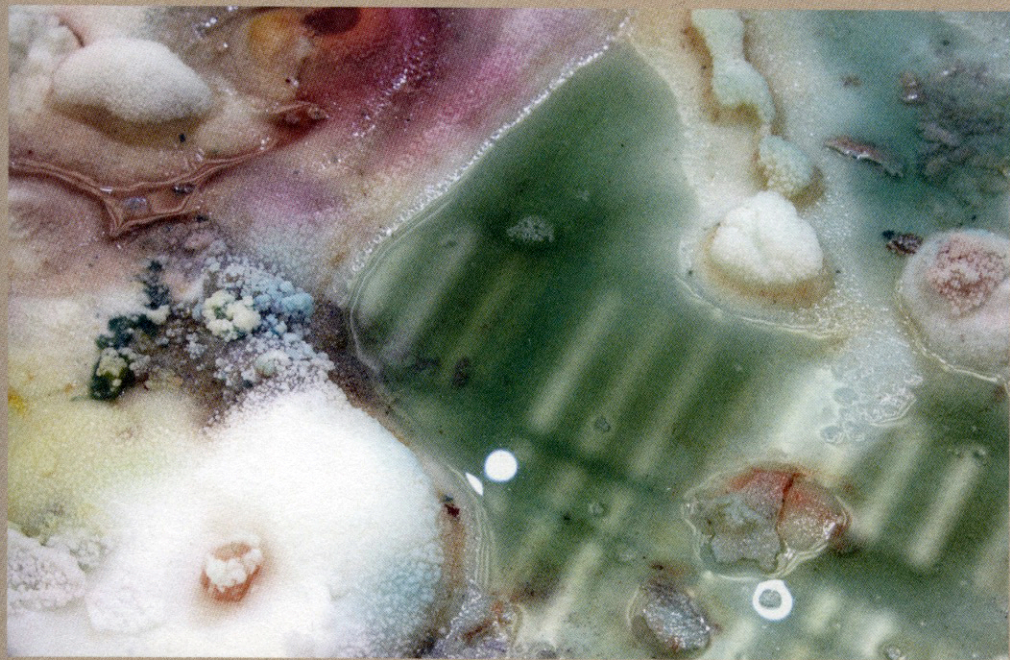


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FEMINISM.AND.CONTEMPORARY.ART

ISSUE . 8 . N O L I . M E . T A N G E R E

Chantal Faust

T H E . M A S O C H I S T I C
P U L S E

Dr Chantal Faust is an artist, writer and tutor in Critical & Historical Studies and Research at the Royal College of Art. <http://lycheeone.com/wp/artist/chantalfaust/>

1 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. A. Hudek and M. Lydon, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.351.

2 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993, p.222.

What kind of movement is a pulse? A pulse is a rhythmical throbbing. As an action, it is to throb rhythmically. A pulse races. It is a vibration, a burst, a point of energy. A pulse is felt and a pulse is taken. The word pulse, stems from the Latin pulsus, meaning ‘beating’, from pellere, ‘to drive, beat’. What kind of pulse follows the rhythm of the beat? And what kind of compulsion is the driving force behind the desire to be beaten?

Take “to beat.” The verb signifies a contact that is established, interrupted, and re-established between two surfaces: the one receiving the blows, and the surface of the object that is dealing them. Thus a rhythm of + - + - (in which + stands for the moment of contact) is induced.

This scansion demarcates a zone of simple opposition on the surface of the beaten body of the “absence/presence” type.¹

So we have this throbbing rhythm to the beat. The on and off of contact. The violent touch and its lack. The space between flesh as it comes together and falls apart. The plus, minus, plus, minus – or the on / off / on / off / on / off. This is the form of the beat. But as Krauss writes in her reading of Lyotard’s text, cited above, this is also an anxious state, whereby: The second pulse is not a principle of recurrence guaranteeing that an “on” will always follow an “off”;

it maps the principle, instead, of interruption. It is a pulse that is rather to be figured as +0, which is to say existence followed by total extinction. It is thus a “beat” that does not promise the return of the same, but simply re-turn, the coming of nothing...²



And in this beat of the interrupted pulse, in this on, off, on, where the off may never return and it

is this yawning gap, between the beat, between touch and its other at its most basic sense, but more so, that dark lack that hovers between 'on' and nothingness: eternal nothingness. Between touch me, and touch me not.

What kind of lick [lack] would the seaweed whip yield? Would it smack with wet delight or would it brush softly, leaving a salty trail in its wake? The figure in Esther Teichmann's photograph wears her lashes like a shawl, glistening strips wrapping over and around her naked body. Dark fingers coiling the flesh, dark-like the soles of her feet, like the space between her thighs framed between a leathery curtain. In isolation, the shape of this seabed growth certainly resembles that of a ball-handled flogger, the whipping apparatus with its many tails. It is not surprising that this species of algae is named *laminaria digitata*, labelled as such for the manner with which its fronds resemble a mass of extending fingers. Whipped by the hands of the sea, she appears blissfully rooted within its claws. Less an instrument of torture, than pleasure.

It is an impossibly extended moment of on-ness. The beat of the lash is forever charged in the image. And the beat goes on. This is no momentary fling, flick, sting, bite, release. Instead, what is exposed through its stillness is a dark caress. The tool for punishment becomes the scar itself. There are no whipping marks, just whip, as if the handle, or handler, has vanished, but its body is somehow



Figure 1. Esther Teichmann, from *Fractal Scars, Salt Water and Tears*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



left behind like a searing leech. She appears to be quite comfortably cocooned in this belting embrace. Perhaps she has fallen asleep. The lick of seaweed is soft, familiar, knowing. It grasps her completely. She is holding her breath.

The anxiety of the masochist divides therefore into an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and an intense expectation of pain.³ Sadism and masochism both bow down to a certain correlation between pain and pleasure, yet there are distinct differences to their methods and approach. Deleuze argued for a distance between sadism and masochism, that they should not be conjoined into sadomasochism, as in, sadism and masochism compounded. For Deleuze, their coupling is not complementary. In *Coldness and Cruelty*, he notes that ‘In every respect... the sadistic “instructor” stands in contrast to the masochistic “educator”⁴. It is the instructor who directs the scene, who says I shall do this to you at my will: an unrelenting force, preying upon its subjects. Whereas in the pedagogical realm of the masochistic educator: We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes. This is why advertisements are part of the language of masochism while they have no place in true sadism...⁵

Deleuze writes that where the sadist requires institutional possession, the masochist requires the pact. He calls them the masochist of contractual relations. And within this theatrical realm, it is the presence of the contract that sets the stage for the ensuing drama. It is the masochist who authors the contract, who lays down the rules of their desires. Which is perhaps why some confusion, or similarities, have been drawn between sadism and masochism.

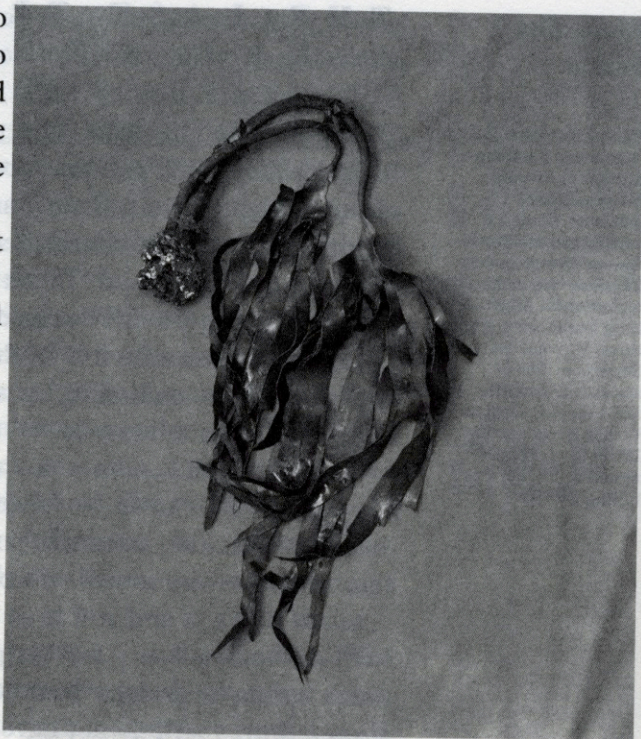
3 Gilles Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’ in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil, New York: Zone Books, 1997, p.71.
4 *Ibid.*, p.19.
5 *Ibid.*, p.20.

Figure 2. Esther Teichmann, from *Fractal Scars, Salt Water and Tears*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



For is it not the one who lays down the orders, who commands that this should be done, even if it should be done unto themselves, the figure of dominance?

It is the contract that precedes the deed. Or to put it another way, it is the word that comes before the act. A fantasy, or a desire, is articulated, but before it is played out, the rules of play, or non-play, are contractually agreed. The contract becomes a stage for desire. In Teichmann's image, it is the artist herself that is on display, it is her hand that wrote the contract.



Who is the ruler of restraint? Do we not need restraints in order to push our own limitations, for what is a limit when it has no edge? It is an on without an off. It is off until infinity. The anxiety of the masochist. The contract announces the state of affairs. It maintains its limits. The contract declares such things. But the contract does not necessarily provide any guarantees. Things can go wrong. Limits can be pushed. Safe words can be misinterpreted. Playing is a serious game in this world. Dangerous. Pulsating. On and on and off again.

