



THE ALLURE OF ABSENCE

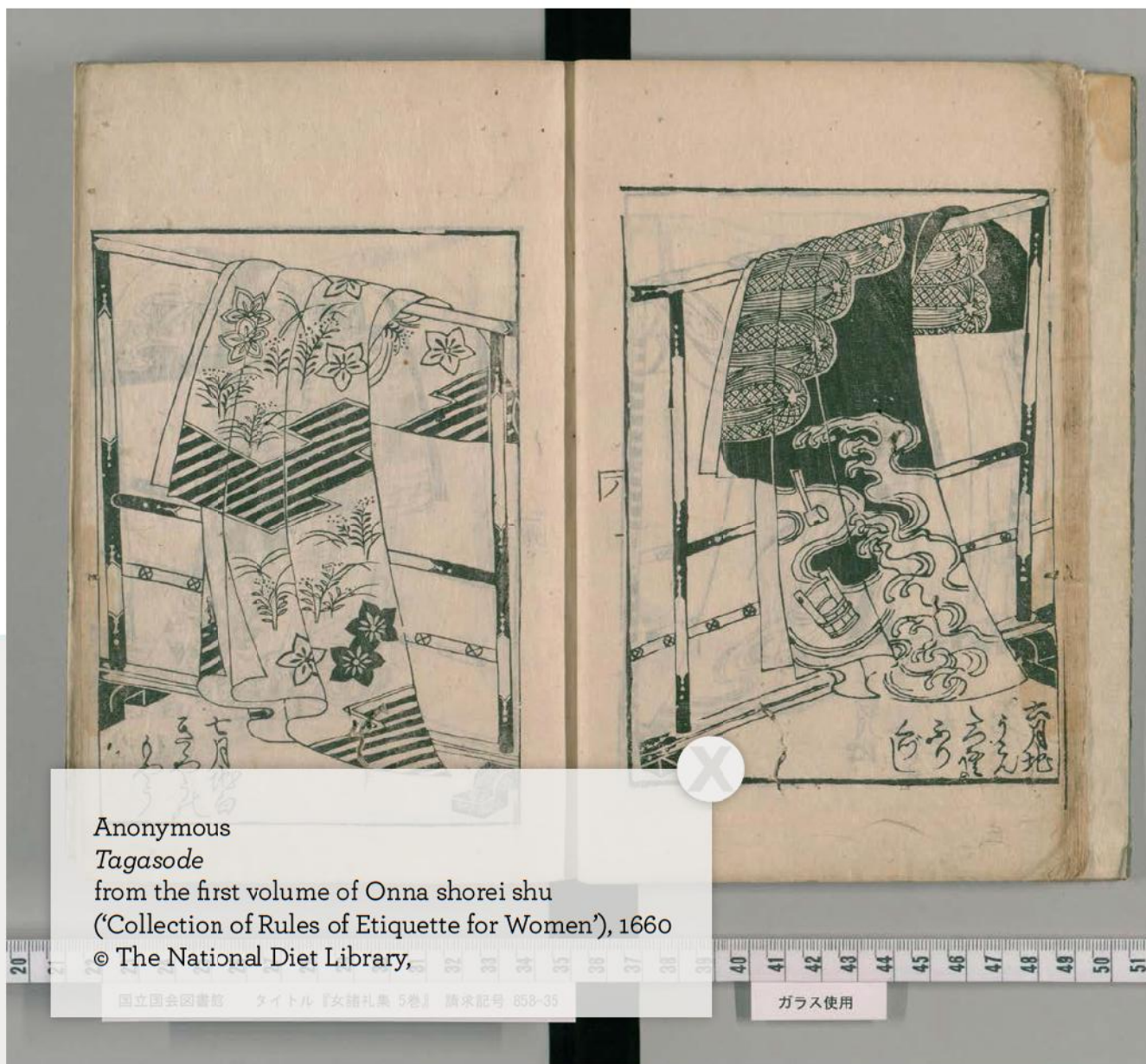
The aesthetics of the female body in Western contemporary art and seventeenth century Japan

The exhibition *Sleepless: The bed in history and contemporary art* **has just opened in Vienna**. As is often the case, both the title and the content of the exhibition omit the word 'Western'; its absence is not considered problematic because the West is an assumed paradigm. It is therefore momentous to discuss one of the representative works in the exhibition in conjunction with another work that is distanced in time and space, but similar in its framing of a conspicuous absentee: the feminine body. The former work is Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), **an installation replicating the artists' own bed**. The latter is a seventeenth century Japanese folding screen called *Tagasode byobu* (Whose sleeves?) that depicts feminine clothes hung on a rack. (fig. A) I will explore the significance of the absent body to issues of feminine identity and bodily practices by bringing the two artworks together as facing mirrors. The objective is to uncover new meanings in each one through the other.

Throughout western civilization, the bed has been the site of crucial existential events such as giving birth, children jumping, wedding nights, sleeping, dreaming, and death. It is an intimate and versatile space, both the site of relaxation, passivity, and sexual activity. When compared to technologies of rest in other cultures, the bed is stationary and difficult to move around—in fact, its very importance derives from its perceived immobility. The bed has also been one of the main framing devices for the female nude in Western art (Clark 1956). Although they tend to be taken for granted, all of these features of the Western bed play a part in the artistic agency of *My Bed*. This is why a comparison with a work such as the 'Whose sleeves' screens is revealing; in seventeenth century Japanese culture, there was no equivalent of

the Western bed. *Futon* (padded mattresses) were still a novelty at the time, and clothes were commonly used as bedding for naked bodies. Clothes also had an architectural function: hung over racks, they would serve as room dividers, similarly to a folding screen (Murase 2000, 353). (fig. B) The clothes retained their association with their owners (Screech 1999, 114), and their display had an erotic connotation (Guth 1992, 33; Carpenter 1998, 424). Clothes, therefore, had a multiple framing function: physical, either when worn or when displayed on rack, and ontological, suggesting the taste of a specific wearer. A similar framing function is performed by the bed in *My Bed*—notice how elements of personal dress, such as tights, are integrated into an assembly that likewise offers a domestic scene for aesthetic consideration.

The titles of these two artworks relate through an inverted parallelism. The title of *My Bed* is specific, identifying the work and its contents as belonging to Tracey Emin. At the same time, the content is non-specific—without a title and an identified author, it could be any woman's bed.[1] In the artist's words, "It's just a bed." (TV Spain 2008, 02:03) By contrast, the title of 'Whose Sleeves?' screens is non-specific and interrogatory.[2] Despite this, the contemporary audience would have been able to reconstruct the taste and personality of a specific wearer, an elegant lady, from the details in the dress (Screech 1999, p. 114). In the former



case, the person (Tracey Emin, the author of the work) specifies the frame. In the latter case, the frame specifies the person (elegant lady). This distinction is characteristic of the specific cultural frames within which both artworks are situated, and further reflected in the documentation attached to the two artworks. The identity of the ladies depicted in the screens is no longer known. Besides historical vagaries, this might be due to the fact that the objects themselves were less important than the social contexts in which they were used. We also don't know the identity of their authors, beyond the assumption that they were so-called 'town painters' from studios selling works in the capital Miyako (now known as Kyoto) (Satsuki Milhaupt 2003, 273). The screens are also difficult to date, and there are various theories regarding the genesis of the genre. Meanwhile, we know close to everything about *My Bed*: who, when, and where it was made, down to the street number of Tracey Emin's London apartment.

The documentary abundance of Tracey Emin's work is a telling example of the encroaching role of media in contemporary art. As Deborah Cherry reports: "In London *My Bed* rapidly became an over-night sensation, as a rhetoric of shock, sensation and controversy swirled around the artist and her work." (Cherry 2001) How did an artwork that was "just a bed" cause such a media frenzy? Well, *My Bed* is not just any bed—it is a dirty bed. Cherry writes that: "*My Bed* emits no strong odour. Nevertheless a stink metaphor, already in circulation for Emin's art, drifted around *My Bed*." (Cherry 2001) The newspaper reviewers who employed this "stink metaphor" were translating visual stimuli into olfactory responses. The same synaesthetic mechanism is consciously employed in the screens. The title itself is a poetic allusion to a classical poem which privileges olfactory over visual stimuli:

*The fragrance seems even more alluring than the hue,
Whose sleeves have brushed past?
Or would it be this plum tree blossoming here at home?*

*Iro yori mo ka koso awaredo
omohoyure tagasode fureshi
ado no ume zo mo*

(Heilbrunn 2000)

The suggested texture and scent of the robes and the flickering light under which they would have been viewed contribute toward an encompassing synaesthetic experience.[3] This is compounded with the enfolded-ness of the screens, customarily displayed at various angles that result in a spatial and temporal dynamics. The insistence on sensual triggers runs counter to the Western aesthetic tradition, highly influenced by Kant's privileging of contemplative over sensory pleasure. Contrary to this tradition, Tracey Emin's artwork invites the viewer to participate in a transgressive sensory experience. Although the artist achieves this only through visually suggestive means, the very suggestion of non-visual elements is repulsive, just like **Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years***. From this point of view, *My Bed* challenges the inodorous and aseptic medium in which art is displayed in the Western civilization. In the history of Western thought, the visual has been privileged as detached and objective, while the olfactory has been relegated to the discourse framing the Oriental or the feminine Other. For instance, in a **François Boucher painting of one of the mistresses of Louis XV**, the flower and incense suggest olfactory pleasure in a manner which parallels that of the screens. Both in the screens and in paintings of female nudes that are intended for private viewing, the gaze is that of a male voyeur, activating the work by imagining the presence of the feminine body. Here is where *My Bed* distances itself: it sets the stage for voyeurism, but offers a doubly disappointing sight: the bed is visually repulsive, and the female body is not present (Terraroli 2010, 55). *My Bed* subverts the traditional idea of contemplative male voyeurism. The strong reactions elicited by the work testify to the effectiveness of this subversion.

There are two responses to *My Bed* that are especially illustrative of the larger meaning it carries. Firstly, I will discuss the appropriation of the artwork by two Chinese artists, Cai Yuan and Xi Jianjun, who "removed some of their clothes, rushed onto the bed, shouting and

jumping, and had a pillow fight." (Cherry 2001) They conceived this act as a performance, entitled *Two Naked Men Jump on Tracey's Bed*. Their act was staged as a refusal to perform the role of voyeur. However, Yuan and Jianjun violated the feminine space of *My Bed* both physically and symbolically, thus appropriating it as a site of masculine activity despite their claim to have done the opposite.[4] The two artists replaced the bodily absence of *My Bed* with a doubled bodily presence. In this sense, whether intentionally or not, they harkened back to a Western tradition of bed-bound nudes. If we were to genealogically trace this tradition back in time, we might mention **Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of intimate lesbian couples**. Lautrec was challenging the function of the bed in Western tradition as a framing device for the female nude exposed to the male gaze. In paintings such as Boucher's, the feminine body's personal space had been fully exposed and available to the male gaze. Toulouse-Lautrec painted the body as defined by its personal space, and not by its erotogenic zones. His choice of feminine intimacy is relevant in this context. The two women enjoying each other's bodies autonomously, hidden and non-erotogenic to the male gaze. It is not only the opacity of the bedcover that restricts the male gaze. It is also the expanded volume of the women's bodies. The artist has configured an expanded bodily space, impenetrable by the viewer.

We find the same use of space in **Jeanne Dunning's photographic work**. The body is present, defining its personal space within the frame of the bed. At the same time, the body is disappearing from the reach of the male gaze, though not completely; the hand is still visible. The immaculate bed in Dunning's *In Bed* is tame and non-transgressive, perpetuating a tight containment of the body—remarkably different from Emin's *My Bed*, with its stained confusion. In Emin's work the framing of the female body is not complete; the body is half-present through its fluid traces: blood, urine, semen. Adrian Gargett points to this when he writes: "*My Bed* is about incontinence moral and actual." (Gargett 2001) I would replace the 'moral' here with 'ontological', echoing calls for a feminist philosophy of the body (Grosz 1994). By transgressing the boundaries between self

and other, *My Bed* is pointing towards a new configuration of feminine identity through the specificity of the artist's body. However, the aesthetic suggested by *My Bed* and feminist theories is still beyond our current system of representation. Works such as *My Bed* thus inhabit aesthetic limbo: abjection.[5] Emin makes the move from body as object to body as abject. The second significant response to *My Bed* that I will discuss addresses the destabilizing function of abjection: "[T]he homemaker from Wales who intervened in the installation and then told the press, 'I drove straight to London with a 500 ml bottle of Vanish. I had a go, but unfortunately I could not get to wash the sheets, just a pre-wash. I may have done the artist a favour. In her video, she was bleating on about a lack of a love life. She will never get a boyfriend unless she tidies herself up.'"(Loughlin) The woman's response is not just about the physical act of cleaning the bed—it is also about configuring a sanitized feminine identity by erasing the traces of her body. In this regard, the name of the stain-remover brand the woman was using (Vanish) is unwittingly appropriate.

Are there other modes of expression besides abjection, in which a new feminine bodily aesthetic could be couched? The screens embody the same sensually charged failure of containing the feminine body—visible only are the objects which bear her traces. Unlike Boucher's nudes, the male gaze is not fulfilled. The resulting ambiguity of the feminine body is valorised and integrated into an alluring identity. Thus, I propose that the screens can function as a model for future aesthetic developments in contemporary art. My proposal takes into consideration similarities in the context of production: although the tendency is to attribute fixity and atemporality to non-Western works of art, the screens were products of an age just as volatile as the nineties. After a century of civil war, the Japanese archipelago had been centralised under the rule of the Tokugawa family, which moved the capital from Miyako to Edo (present day Tokyo). Rapid economic growth led to wider audiences which required fresh visual formulas of consecrated themes. The screens were produced at the very beginning of this period of intense transformations. They were contemporaneous with the emergence of a new bodily aesthetic, represented by the 'bent' poses of a burgeoning demimonde (Carpenter 2002).(fig. C-D) The iconography of erotic images

Shibata Zeshin,
Parody of the Four Accomplishments
Nineteenth century copy of early seventeenth century
folding screen, one of a pair of six-panel folding screens,
ink and colour and gold leaf on paper, 120.7 by 285.8 each
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



was also changing in this period, from nude bodies against an empty background to cloth-framed bodies in an interior setting (Tanaka 1996, 63).[6]

I interpret the absence of a body in the screens as a crisis in representations of the feminine body. Relatedly, I argue that these screens are a manifestation of a change in the conception of the body in seventeenth-century Japan. Could *My Bed* announce a similar future aesthetic transformation? When the feminine body was featured in early seventeenth-century Japanese paintings, it was depicted with alluring 'bent' poses in which the tightly-draped garments played an important role. The screens thus exhibit a fissure in the iconographical conventions of the feminine figure, fragmented into clothes on the one hand and a highly expressive body on the other hand. At the time, this iconography was highly unusual, daring and experimental. This is more difficult to recognize today because the bodily poses were soon standardized into depictions of feminine beauty in the *ukiyo-e* ('floating world picture') genre, that has since received considerably more attention in the West. For instance, the erotic undertone of poetical allusions in the screens was brought to the fore in later images. (fig. E) In the pictured example of a 'floating world picture,' clothes hung on a rack configure an erotically-charged scene along with the woman bather's coquettish hand gesture (Mostow 1996, 101-103). Despite their delights, these later images ultimately simplified the ambiguity and radicalism of early seventeenth century screens. The screens, as well as *My Bed*, are characterized by the temporary nature of their display, their snapshot quality. The resulting sense of casualness in both cases encourages the tendency to dismiss these works as insignificant or generic, to moderate their transgressive movement. In this sense, both works are casualties of fame (or the lack of it), historical change, aesthetic canons, and the need for closure.[7]



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