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