

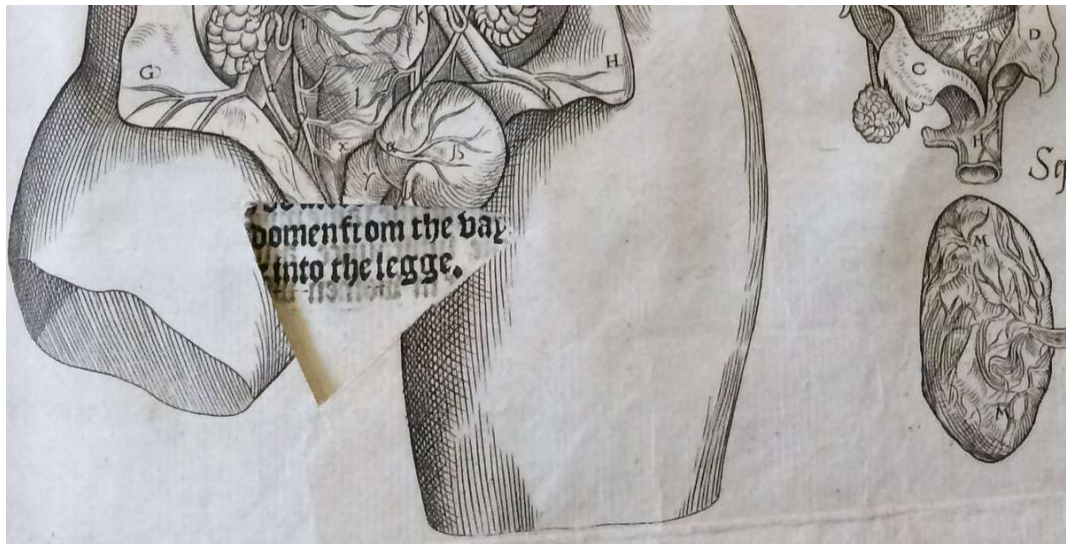
# Visions as practice in practice-based research

Sarah Scaife

Exeter University Magic and Esotericism Research Group  
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Intimate interior of a woman's body

This work bounces off Dr Emily Selove's presentation, 'Dangerous Books', given at the Exeter University Magic and Esotericism Research Group on 3 April 2020.



Thomas Gemini, 1559, anatomical diagram (detail) with section removed

I was intrigued by the spell involving “a slave girl”\*, which relied on the intimate interior of a woman’s body as a site of magic. It brought to mind Bernini’s sculpture of a woman who began to experience religious ecstasy during almost a year of ill health, The Ecstasy of St Teresa.

May I introduce Dr Teresa de Ávila, and her research methodology?

#### FOOTNOTE

\*It feels necessary to notice this phrase, ‘a slave girl’. Selove (3 April 2020) spoke of how these women, who serviced the court of the Moghul Empire, could be highly valued for the wit and intellect they brought to male company. Strangely, the role affords opportunities to behave in ways which are not allowed in the requirements imposed on a wife. Yet at the same time here is another deep contradiction, for women only experience this lack of restriction from within economic and patriarchal enslavement. In a different way, some mediaeval women found opportunity within the constraint of extreme religious practice, including that of becoming an anchorite. And, as a friend reminded me recently, let us not think of this agency carved out from within significant constraint as an historic female condition. It remains very present. I am also aware that this footnote is a form of what Prof. Shawn Sobers calls an “*Inconsequential Monument* – How we attempt to honour the sacrifices made by our ancestors with sincere respectful gestures and acts of remembrance, which in truth are never enough to fulfil, meet or reach the actual sacrifices that were made, but is what we feel is a fitting and adequate gesture in any given moment.” (Sobers, n/d).

Teresa's research methodology

Teresa (1515 –1582) was a Carmelite nun and a religious reformer. Illness was an ongoing feature of her life. She documented much of this, creating a unique medical record from the period.



Bernini, The Ecstasy of St Teresa  
1647-1652

In recognition of her remarkable contribution to the mystical literature of the Church, Teresa is among 36 Doctors of the [Roman Catholic] Church, of whom only four are women.

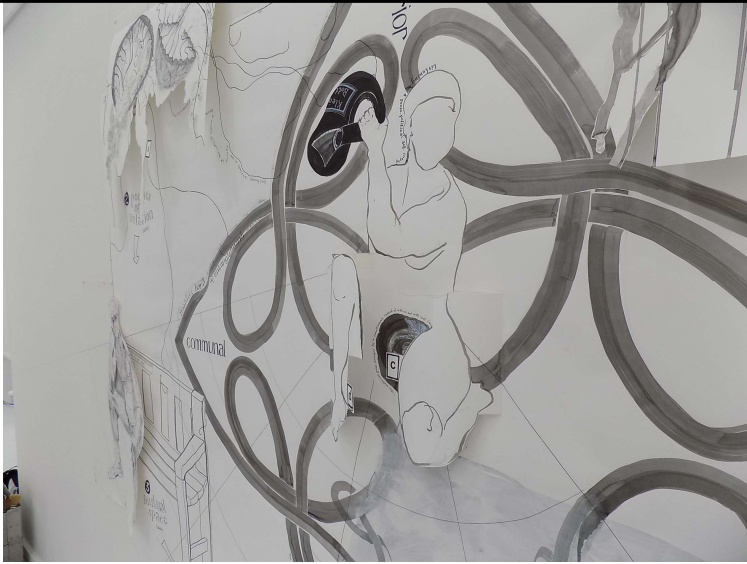
Teresa was a scholar who undertook practice-based, embodied, performative autoethnographic research.



Sarah Scaife 2019 studio shot, working on *The Anatomy of a Practice*  
a large diagrammatic open-the-flap drawing on paper

My own doctoral research at Exeter, supervised by Dr Bryan Brown, will share some of this ground, though it is in the field of Magical Aesthetics (Dixon, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2018) not Catholicism. It is thrilling to stand in Teresa's shadow at the start of my PhD.

Camille (1996, p.125) proposes that the particularity of the experience of being a Christian nun in the mediaeval period, fostered sophisticated visual skills in "these women [who] sought to make their own bodies sites for the performance of Christ's passion." He argues that this image-inary world "cannot be fixed in a specifically sacred or secular content, but [...] move[s...] evocatively between the two."



Sarah Scaife 2019 The Anatomy of a Practice (detail)

Commenting in 1996, Camille (1996, p.19) suggests that “in a [mediaeval] world with presences, unseen as well as seen, images of things were far more powerful than they are today”. As Selove’s presentation hinted, in 2020 we may be returning to these mediaeval perspectives.

This radical, mystical tradition vibrates with aesthetically literate women. I use ‘aesthetic’ here, as Morton (2013, p. 35 and elsewhere), in its broadest sense of relating to perceived sensory experience rather than just beauty. These women occupied a unique position, overstepping and subverting Christian boundaries in their deeply sensual relationship with deity. In the name of God, they could see the unseen and found a voice to speak the unspeakable feminine. I want to know more about them.

## Voluptuous sufferings

I invite you to consider Teresa's vision, as depicted by Bernini roughly one lifetime later (between 1647–1652), translated from Teresa's own record by Suzanne Warma in 1984 (Turvey Sauron, 2007, pp.260-261).

Mediaeval art - not to mention the current pandemic - reminds us that the troubled human experience of the sick body is widespread and persistent. Mediaeval people may have found comfort by “enter[ing] into the voluptuous sufferings of the saints. [...] While the naked sexual body was consigned to the margins, the naked, sadistically tormented body, whether of Christ or the Saints, was given centre stage” (Camille, 1996, p.160).





Teresa writes:

“Beside me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form... In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated into my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God.”

(Turvey Sauron, 2007, p.260-261)

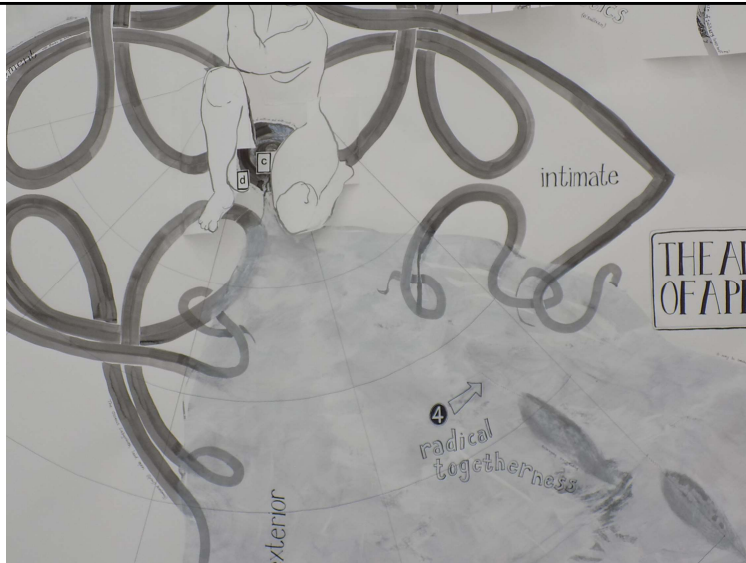
Oscillation, paradox, contradiction



She continues:

“The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one’s soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it - even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in his goodness, to grant him some experience of it.”

(Turvey Sauron, 2007, p.261)



Sarah Scaife 2019 The Anatomy of a Practice (detail) large diagrammatic drawing on paper

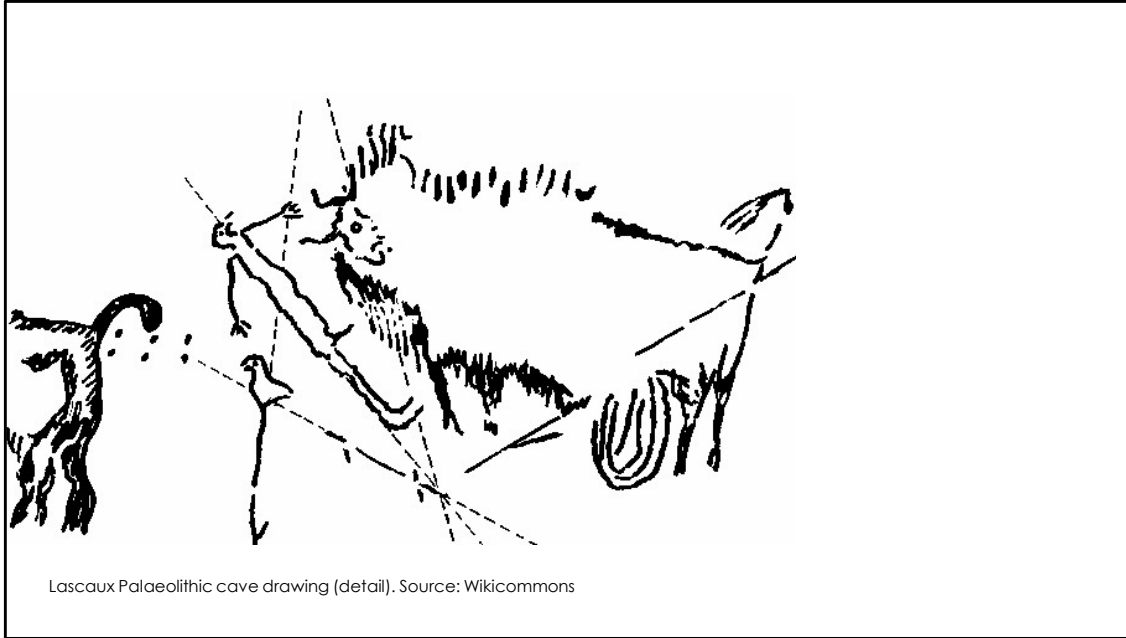
For many women - and I am one of them - patriarchal Christian orthodoxy has dried out and unravelled the intimately twisted magic of the sacred and the erotic. Here is a woman openly and “undecidedly oscillating between the deeply sacred and the deeply erotic” (Turvey Sauron, 2007, p.189). She is flooded with life force: ecstatic, divine, the kundalini, for Dylan Thomas, “The force that through the green fuse drives”.

If we can step outside the binary order of the Modern period, such oscillation need not be troubling. Indeed, I am in accordance with Morton in thinking that existence itself might be understood as contradiction and paradox: “I hold that contradictory beings exist - that this is what existence is in some deep sense” (Morton, 2013, p.32).

I would like to move from Teresa’s vision to one of my own.

## Working with a Shaman

I do not yet find it comfortable to theorise my experience of working with a shaman. Everyday discourse in the UK marginalises or exoticises shamanic practice, so I rarely speak about it.



Lascaux Palaeolithic cave drawing (detail). Source: Wikicommons

Perhaps I could start by describing work with a Shaman as an intimate one-to-one, magical performance. To borrow Emily Selove's words, at the magic research group (3 April 2020), this is "spirit affecting spirit, spirit affecting body as categories of magic. It's a life or death sort of performance". David Abram's animism, in 'The Spell of the Sensuous', republished in 2017, is closely aligned with my own ontology and gives me some clues.



Abram writes that “the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate [...] Considered phenomenologically - that is, as we actually experience and live it - the body is a creative, shape shifting entity” (Abram, 2017, p.46-47).



I don't yet understand how and where animism, phenomenology and object oriented ontology (OOO) meet or collide, but I'm beginning to glimpse some sticky patches to investigate. Morton, tells us that "a hierophant is someone who makes the sacred appear, perhaps a shaman rather than a priest." (Morton, 2013, p.91). At the same time, in OOO, there is always an unspeakable, enclosed, secret, or "withdrawn" element. Abram (2017, p.222) tells us that Heidegger's writing implies "the very thickness of the present, itself - that there is an enigmatic, hidden dimension at the very heart of the sensible present, into which phenomena may withdraw and out of which they continually emerge."

Are Morton and Abram saying more or less the same thing?

Today, I want to take you back to revisit The Walled Garden, a place where I have been many times, usually guided and accompanied by a shaman.



The door to the walled garden  
as aperture

What I can reflect on is the artist's response, where, unlike Bernini, the artist is herself the one experiencing the healing vision.



Credit: thesuccess on Morguefile

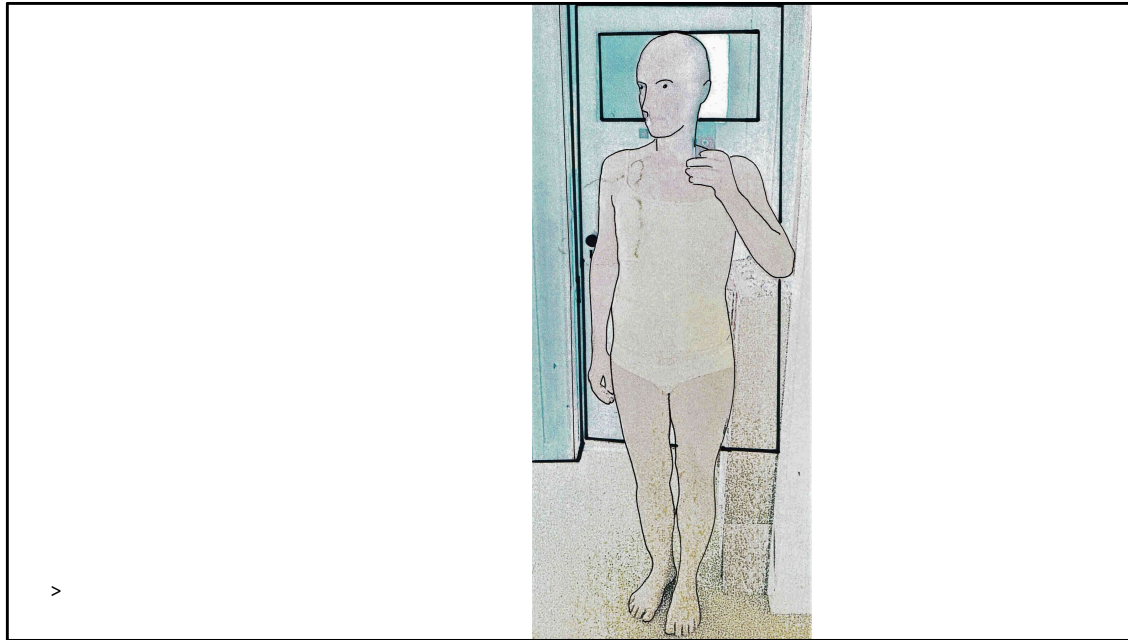
The 000 notion of *aperture* is relevant here. “So what is aperture, the feeling of beginning?... Stories begin with flickers of uncertainty... Every detail seems weird, floating in a bath of potential significance.” (Morton, 2013, p.123) When the shaman takes me to visit the walled garden, the vision always begins some way off. I always walk towards a door in the garden wall.



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The style of door changes but it is always closed. As Morton (2013, p.124) puts it, “An object [in this case, the door to the walled garden] appears like a crack in the real”.

Apertures oscillate: from the Latin past participle of *apertus*, meaning at once to open/uncover and at the same time to close/cover. The prefix *ap-*, coming before the letter P means *towards*, for example in the word ‘approach’, but *ap-*before a vowel or an H means *away/off/from/detached*.

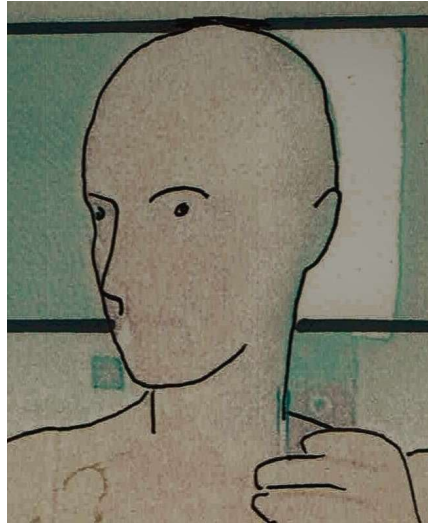


Writing at home during lockdown I wonder if we are locked in or locked out. As I leaf through the etymological dictionary, I can't help but notice the link between ap-erture and the word *ap-ocalypse*.

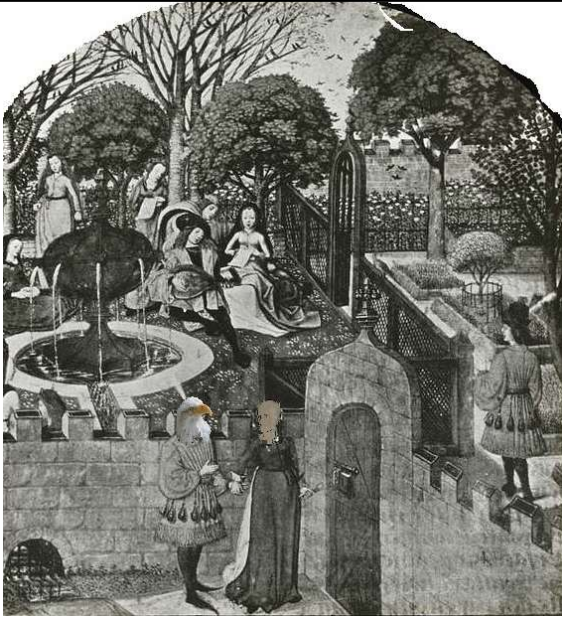
Apocalypse: an uncovering, a revealing, a removal of the veil of concealment, an unveiling of that which could have not been known before now. Pertinent, isn't it?

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, apocalypse meant a vision.

All shall be well



I invite you to consider part of a vision, which I experienced during the poisoning of chemotherapy in 2017:



“In the very centre of the walled garden is a fountain. A well. A spring really. Standing in the spring a small child splashes about in the water. The bronze statue looks down on the child, bronze arms outstretched, bronze songbirds perching on bronze fingers. And the waters of the spring are pumping up through the bronze body, rising to the top of the poised head and pouring out, flushing out through every opening, every opening, washing down - as laughter - back to the source beneath.”

(Scaife, personal notebook 2017)





My field notes, kept at the time, rather understate the laughter. I can tell you I was *crying* with laughter, vibrating: *jouissance* as flow, flushing through, outpouring through every aperture of my body. The gushing paradox of skin turned to metal, wet and porous as the intimate surfaces of the human body. My body is at once hollowed out and filled to overflowing. The boundaries between states - solid, liquid, mucosal - become blurred.

My own and Teresa's visions are both at once utterly abject and deeply sacred. In my vision it is the moisture which performs the same role as the drapery folds of Bernini's sculpture, enveloping exterior yet intimating interior. Morton tells us that philosophers tend to find the aesthetic (sensory) dimension, the physical workings of the body, to be a "realm of evil" (2013, p. 18), referring to "the demonic aesthetic dimension" (2013, p. 22).

Turvey Sauron (2007, p.191) quotes St John Chrysostom, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century: "The whole of her body is nothing less than phlegm, blood, bile, rheum." As Kristeva identifies (Turvey Sauron, 2007, pp.193-200), warding off the abject lies at the heart of many religious rituals whereas, I'm curious that certain practices of (not harmful) magic seem to embrace, and sometimes seek, the materiality of physical being. Unlike me, Teresa is a saint as well as a research scholar. Is a saint's bodily existence unclean in the same way as mine, or the body of Selove's "slave girl"? Here is another interesting area.

You will have noticed, of course, that for this healing journey, the shaman guided me to the garden centred on a homophonic "well". But that part of the coded message comes from inside me, not him. The vision-object, the performance, is created between us. (Whalley & Miller, 2017; Brown, 3 April 2020)

An experience of flow is fundamental to human embodiment, in our moist tissue, fluid emissions, and in Csikszentmihalyi's sense of deeply immersive activity. Did this overwhelming insistence on flow, this ecstatic experience help to make me well again?

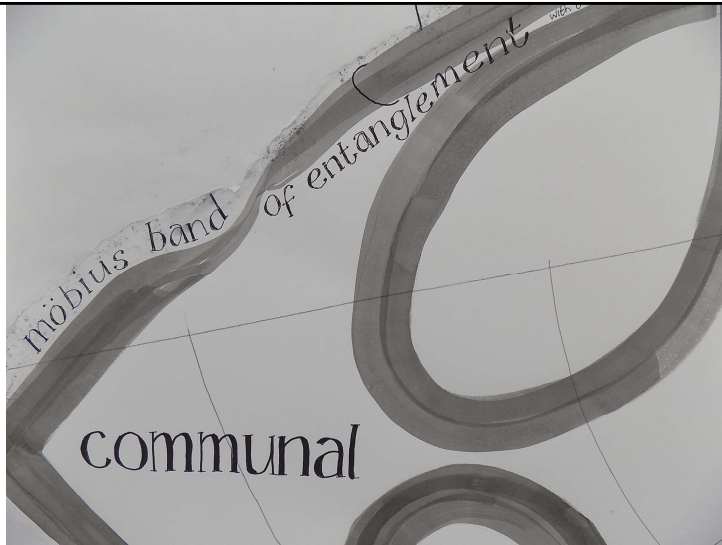




A cancer diagnosis does feel like an apocalypse, but treatment might be experienced in many ways. For example, if you have ever had an MRI scan you may agree that the scan could range from a torture machine to some sort of sci-fi Festival dance music apparatus. Thanks to my long-established experience of working with the shaman, and my art practice too, I discovered that I could decide which registers to tune into, and thus influence my sensory experiences. Difficult treatment became for me a dance club, a spaceship, material for an artist residency. At the time I had not read Morton (2013, p.20), but I think that, like me, he is suggesting that if we change the story, we change the perception; and therefore, we change the causality.

## Aesthetic causality and healing processes

For Morton (2013, p.113), causality is a kind of sampling; “it seems as if each entity samples the wave front in different ways.” Are my visions, Teresa’s visions, samples remixed from all possible experiences open to those beings in human embodiment? Who knows if Teresa, a Catholic nun, had any experience of intimate sexual connection? She is tuned into the expansive life force which current Western sensibilities associate with sexual pleasure, but it is much more than this.

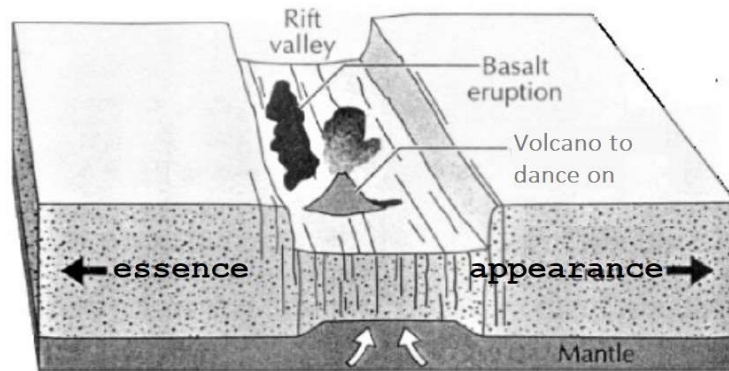


Sarah Scaife 2019 The Anatomy of a Practice (detail)

Just as at quantum scales entangled objects “behave as if they were telepathic” (Morton 2013, p.121), Morton invites us to consider that this entanglement is spreading through “a vast ocean of objects, all communicating and receiving information from one another”, an ocean of “interobjectivity” (Morton 2013, p.121-122).

The shamanic journey enters this entanglement too. Morton’s notion of *tuning* might well be applied to shamanic medicine: “Yet when you tune, real things happen. You are affecting causality. You are establishing a link with at least one other actually existing entity” (Morton, 2013, p.23)

Dancing with volcanoes



Sarah Scalfe 2020 (after Morton 2013)

Morton (2013) reflects on *The Rift* between essence and appearance. As Turvey Sauron (2007, p.193) puts it an opening “could equally be a liberation or a wound” and much art relating to the female body operates to prevent leakage. Is a rift also a tear or a cut? A primal wound (Turvey Sauron, 2007, p.193)?

“Our relating with objects opens up the abyss of freedom because each relation is a dance on a volcano, an emission from the opaque void of an object. Relations are uncanny and hollow because they dance at the edge of volcanoes.” (Morton 2013, p.89)

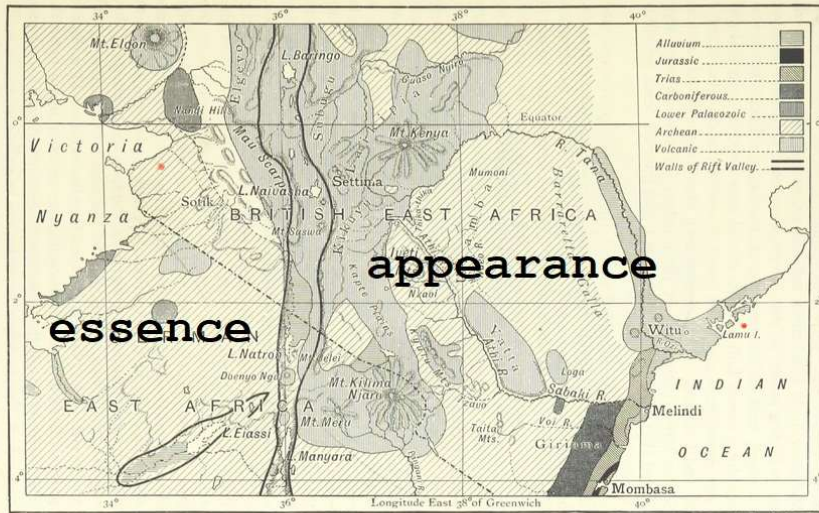
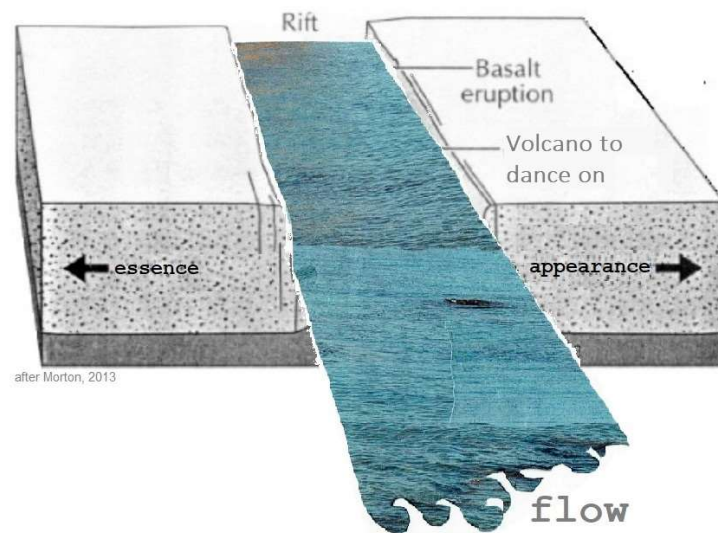


FIG. 7.—Geological Sketch-Map of British East Africa.

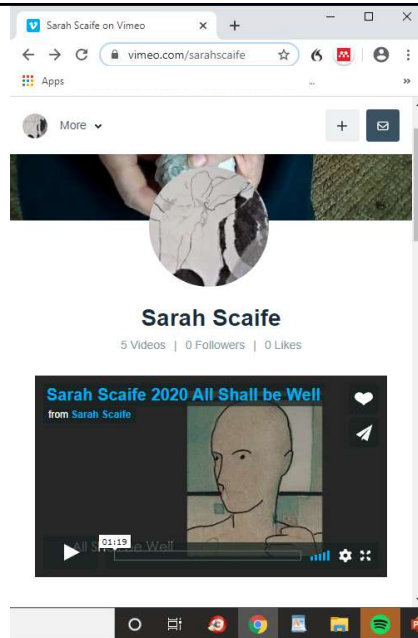
This Rift analogy reminds me of a trip to the East African Rift Valley, a feature of great depths overlying plate tectonics, where the Earth's crust is floating islands and the magma wells up in fiery eruptions. This is perhaps one of Henry Bergson's 'privileged locations', one of Simondon's knots or points of passage between two realities (O'Sullivan, 2018, p.6).



“[Causality] *pours* constantly from a single object itself, from the *chorismos* between its essence and its appearance. [...] [The Rift generates] ‘blue notes’ [...] pitched [...] impossibly between harmony and dissonance”  
(Morton 2013, p.36, emphasis on *pours* is mine).

Is this the journey that the Shaman makes; into the abyss, to dance across the rift between essence and appearance?

May I invite you to watch this one  
minute film on vimeo:  
<https://vimeo.com/sarahscaife>



[I invite you to watch this one-minute long film on  
video, before returning to the concluding section of  
this work >  
<https://vimeo.com/sarahscaife>]



## Coda: magic in the sensual ether

A healing vision becomes a new object. It often continues to unfold, looping outside linear time. Things interact with each other in what Graham Harman calls a “sensual ether”, which is located in neither time nor space (Morton, 2013, p.20), or, to put this another way “reality itself is not mechanical or linear, when it comes to causality” (Morton, 2013, p.17).



Photo credit: Plymouth College of Art

In 2019, two years after this vision and feeling well, I had the opportunity to give a short talk at Tate Modern, at the invitation of the Tate Exchange programme. I selected and researched a painting in preparation, but when I arrived at the gallery the day before, the painting was unexpectedly removed from display. A rapid rethink was required. My strategy was to walk the galleries, open to any artwork which might call to me. After some nerve-wracking time, as I stepped through a large opening into the space between works by Antony Gormley and Eva Hesse, I felt a charge pulse through my body. I knew very little about the history of the two works, but I knew that this was where I would speak.



As Morton (2013, p.23) puts it “one object [...] can be attended to, attuned to, in different ways that bring out strange hidden properties of that object,” so that in doing that tuning we might make another object, in this case my ‘Tate 10 Minute Talk’.

Antony Gormley 1985 *Untitled (for Francis)* is a life-size figurative metal sculpture made from a plaster mould, cast from the body of the artist. The figure is pierced and slit across the chest.

Antony Gormley 1985 Untitled (for Francis)  
Tate Modern



Gormley has said: 'I regard my body as the vehicle through which all my impressions of the world come, and equally I want to use my body as the vehicle through which anything that I have to communicate with the world can be carried.' (Tate, 2016).



In a paradox of oscillation and contradiction the sculpture is at once the body of Gormley; it is the body of a Christian saint; it is my own in-cancer-treatment body, shape-shifted into a magical statue, with healing well waters gushing through me.

[ENDS]

Sarah Scaife 2020

<http://www.berrybrowngown.uk/>

Tate (2016) Antony Gormley 1985 Untitled (for Francis)  
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