

Living Prior Being

Abortions and Knowledge of the Enigma

Magda Schmukalla

The recent decision by the US Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a ruling which declared the prohibition of abortions as illegal, is, as Jacqueline Rose provocatively writes, 'itself a sexual act'. It is an act which 'can be placed on a continuum with rape, as a way of punishing the female of the species and bringing her into line' (Rose 2022: 16). It is a legal action that is painful and traumatic in itself. An enactment of a patriarchal law which does not recognize and speak to, but which seeks to control the realities of the feminine body, of femininity, and feminine sexuality. It consequently and rightly triggers the desire for a strong response or counter-force – a desire for a demonstration of strength and a forceful insistence on women's rights, their autonomy and their right to control their bodies. At the same time, however, this insistence on strength and choice triggers a response which to some extent also makes it difficult to address and acknowledge some of the more complex and conflicting nuances and feelings that surround the phenomenon of abortions. It triggers, for instance, responses which lead to the idea of binary choices in which the preservation of woman is positioned against the preservation of the potential child. An abortion is then seen as justified because of the woman's autonomy and sovereignty, and not because of her vulnerability and the peculiar experience of a loss or lack of autonomy which an unwanted pregnancy brings about.

'What would it be to have a pro-abortion politics that did not flee from vulnerability and dependency – that did not take as its implicit starting point the perspective of the sovereign, perfectly autonomous individual?' Amia Srinivasan asks when reflecting on the consequences of the overruling of *Roe v. Wade* (Srinivasan 2022: 19).

This chapter aims to think with and through abortions as phenomena that are deeply entangled with experiences of vulnerability and dependency. It will argue that in order for abortions to be understood and as such accepted as part of human life a pro-abortions politics is needed which does not require a further strengthening of the idea of the sovereign subject but rather an acknowledgement of its precarious existence. Abortions, I will argue, are a justified and often existential necessity to preserve the self, yet paradoxically cumulate in experiences of the self's limits and undoing. They are embodied events which sit at the intersection of life and death and as such require and produce different epistemological conditions, different ways of knowing, of thinking and regulating communal life. In examining the experience of abortions along Tracey Emin's *How it Feels* (1996) the chapter further demonstrates how the experiential structure characterizing abortions is akin to artistic events and an artistic knowledge as it falls into the liminal sphere of experiences which exist and sit prior to life's and death's formations in words and discourse. As such, I argue, abortions allow those who witness, experience, or live in their wake to contribute an alternative knowledge of what it means to be human, or better, as I will show, of what it means to be vulnerable or sensitive to its absence.

Enigma

According to Adorno, all 'artworks – and all art together – are enigmas; [...]. That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language' (Adorno 2011: 160). Artworks contain and trigger an enigmatic experience, which from the perspective of language can be noticed but not controlled or possessed. This specific experience of enigma is characterized by the fact that what is addressed and produced in the artwork slips through the means of theory, i.e. through the means of what can be rationally understood. It is for this reason that, Adorno writes, it is 'those manifestly incomprehensible works that emphasize their enigmaticalness [that] are potentially the most comprehensible' (2011: 162). Those artworks that cannot be comprehended, the most bewildering, are at the same time the most intelligible for as enigmatic compositions, seemingly nonsensical, they embody in form and symbol exactly what they seek to speak about, namely a knowledge of what is mysterious, puzzling, but real; of something that exists yet escapes the symbolic and social structures that are used to create sense and meaning: the enigma.

While distorting language and theory, art's enigmatic character, however, also poses and communicates a demand. A demand for the incomprehensible to be comprehended; for the experienced yet not understood, unstructured difference to be known. This means that art's enigmatic experience is something that is outside theory's reach, yet precisely because of this unreachability it reaches theory in some way even stronger, by putting theory, knowledge, and language into the impossible position of having and desiring to think what is unthinkable.

Art is therefore, equipped with a specific form of agency. Its mystery *does* something to language and theory: 'No concept that enters an artwork remains what it is; each and every concept is so transformed that its scope can be affected and its meaning refashioned' (2011: 163). In encounters with art, concepts change, meaning converts, yet never into something that can be fully known, controlled. A remainder of art's incomprehensibility, which is art's specific type of aesthetic knowledge, always remains.

And although the disturbance and rupture caused by theory's encounter with art's enigmaticalness happens on the level of discourse (art depends on theory/language which it disrupts), Adorno was also concerned with the artwork's unmediated link with othered material realities which in hegemonic structures could not come into being, were not meaningful or could not come into action, for they had not been measured, noticed, or spoken about. Present but not mattering, without meaning, and without language that would allow these unnoticed or nonsensical configurations to influence structured reality. In art these material realities prior to meaning find form and as such destabilize and rearrange the structure of theory and knowledge as we know them. When engaging with art and art's language, neither experiencing subject nor conceptual knowledge or meaning remain the same – each is changed and affected by the encounter with art's knowledge of the enigma that is incomprehensible but real. Engaging with and thinking through art therefore means to allow knowledge, meaning, and self to acknowledge and live with matter and energy that is excluded from the existing order, that triggers a crisis or rupture in life's structured appearance and as such threatens its existence.

Abortion

In the artistic film *How it Feels* (1996), Tracey Emin, a contemporary artist known for her provocative installations and personal ready-mades, speaks and reflects about her abortion, which she had five years before the film was shot. The film shows the artist returning to places which are associated with the abortion: the practice where she received a consultation from a doctor about her unwanted pregnancy, the hospital where the abortion took place, and a park in which she once was with her ex-boyfriend, 'the father of the aborted child' (Emin, 1996). While Emin is known for turning personal experiences and events into art, this video is arguably one of her most personal pieces. Its filmic narrative feels spontaneous, unstructured, improvised. It shows Emin speaking to a friend who films her and who occasionally asks questions, but the film's thread is made of Emin's stream of thoughts. Confused, contradictory, emotional, and with a clear demand that something about this abortion, something that happened to her and to her understanding of life through this abortion, had to be communicated, had to still be understood or expressed.

She describes how she never wanted to be pregnant, and how she only got pregnant because her doctor had told her that the likelihood for her getting pregnant was 99.9%. She also talks about how the doctor tried to convince her of having the baby as this was probably her only chance to become a mother, and she states how upset she still feels about his reluctance to grant her permission to abort a pregnancy she never wanted. '(F)or six weeks they wouldn't believe me. For six weeks they knew I was pregnant before signing those papers' (Emin, 1996).

While Emin's memory of her idea of pregnancy is unambiguously clear, she never wanted to be pregnant, the rest of the film is saturated with contradictions and disconcerting thought images. 'This all sounds sad, but it isn't really,' Emin says when describing how she got depressed and was unable to believe in and love anyone after she had gone through the abortion and the physical and psychic complications that arose from it. 'The abortion was a mistake, but it was the best fucking mistake of my life. This is a contradiction but it is true' (Emin, 1996). To understand the experience, the decision, and the particular interplay of struggle and relief that the artwork speaks about we need, I argue, to stick Emin's words, her puzzling thoughts. Not so much in order to understand the meaning that is usually associated with these words, but to notice how her words open an experiential space for what escapes their usual meaning.

In one scene, for instance, Emin's thought images open up a difference between unwanted pregnancy and abortion. While she was certain that she did not want to have a child, that she had not planned to get pregnant, the decision to have an abortion was, according to Emin, impossible. It was a decision that no one can actually take, and therefore a decision that deeply scarred her. 'When you are pregnant you don't make up your mind that you want an abortion. You make up your mind that you can't have a child.' Not wanting a child and wanting an abortion are two different things yet they are entangled with the same phenomenon of an unwanted, difficult, or dangerous pregnancy. Or we could also say that while not wanting a child is a decision that is somehow still taken within the registers forming her self and providing her with the idea of autonomy and choice, the decision for an

abortion seems to slide towards a different set of registers; or better towards a realm of experience that does not form around known or stable registers; 'An abortion is like life without life and death without death. It is almost impossible to make that decision' (Emin 1996). An abortion slips through both life and death; it slips through the frame of the human mind and body.

Yet, she takes this impossible decision. It was a mistake, but the best mistake of her life. 'I did this to preserve myself' (Emin 1996). Yet, the self that speaks in and through *How it Feels* does not resemble any idea of preservation or continuity. It is rather a voice of someone who witnessed and communicates an unprocessed or perhaps incomprehensible change or loss. *How it Feels* is not composed of the narrative of a self that was preserved, but a self that seeks to reckon with an experience that utterly destabilized the artist's view on life and death. This moment of confused or dispersed selfhood is amongst others present in the scene in which the artist describes the moment at the hospital, shortly before the abortion took place, and when she was asked whether she really wanted to go ahead with it. She said 'Yes', but at the same time felt it wasn't her saying yes but an agent or agency outside her self acting against her absent or immobilized self as well as against the other voice of a potential child which at that time was speaking and living through her: 'As I said yes, it wasn't me saying yes, it was just the word 'yes' coming out, and when I said yes I could hear the baby, which was then a baby inside me, screaming "No!"' (Emin 1996).

Pregnancy

What happens to the self during pregnancy?

In 'Were you part of your mother's body?' philosopher Elselijn Kingma reflects on the question whether the fetus is an independent organism contained within the gestating organism or whether it is an integrated part of the latter (Kingma, 2019). Kingma argues that most philosophical debates as well as common-sense opinions support what is called the containment view, which means a view that understands the fetus as a separate organism, namely the organism of an individual who will be born in future. During pregnancy this future being is contained within another organism, which is also separate yet responsible for the fetus' growth and health: the gestating organism. Contrary to this commonly perceived view, Kingma shows how the containment view is actually not supported by a range of biological and physiological considerations and argues instead in favour of a philosophical justification for the so-called parthood view, namely the view that fetus and gestating organism are entangled, are in fact one organism. She concludes that the parthood view, although underrepresented in philosophical debates and everyday views, makes more sense as the relation between fetus and gestating body conforms with the criteria which define organisms (Kingma 2019)¹ and reflects on questions that arise once we start thinking of mammal organisms as organisms that can become part of or can literally merge with other organisms (Kingma 2020).

¹Criteria such as physiological dependency, metabolic and functional integrity, topological continuity and immunological tolerance.

What is telling in the context of this paper is the question why there is such a resistance to the idea of fetus and gestating body being seen as forming one organism. Kingma answers this question by arguing that the pregnant mammal 'poses a problem for biological individuality' (Kingma 2020) and with this a problem for one of the core ideas forming a modern world-view and modern sciences. Once we think of fetus and gestating body as intertwined the idea of individual bodies and organisms is threatened, for if mammal organisms emerge from more complex entanglements with others, with other matter and other organisms, how can we be sure that they remain individual, separate beings after the event of birth? And to take this argument further, if we think of the human mammal as an organism that is not only characterized by biological but also psychic/mental individuality, how can we be sure that this individuality, if and once it exists, remains present and stable, against all odds? For example, against experiences that radically question our sense of an autonomous self, such as experiences of loss, violence, brainwashing, or poverty? The pregnant mammal, hence, challenges the idea of the individual in its physiological but also psychic formations.

Julia Kristeva's work on the maternal body theorizes the catastrophe that pregnancy brings about for body and identity. A pregnancy not only alienates the woman from her body as she usually knows and experiences it, but also from her image of self:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." I cannot realize it, but it goes on. (Kristeva 1980: 237)

Concerned with how language organizes psychic and physical worlds around conceptual pairs such as 'I' vs. 'other', inside vs. outside, separate vs. together, Kristeva demonstrates how the physical and emotional experience of pregnancy makes these symbolic orders collapse.² As an embodied process which undoes the effects of ordering structures or shapes, both physical and symbolical, pregnancy hence reopens the field of known truths or known ontology and blurs the boundaries of what is knowable and real. As such it turns into an embodied encounter with what is prior to the ontology of separate organisms and individuality and is therefore an experience shaped by a loss or the lack of identity, a 'psychosis of the speaking Being' (Kristeva 1980: 238).

This, however, does not mean, Kristeva further argues, that pregnancies produce a state of being that is restricted to women only. Rather, pregnancies initiate an intrinsic experience of difference that is always there, is always countering or troubling a sense of self, yet is usually or mostly repressed. In pregnancy, this feminine element of subjectivity, the fact that

²Similar to the undoing of selfhood experienced by the pregnant woman, neither fetus nor infant have the psychic ability to experience the world and themselves along such structures. This cognitive ability is gradually gained with the ability to distinguish self from other, which is entangled with the ability to speak and to think through abstractions, with the acquisition of language.

individual subjecthood is not all there is, or better, that it is not static or universal, comes to the fore. Pregnancies, are consequently also some form of truthful or liberating experience. They allow for an embodied knowledge of the fact that biological and psychic individuality, the body and self as separate from others, are only one of the forms in which life exists; that their reality is part of a specific 'social-symbolic-linguistic contract of the group' (Kristeva 1980: 238). Once this order is destabilized other forms of being, those existing before, beyond, or elsewhere, can be sensed.

What is crucial in the context of this paper is that the destabilization of identity and self caused by pregnancy is triggered by a specific form of materiality, or experience of matter, which causes the crisis or collapse of linguistic order. The crisis of identity is caused by a reconfiguration of the body, with the body going through a process that transgresses common ways of experiencing and thinking about bodies and selves. The body is literally experienced as if going against the laws that usually define bodies. While the material constitution of biological and psychic individuality is, as I argued elsewhere, usually aligned with the laws and concepts of particle physics, which means with a view on physical reality structured around separate entities and their intrinsic qualities and interrelations, the experience of pregnancy contradicts this symbolic structure and its laws, and instead conforms more strongly with the paradigms of quantum mechanical theory (Schmukalla forthcoming). In contrast to particle physics, quantum physics regards matter and life as dynamic configurations of energy which are in constant flux and always entangled with the specific measure instruments, thinking apparatuses and theory that are used to generate a knowledge or awareness of their existence (Barad 2007). This means that from the perspective of quantum physics being and matter do not exist in static forms a priori to their measurement or knowledge (it is not that bodies, objects, subjects exist naturally as fixed, separate, physical entities), but take on a specific form in the moment when they are measured or consciously known, with the methods or concepts structuring this moment of knowledge production taking part in the phenomenon that eventually is known.

In the context of social human life, the framework of Newtonian particle physics forms and confirms the hegemonic experience that as human beings we are independent organisms, who exist in separate bodies, with each body hosting one mind, whose mental reality is the product of the conscious and unconscious interplay of one individual subject. In a quantum physicist view, however, such human minds or bodies as independent, fixed entities are materially real, yet only as one possible of multiple and entangled formations. Furthermore, they are materially real yet interacting with and framed by a specific thinking apparatus, or social-symbolical contract, which takes part in their formation as entities. Once, however, this apparatus or contract is changed or replaced by a different or no contract, what exists as matter changes too. This means that prior to the act of measuring or knowing matter and organisms, life does not exist in the form of material objects and entities but is formed of energetic systems and nets of potentialities prior to their collapse in the moment of measurement when 'just one, classical outcome [that of interacting particles/subjects] is observed' (Wendt 2014: 3). Or to put it differently, prior to being individual bodies and minds, humans or human life quite literally exist as walking 'wave functions of possibilities' (2014: 3).

The experience of pregnancy is then closer to the experience of waves than to the experience of separate particles and sovereign subjectivity. It consists of an experience of matter which is in the state of uncollapsed possibilities, prior to structure, or prior to birth, yet present in a net of entangled energy. As such it is an experience which transgresses the social-symbolic-linguistic contract for it is an experience of 'an embodied entanglement which is neither none, one nor two, and which consequently cannot be placed within the parameters of common Western subject positions' (Schmukalla, forthcoming).

To grasp a knowledge of this other reality, to acknowledge and live what is other to the individual self and the individual body, and as such to grasp a sense of the experience of pregnancy, we need to rethink common ideas of being, knowing, and subjectivity. Or, to put it more simply, we need to become able to think differently. Feminist theorist and quantum physicist Karen Barad therefore asks 'what are the onto-epistemological conditions' that allow us to think along a mode of theory which is not about capturing entities and their relations, but is a mode of theory which attempts to know and remember what is prior to being/knowledge of entities, prior to matter's formation in particles, and prior to the moment of measuring and knowing (Barad and Gondorfer 2021: 16)?

When referring to this prior of ontology, Barad, insists that she does not mean 'temporarily prior, but ontologically prior, and prior and prior ...' (2021: 19). Not what was chronologically before the measurement, which from the perspective of a particle theorist would be some form of vagueness or chaos due to the lack of adequate measurement or measure instruments, but what is, has been and will be other to what we can possibly know. Or to put it differently, the prior to ontology does not refer to a pre-modern otherness nor to the other as defined in opposition to the modern subject, but to an otherness that is prior to and survives the event of knowledge and birth as an event of biological and psychic separation. It refers to a state prior to being that is embodied in experiences of pregnancy, not however, as something that then ends and vanishes and as such becomes meaningless for life after birth, but as an otherness that outlives birth and measurements.

What happens to the self as sovereign entity if this prior to being, this state of possibilities and entanglements as in contrast to certainties and entities, is acknowledged, or is approached from within the realm of speech, self, and theory?

Abortion

'This wasn't me. [...] I did this to preserve myself' (Emin 1996)

During pregnancy a complex encounter with the undoing of one's own organism and self is experienced. A loss of identity, autonomy, familiar body shape, routine. An enriching, liberating, truthful experience, but part of a difficult and at times overwhelming process; especially for those whose self is already under threat or unstable, because they are young, because of financial precarity, because of excessive, experienced violence, or of a struggling mental or physical health.

Emin grew up in the British seaside town Margate in south-east England, where she was raised mainly by her mother and where she experienced poverty and various forms of sexual

violence and social exclusion (Emin 2006, Pollock 2020). When growing up, she developed an ambition to leave the precarious path of a working class girl and woman that society had placed her on. This desire was bound to the decision to not want to have children:

I spent all my life fighting against what I should have been. Where I grew up, by the time you are 17, you have one or two kids, and if you work really hard you get a council house or a council flat. Now, I have been to college, again, I left school at 13, I got into college, I got a first class degree in art, I actually managed to get myself a fucking MA even though I hated it. I've gone through this whole educational process against all odds. And now I wasn't going to completely fuck myself over by having a baby that I didn't want, and alone. I had difficulties taking care of myself. Let alone, looking after someone else. And for six weeks they wouldn't believe me. (Emin, 1996)

Emin took the impossible decision of having an abortion in order to preserve her self, yet what she sought to preserve, I argue, was not the self of a heterosexual, capitalist, social contract, the self as an independent, reproductive entity or body, but a self which allowed her to divert from a path and self determined by society. The self she sought to preserve was a rebellious self, a self as becoming artist, and, a self which, as I will argue in this section, would stay near the material realm of possibilities and waves as in contrast to certainties and entities.

In 2019, almost 30 years after *How it Feels* was created, the artwork was exhibited once again as part of a new exhibition, *Fortnight of Tears* (2019), which was formed of a series of paintings, drawings, and sculptures that Emin created after her mother's death. In this exhibition artworks that she produced in response to the experience of mourning her mother's death were placed next to some of her older works which link to memories of rape, abortion, and the unfinished mourning of missed, lost, or halted motherhood.

The paintings and drawings brought together in this exhibition feel rough and minimal. In their abstract, aesthetic language they speak of feminine bodies and pain that is experienced through or in-between these bodies. They are painted with quick, expressionist brush strokes, often straight on to the ungrounded canvas, like monumental sketches of impulses that quickly had to be captured, that had to be lived and somehow expressed. In these impulsive paintings bodies, dead bodies, unborn bodies, raped bodies, mourning bodies, are not clearly from others or the pale context that surrounds them, but they overlap, are entangled through a dynamic movement of which the brush strokes keep a trace and which which gesture towards but never fully contain a body. In a *Fortnight of Tears*, 'the veil between life and death is torn open. She sees her late parents and communicates with them. She carries her mother's ashes and they feel like the weight of a person' (Jones 2019: 5)

Despite this aesthetic blurring of boundaries between bodies, space, and time, the titles of Emin's paintings are in most cases an address to another person or a description of a self, 'I: 'I was too young to carry your ashes', 'I don't know who I love', 'I wanted to go with you – to Another world' 'I longed for you'. Yet while many of the scenes depicted in the paintings

refer directly to scenes that the artist experienced when witnessing or processing her mother's death, their aesthetic openness also leans towards experiences of other losses, of other deaths, or other pain, and other bodies.

The 'You' and 'I' in the titles are therefore not personified, objectified yous or Is, not one person or two people, but the expression for a transcending affect that affects all surrounding matter and by doing so connects, entangles. Both other and self, although somehow existent, are in a state of fluid excess, transgressing the boundaries of containers and concepts. Instead of discarding or rejecting this state of entanglement as unspecified, unseparated, or unborn being, it forms the centre of Emin's art and such draws and preserves a link to her experience of having had an abortion.

In *How it Feels* she describes how after having gone through the abortion she knew that her art could not be about making things, about constructing objects, but that it was about taking them from where they already were – from some kind of prior to their being as objects. For Emin this meant to take her art to where her most intimate, most contradictory feelings form and are held. Art was not about producing new objects but holding unstructured matter, matter that has been conceived but does not matter, either not yet or never or not any more.

Springing from the experience of her abortion Emin's art is not about creativity as the creation of new things, new bodies, new words; it is not about separation, the separation from and of her mother in life or death, but consists of melancholic acts and images that preserve the unresolved conception or the uncollapsed spectrum of possibilities or entanglements. Or to put it in other words, for Emin the abortion turned into an artistic imperative to never repress but work with the experience of incomprehensible tensions and entanglements – and to remain close to the prior to being, to the body of her mother, which means to a time and space prior to her self as subject, prior to mastery, stability and sovereignty. And it meant to remain close to the unwanted child that could have become 'You' who could still be 'mum' who could still be 'life' but has never been and yet persists in ghostly, wave-like forms. Being in touch with this other or othered or prior world, the occult, the unresolved, uncut entanglement of the womb, means to know of the limits of individuality and sovereignty. It preserves the self by opening the self towards its own impossibility and allows the self to live 'among spirit and dreams' (Jones 2019: 6).

Unwanted child

"I know why you feel that I overprotected you as a child."

I just had told my mum in an outburst of historical anger that I had never been able to speak to her about my worries and pains as I feared that they would hurt her too much – that she would not survive my suffering. And I also told her that I found that she had always been excessively afraid about me – afraid that something bad could happen to me. While speaking to her about the unsaid of my childhood, I hold my son on my arm who must sense the tension forming around this conversation and perhaps to protect himself has fallen asleep.

“I had an abortion when I was 16. I never told you about this.”

She hadn't. I listen. Something new is being said. Something that had always been there, that I perhaps sensed, but didn't know of.

“I was so young, I didn't know what to do. My mother offered me to take care of the child, so that I could continue living my life – but I didn't want this. So I decided to have an abortion, but after that I felt guilty. I don't know why, but I did. Probably because of the church and how they make you feel that you killed someone. And then when you were born I felt even more guilty for I thought that if I had been able to abort once I could have also aborted you, and this was something unthinkable. I never told you about this because I thought you would feel hurt and be angry with me.”

I am stunned. I don't know what to say. After a while which feels like eternity, but passes like a flash, I say “I probably wouldn't be alive had you not had the abortion.”

And indeed, I am alive, and yet, when listening to my mother's words I recognize the contours of a familiar ghostly part of me getting stronger, an unborn me, a dead me, an unwanted me, me living and having lived in the potential place of the unwanted child. A place formed by my mother's desires and feelings of guilt, of her dreams and fears merging with mine, but also a place that felt deeper and truer than others. The impossible place of unresolved, haunting, yet persistent possibilities.

I am alive. My son is sleeping. Between us something, someone else.

Ghosts

Emin's art springs from where the abortion left her, from experiences which fall between life and death, between times, and between selves. Yet, these hauntings, I argue, are not supernatural in a sense that they cause perceptions of something that is not real, that they are pure fantasy of a psyche which is not in touch with material reality, but are the product of a psyche which is able to embrace and live with the possibilities of matter before and beyond its collapse into independent entities. A materiality which is prior to separation of mother and daughter, of life and death, of my body and your body, and that is interconnected in terms of time, space, and body, and whose state is one of possibilities and not of facts. An abortion leaves a trace of this entangled materiality – and as such preserves a knowledge of the 'you' and 'me' not as facts or words but as possibilities and of the fact that something is excluded or lost when some thing is said, born, or gained.

Emin's art allows us to think that the cut between you and me, between life and death, is an agential cut (Barad 2007). As agential cut it materializes, structures, specific forms of being and provides us with the possibility of knowing difference, time, space, and self, yet each of these conceptual and material formations, moments of birth, depend on and are being shaped by specific apparatuses and social-symbolic-linguistic contracts. Abortions as inversions of agential cuts, as actions in which the conditions needed for a separation are undone or resisted against, destabilize the ontological, epistemological and methodological primacy of cuts and instead move being towards the void prior to being, towards life without

life and death without death, and perhaps for that reason have become such a battlefield of politics.

In Emin's art, and art more generally, however, 'the living and the dead meet, and they merge' (Jones 2019: 8). In Emin's art the unwanted child is neither idealized, nor repressed or forgotten, but held. The more we feel we need to repress this blurring materiality, this blurring ghostly body which catapults us towards the state of merged and becoming being, a state of unclarity, vulnerability, and dependency, the more, I argue, a fury or fear of abortions is being triggered. The more life and death as well as their difference need to be controlled – regulated by the law and with this moved further away from experience, or from those who manoeuvre through the liminal zone of actual or possible or impossible pregnancy; a zone in which law and language are themselves vulnerable and weak.

X

Abortions produce experiences which preserve an embodied knowledge of what is prior to birth – and with this prior to life as we know it. Entangled matter, spectrum of possibilities. They neither preserve the self nor do they destroy being, but remain at the threshold of incomprehensible being, of indeterminate yet non-arbitrary difference. Reading the experience of abortions through Emin's *How it Feels*, this chapter argued that we should seek to acknowledge how abortions destabilize our understanding of life and death, how they challenge ideas of independence and choice.

How it feels shows an image of modern subjectivity as a human configuration that is vulnerable, contradictory, and haunted by the unknown or unrealized possibilities of being that fall through a person's sense of subjecthood and yet are real. It shows a subject that is not coherent, contained, and strong, but struggling, living in various times and moments, and living with feelings whose tension is at times unbearable yet real. A subject that further is not defined by independence but by her entanglement with the maternal and with this to processes prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract. By drawing on quantum physics I have further shown that knowledge of this state of entanglement should not be seen as regressive, not as a denial of material reality, but as a knowledge of matter human life as a conglomeration of energies as systems of possibilities. And I have shown how art that destabilizes theory offers an alternative mode of doing theory which acknowledges the enigma prior to being. Not from the position of a state of wholeness, strength and independency, but of heightened sensitivity of the unspecified, unknown, unborn or dead 'You', the reality that is there in and through 'me', but in forms that destabilize or even destroy 'me'.

In one scene, *How it Feels* addresses two feminine positionalities that are usually thought as separate or even opposite to each other. In this scene Emin reflects on her relation to mothers, and says that when she hears mothers saying that they cannot imagine their life without X, with X being their child, she feels and thinks that 'I will always imagine my life without X ...' (Emin 1996). She will always know of the void left by the unborn, unresolved, or uncollapsed field of possibilities.

Instead of constructing the 'I', the self, as something that is separate of others, here in both cases the self is entangled with X. In one case it is entangled with other living bodies and minds, whose separate life and being remains linked to a sense of interiority which the parent cannot know or control. In the other case the X is entangled with unborn, unwanted, dead, or dying bodies. Constructing images or constellations which allow us to think both of these positionalities together makes possible, I argue, to think and do theory without having to repress or disregard the enigma that is prior to the act of thought or selfhood or birth. It does not only allow us to think of the autonomous self that is simultaneously a conglomeration of entanglements and dependencies and therefore of other potential selves, but might also allow us to speak about abortions in less polarized, more vulnerable ways.

And by the way, mum, thank you for telling me about the abortion. I will always imagine my life without X.

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