

Unravelling the Body Conscious

Mary-Ruth Walsh

Waterford Healing Arts Trust, also referred to as 'WHAT' is an acronym that makes you think. However, I believe we don't ask the question 'what' often enough both in art and in life. What is it? What is it about? What does the artist mean? Asking 'what?' is a good way in to exploring the work of Dorothy Ann Daly, Lucia Barnes, Susan O'Brien Duffy and Vera Klute as featured in the series of *Body Conscious* exhibitions.

Vera Klute

Vera Klute's photographic work in *Body Conscious III* plays on the trope of the X-Ray apparently making the mysterious workings of the body transparent. Witnessing the thrill of transparency has lost none of its sensation and excitement since the first X-Ray taken by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen of his wife's hand in 1895.

However what appears transparent in many things, and in this instance, the X-Ray, is in fact far from clear. Transparency denotes laying bare that which is hidden yet it is interlayered with obscurity and ambiguity. Transparency is a strange term suggesting a kind of honesty, 'a transparent government' or a 'transparent medical service'. But is transparency ever fully possible? Even a pane of glass becomes opaque with our reflections as we stand in front of it. Our craving for transparency, our fetishising in wanting to know (tinged with a fear of finding out) what is inside our bodies is what makes Klute's internal depictions so fascinating. Klute explores that visceral bag we call our bodies, the internal, gelatinous, pulpy, spongy, yielding conglomerate of highly refined organs that arrange themselves within our bony frames.

Although we see ourselves as part of a sophisticated society and as independent thinkers, we are married to a sometimes unruly body who's functions dictate to us, at the very least, that we must sleep, eat and wash to maintain vigour and health. At worst interior cells can transgress their normal boundaries resulting in ill health. On close inspection this link between our visible outer selves and our invisible internal selves makes for an uneasy relationship, as we hope our involuntary internal body will 'behave'. It is within this uneasy relationship that Klute makes her work. So as we, the viewer, stand in front of Klute's works wearing our exterior skin of social sophistication, we watch this to-ing and fro-ing between our outer and inner body; between our culturally-correct *superego* and the interior instinctual *id*; and I interpret this *id* as the *interior of the body* rather than that of the mind. This lack of transparency in Klute's work questions the balance between the inner and outer body and the dominance of one over the other. This threatens to befuddle our carefully balanced, socially constructed idea of our body.

Klute's work taps into our deep-seated, interstitial spaces, the pith and marrow of our being, our innermost private areas that equates with the private space of the domestic. It is here, in the domestic heart that we allow our bodies greater latitude, and it is here I suggest that Klute finds the material references to her 'transparent' works, as she notes: 'With a collage-like arrangement of shapes and materials, the images substitute organs with inanimate objects and organic textures with general household

products'⁴. Close up inspection of her collages display a real delight in these found domestic materials as body organs duplicate for quotidian objects - a red pepper becomes a heart; lungs are bubble wrap; the womb a hen's egg; the fallopian tubes are crumpled plastic that changes to plastic bubbles mimicking transparent ovum awaiting fertilisation. But in Klute's work these eggs contain fully grown adults in their street cloths causing a 'surrealist jolt' not unlike Duane Hanson sculptures such are the persons' non-descript, but unnerving presence. However, the transposition of object or gadget to the body interior should no longer surprise since the historic first heart transplant by Dr. Christiaan Barnard in 1967, when the very locus of the person, their heart, was transplanted from one body to another. In Klute's work, I suggest her interests go further than the use of inorganic cogs, wheels and chains against the backdrop of the handmade 'organic' body interiors. Their use appears more as an investigative tool to explore the space between our insides in relation to our outsides and the social mores of our times. Do the five plastic stomachs in *Ruminant* signify the western endemic of over consumption or do they contemplate our global production of plastic at 280 million tons in 2011 according to statistics published by PlasticsEurope?

When viewing Klute's work, artist Hannah Höch comes to mind for her sharp witticisms and investigative ideas on politics and the female body. Clearly taking up the Höch baton is Kenya born Wangechi Mutu, whose collage work references the body exterior and our relationship to consumerist products. And in an exceptionally challenging way the body interior is explored by Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum in her work *Corps étranger* (1994). While nearer to home Aileen Barry's *Deep in the Marrow*, shares some similar explorations in animation and themes as described by Brenda Moore McCann.⁵

Klute's drawings, *Idle Hands* and *Snot* deserve further discussion that this short paper cannot encompass; however like the hand in *Snot*, Klute's work is hard to shake off. *Body Conscious III* reveals Klute's exceptional technical skill in exploring those internal uncharted spaces of our bodies. In describing them as transparent, which they initially appear to be, they draw in the viewer; yet they become opaque the more they are observed, and in losing their transparency they ask more questions than they reveal.

Conclusion

The *Body Conscious* series, as curated by the Waterford Healing Arts Trust, reiterates the extraordinary nature of our bodies, its resiliencies and fragility that relate closely to our cultural understanding of ourselves. It is heartening to see how Dorothy Ann Daly, Lucia Barnes, Susan O'Brien Duffy and Vera Klute explored, through this series of exhibitions, the body in all its nuances, complexities and contradictions.

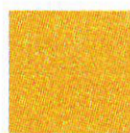
Mary-Ruth Walsh, 2013

www.maryruthwalsh.com

www.crossgallery.ie

⁴ Email conversation with the artist 25-03-2013

⁵ Essay available at http://www.aileenbarry.com/Deep_in_the_Marrow_Info.html

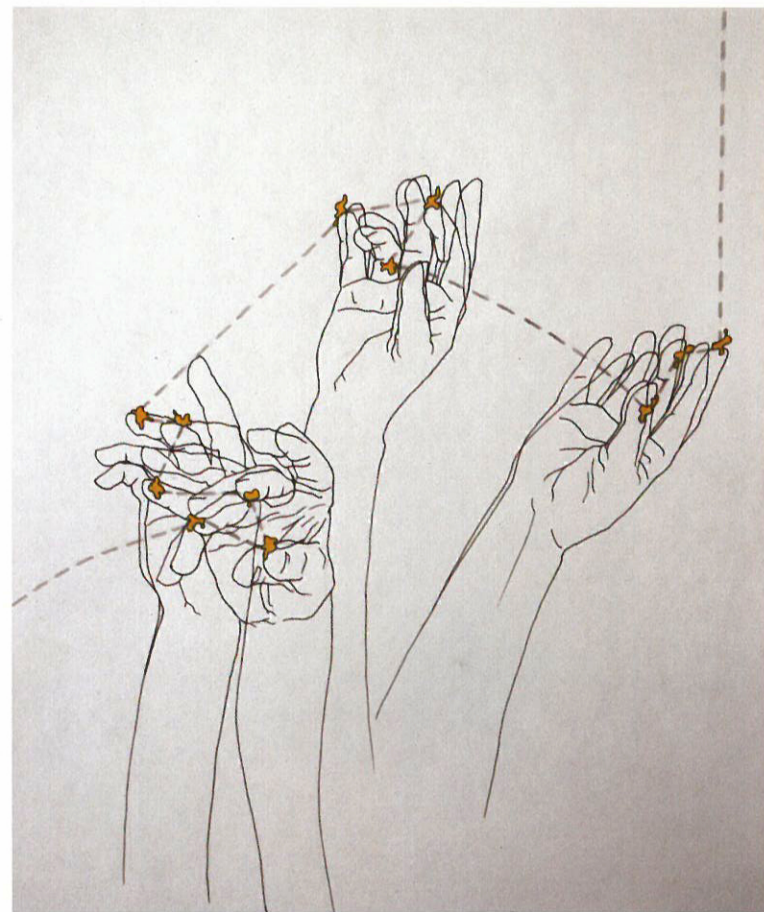


Vera Klute

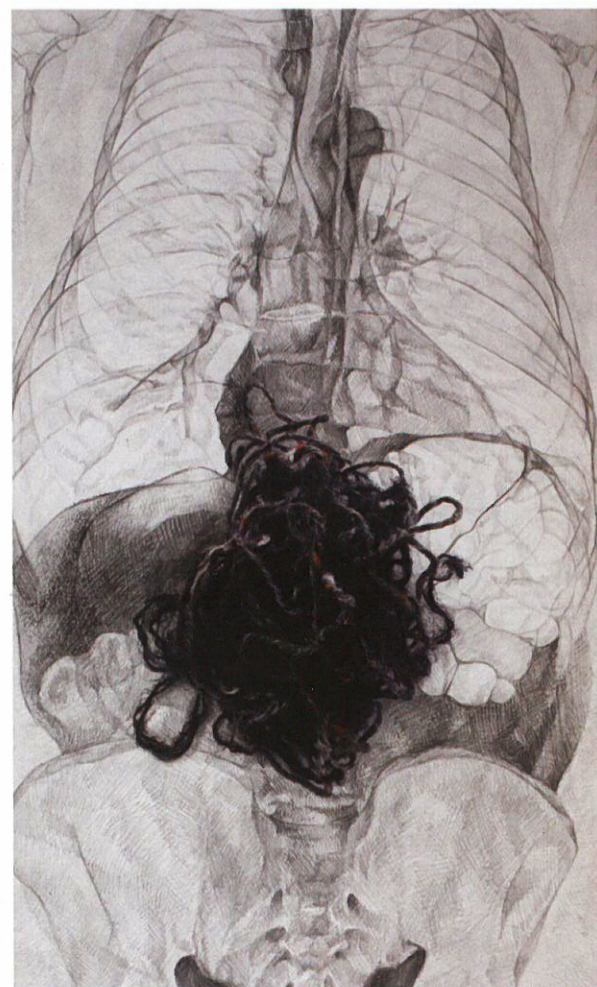
Body Conscious III

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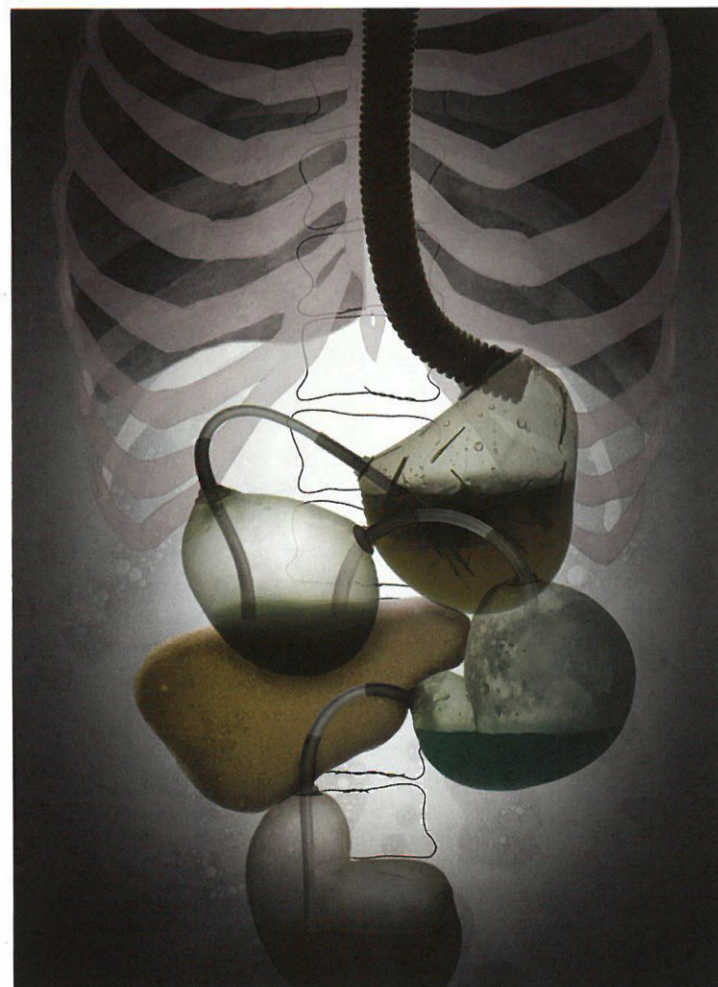
German-born Vera Klute lives and works in Ireland. She graduated from Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology in 2006. Her work has been included in many exhibitions worldwide, is part of both private and public collections and has recently been added to the National Self-portrait Collection of Ireland. In 2011, her work was chosen for 'Futures 11' at the RHA, Dublin. Previous solo exhibitions were held at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny (2011), Wexford Arts Centre (2009) and The LAB, Dublin (2006). Forthcoming exhibitions will be shown at The LAB, Dublin (2014) and The RHA Ashford Gallery, Dublin (2014). She received Arts Council Bursary Awards in 2008, 2009, and 2011 and the Emerging Visual Artist Award, Wexford Arts Centre in 2009.



Snot, Vera Klute
2013, Marker and crayon on paper, 30 x 37 cm



Knot, Vera Klute
2010, Digital print with pencil & charcoal on paper, 58 x 84 cm



Wiederkäufer (english translation: Ruminant), Vera Klute
2009, Lambda print mounted on acrylic, 39.8 x 55 cm