



Flowing Body: The Collision of Power Relations, Mind and Body Agency

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Abstract

This article constructs a novel theoretical framework for understanding the body in feminist theory by critically engaging with existing non-binary and non-essentialist views. It advances upon foundational critiques, particularly those by Haraway, Connell, and Butler, integrating the dynamics of body agency, power relations, and mind to propose a more fluid and intersectional approach to body politics. The new framework posits the body as an active participant in its continuous formation, interacting with and reshaping societal norms and expectations. Empirically, the paper analyzed four artworks displayed in art galleries and museums in Lund and Malmö in Sweden as case studies, focusing on how these works represent and shape notions of the female body across various themes including beauty, reproduction, migration, and sexuality. These artworks serve as a medium to explore how corporeal experiences are constructed through the interplay of power relations, mind, and body agency. Through critical analyses of theory and textual analyses of artworks, this paper points out that the body is a language of fluidity, simultaneously influenced and shaped by power relations, the mind, and its agency. Feminism should treat the body more carefully, avoiding biological essentialism or absolute social constructs.

Keywords: Body theory, Power relations, Agency, Art, Gender

1. Introduction

In my paper, I will explore the meaning of bodies in feminist theory/practice. Beyond social construction and binary, between submitting to the agency of bodies and using them as tools for resistance, how should feminism be more careful about our bodies?

All the arguments in this paper are grounded in political physiology and social construction. Through Haraway's (1991) political physiology, we learn why neither the study of our bodies nor our bodies are natural, and that there is a ruling principle permeating the natural sciences. Therefore, I will begin by introducing this key concept. Then, I will focus on Connell's (2005) and Butler's (2007) critique and reconstruction of social construction and their responses to the question of "how feminists should be careful with the body" (Connell's body-reflexive practice theory and Butler's performativity theory). The theoretical part will introduce an intersectional model based on breaking the body-mind/nature-culture binary, combining Connell's and Butler's ideas to present a theory of the fluidity of the body.

In the empirical section, I engage with a selection of artistic works from galleries in Lund and Malmö to analyze the representation and shaping of the female body within the domains of beauty, reproduction, migration, and sexuality. This analysis highlights how corporeal experiences are shaped by the interplay of power relations, cognitive processes, and bodily agency. The depiction of bodies in these artworks provides critical insights into the construction of identity and social relations, underscoring the need for vigilant feminist approaches to body politics.

The final section synthesizes the theoretical insights and empirical observations to draw comprehensive conclusions about the implications of these discussions for feminist theory and praxis. This integrative discussion aims to highlight the transformative potential of viewing the body through a feminist lens that is both critical and reflective, advocating for a continuous reevaluation of our engagements with the body in feminist discourse.

2. Theory

2.1 Political Physiology

Haraway (1991) believed in the importance of animal sociology in explaining theories of how bodies are oppressed. By analyzing Clarence Ray Carpenter's work in 1938 on 40 rhesus monkeys freed into Cayo Santiago, Haraway (1991) reveals that the principle of domination is embedded in every aspect of natural science as a natural property. Thus justifying political physiology and showing that our bodies are not merely natural and biological, "the natural sciences have been used in the interests of our domination and not our liberation." (Haraway, 1991, P8) There are a few simple examples to prove this point. The study of the sperm and the ovum referred to in the discussion of physiology in *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 1997), proves not only that science is limited by feudal ideas and gender, but also that it is not entirely objective. In *Female Choice*, Meike Stoverock (2021) demonstrates that in most species in nature, females have sexual choices. Within these species, it is the natural rule that females choose which male to mate with. Dominators and scientists reinforced male dominance by analyzing that nature is also full

of male domination, but in fact, this is just the imagination of males. The theory reveals that the natural sciences, including biology, are not merely natural, and that the theories used to study natural things are culturally constructed. Therefore, we need to rethink feminism based on a critique of the nature-culture binary.

2.2 Critique and Reconstruction of Social Construction

In the study of the relationship between the male body and masculinity, Connell (2005) offers a critique of social constructs. She argues that both physiological determinism and social constructionism, as well as common-sense theories that compromise between the two, are wrong. If physiological determinism likens the body to a "machine" (Connell, 2005, p48), social constructionism likens the body to an "artwork" (Connell, 2005, p50) constructed by various social factors. She points out that this view ignores the practical activity of the body as the body itself. She uses the example of "Don Meredith's realization of the pleasure of anal sex (body practice) leads him to experiment with homosexual sex (new social relationships), whereas he had previously considered himself heterosexual" (Connell, 2005, p60) to argue that the body can resist and even overturn the social constructions that symbolize it and in turn influence the processes that produce social behavior, which she calls body-reflexive practice. She argues that by changing body-reflexive practice and increasing body agency, it is possible to re-present the body and achieve the utopian goal of degendering (Connell, 2005, p233).

Butler (2007) similarly criticizes social constructionism for viewing the body as merely a tool or medium, and "a split is introduced in the feminist subject." (Butler, 2007, p8) However, rather than rejecting the theory altogether, she reconstructs it on a post-structuralist and non-essentialist basis. Deconstructing the opposition between gender and sex, she points out that the so-called biological sexual binary is also constructed and is a scientific discourse with implicit political interests. In terms of definition, gender is indistinguishable from sex. At the same time, she attempts to break down the Diocesan body-mind binary and to stitch the body back together from the split between culture and naturalness. So how shall we understand the meaning of the body in a non-binary, non-essentialist, and post-structuralist feminist theory?

In response, Butler (2007) presents her theory of performativity. She argues that "the gendered body is performative." (Butler, 2007, p185) The actions, performances, and even desires of bodies are disciplined by a political discourse in which existing oppression of women and heteronormative-centered gender power relationships are sustained. This theory explains how gendered bodies and gender identities are constructed in repetitive performativity (an imitation of a purely normative gender concept). Thus, all norms/restrictions on gender (both biological and social) lose their legitimacy. Butler argues that the task of feminists is to find and repeat subversive performativity to displace gender norms.

In general, both Connell and Butler challenge the idea of the "body only as a tool" in social construction. If essentialism is physiological determinism, social construction is cultural determinism, both implying that there is an unavoidable fate that determines who we are. While social construction is a powerful defense against the physiological determinism that "the natural sexual differences between men and women dictate that the oppression of

women cannot be changed", we must be careful of the ambiguous discussion of the relationship between gender and sex in this theory.

For this, Connell (2005) directly rejects social construction, stating that our bodies have a reflexive practice that can in turn change the social construction. Butler (2007), on the other hand, goes further than she does. Without denying that our bodies are constructed in the social acquisition, she points out that because of this, feminists can change gender norms by changing this social acquisition, and we can become whatever we want to be.

2.3 Research Gap

Existing studies continue to explore the intricate relationship between the body and social constructs, particularly focusing on the dynamics of power relations. Research by Markula and Pringle (2017) applies Foucault's sociocultural theory of power and discipline to understand body pressures. Their study delves into how aging bodies are subjected to societal norms within gym environments, revealing the pervasive influence of power structures on bodily practices and self-perception. Similarly, Tiggemann et al. (2021) highlights how societal norms and power structures shape body image and perceptions, contributing to body dissatisfaction and the internalization of disciplinary power. Both studies indicate that the body is not only a site for the imposition of power but also a site for resistance, illustrating the dual role of the body in power dynamics.

In the realm of media studies, the relationship between social media and body image has become a critical area of investigation. Vandenbosch et al (2022) summarises recent research on social media and body image, suggesting that social media is a significant force in shaping body perceptions, reinforcing societal norms, and contributing to body dissatisfaction. Digital feminism has emerged as a powerful movement leveraging online platforms to address body politics and resist societal norms. Baer (2018) discusses how digital activism has become a crucial aspect of contemporary feminist movements, focusing on body politics and the challenges posed by neoliberalism. Digital platforms enable feminists to disseminate counter-narratives and create supportive communities that challenge oppressive body standards.

Recently, the study of the body has shifted to new materialism, exploring the body's materiality in novel ways. Schaefer (2024) discusses the material culture shaped by colonial powers, using Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* to show how objects and ceremonial practices project power. García (2024) examines Cuban literature and art, emphasizing how bodily materiality intersects with ecological and social narratives in the book. Both studies highlight the influence of material culture on political and social perceptions. These perspectives help illustrate how materialist approaches can enrich our understanding of body politics and agency in contemporary feminist discourse.

Despite these advancements, notable gaps remain in addressing the dynamic interplay between bodily agency, power relations, and cognitive processes in a non-binary framework. Existing literature often treats these factors in isolation, failing to capture their fluid interactions. This gap is particularly evident in discussions about the body's role in intersectional feminist theory. My study aims to address this by proposing an intersectional

model that integrates these elements, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the body's role in feminist theory.

2.4 A New Theoretical Framework

By situating my research within contemporary discussions, I build upon and extend the work of Haraway, Connell, and Butler, offering a novel perspective that considers the body as an active participant in its continuous formation. This approach not only fills existing gaps but also provides a robust framework for examining the intersection of gender, power, and agency in modern feminist discourse.

This model views the body not just as a site of power imposition but as an active participant in its continuous formation. This perspective considers the body as operating within a fluid unnatural-cultural, and unbody-mind binary, where power relations, thought, and body agency are not static entities but are in constant negotiation and conflict, influencing and compromising with each other.

For instance, even from infancy, as highlighted by the differentiated treatment in the selection of clothes and toys along gender lines, bodies are subtly disciplined within the socio-cultural matrix. However, acknowledging this does not suffice to fully explain the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate and sometimes subvert these norms through bodily expressions. My model therefore emphasizes the "fluid unnatural-cultural process", a dynamic and cyclical interaction where the body, mind, and societal norms are not only interrelated but are continually co-constructing each other. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how bodies react to and also reshape societal expectations, thus providing a more robust framework for examining the intersection of gender, power, and agency.

By situating the body at the center of this triadic interaction, the model accounts for the complexities of personal agency and the transformative potential of bodily practices. It points that body agency is not merely reactive but is proactive in challenging and redefining social norms. This theoretical advancement addresses the gaps in previous literature by proposing a more holistic and dynamic approach to the study of the body in feminist theory, which will be further elucidated through the analyses in subsequent sections of this paper.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to deeply analyze artworks related to the depiction of women's bodies exhibited in major museums and galleries in Lund and Malmö, Sweden. The selection of these artworks was based on their ability to showcase diverse perspectives and profound cultural meanings regarding the female body. To ensure comprehensive depth and breadth of research, four pieces from different art forms were chosen: sculpture, portrait photography, a combination of photography and text (photographs of parts of a female artist's body alongside her diary entries), and painting, each exploring themes related to beauty, reproduction, race, and sexuality.

To gain a deeper understanding of the artistic representation of the female body in museums and galleries in southern Sweden, this study was conducted through onsite visits to all major museums and galleries in Lund and Malmö in October 2022. The writer personally inspected every artwork related to the female body and documented each piece. After thoroughly considering the themes, forms, and cultural significances of these artworks, four pieces were selected as core cases for the study. Detailed photographs were taken of the selected artworks, and official descriptions provided by the museums and galleries were collected. These photographs and textual materials formed the primary data sources for this study, allowing the researcher to revisit and analyze the artworks multiple times, even in their absence, ensuring a thorough and extensive analysis.

The analysis was conducted using textual analysis, focusing on the visual content of the artworks and their accompanying textual descriptions, including official presentations and statements from the artists. This method facilitated a thorough exploration of how these works express societal and cultural notions about the female body. Particular attention was paid to interpreting the images, colors, compositions, and other visual elements of the artworks and how these elements interact with the textual materials to construct and influence audience perception and understanding.

4. Case Study

4.1 Definition of Beauty

The first artwork I will analyze is a sculpture called *Jag tänker på mig själv /Thinking About Myself* from the Skissernas Museum. The artist, Marianne Lindberg de Geer, sculpts the contrast between "our" (or the artist's own) bodies and the ideal nude with sharp brushstrokes. As hooks, bell (2015, p34) points out, the notion of beauty in the fashion industry and mass media often entails sexist, white supremacist perceptions of capitalist patriarchy. Skinny bodies, prominent collarbones, firm breasts, flat stomachs, well-defined waistlines, and straight legs are all typical elements that trigger female body anxiety in social media.

Who has the right to define the beauty of female bodies? A very practical answer is men. It is mostly men who control the fashion industry, the make-up industry, and the mass media. While in life, within a compulsory heterosexual framework, there may not be a single standard of female beauty - some regions celebrate the beauty of the s-curve, while others define beauty as "white, childlike and thin" - but they do share a common principle which is to interest men. These beauty standards and popular judgments have not only discouraged the feminist movement but have damaged female bodies, for example causing severe anorexia and self-hatred. However, critiques of the concept of beauty do not bring about change, but rather confuse many girls (hooks, 2015). What we need is to reconstruct the concept of beauty and rethink the meaning of our bodies and the way we shape them.

Women are born with a body, but it never grows "naturally". The way we shape it (what we eat, what we wear, and how we act) follows more or less certain social norms. Thus, in the process of body culturalisation, we cannot say that we have both a natural body and a cultural body. Culture and nature, body and mind are never just simply binary opposition. At the same time, Marianne Lindberg de Geer makes us reflect through the contrast between real and imagined bodies that our bodies do not always grow as we expect even if

sometimes we make a lot of effort (e.g. exercising every day does not always lead to weight loss; cosmetic surgery also carries a risk of failure). And this is why we cannot simply treat our bodies as tools for self-expression or as canvases to be colored randomly. We cannot ignore the important role performed by body agency in this.



Jag tänker på mig själv /Thinking About Myself By Marianne Lindberg de Geer (2006)

4.2 Fear of Reproduction

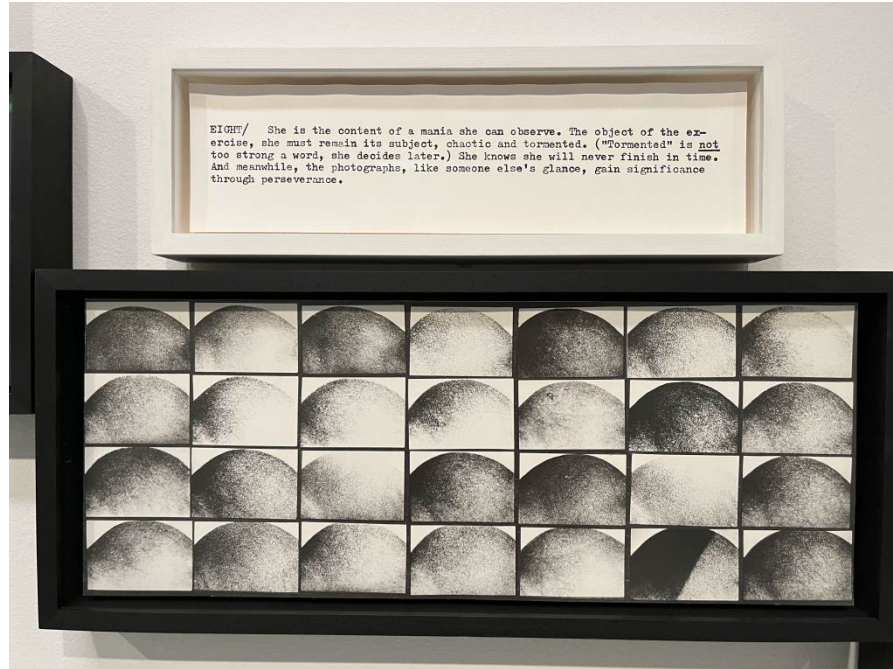
In *Ten Months*, Susan Hiller creatively recorded the growth of her belly during the ten months of her pregnancy. This work, from Moderna Museet Malmö's 2022 collection exhibition, entitled *Conditioned Movement*, consists of ten blocks arranged in a stepped sequence, each with twenty-eight photographs, accompanied by a text taken from the artist's diary. The combination of photographs and text vividly recreate the artist's bodily transformation during her pregnancy. As the curvature of the belly grows, the artist's perception of pregnancy and the work itself changes.



10 Months By Susan Hiller (1977-1979)

These perceptual shifts are sometimes contradictory, with the desire and fear of pregnancy interspersed throughout the text. On the one hand, she writes, "she believes physical conception must be 'enabled' by will or desire" (Text Two). On the other hand, "it is perfectly possible to forget who one has been and what one has accomplished." (Text Five) She remained subjective in this process by constantly portraying bodily changes, but at the same time found it increasingly difficult to complete the work. Ultimately, by "acknowledging contradictions, and expressing inconsistencies", "she is no longer confused." (Text Ten) At the same time, there is also a pointed reflection on the social status of women implied in these changes. "They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak 'as a woman'..... As a woman, she can not speak." (Text Six)

In fact, the fear of reproduction and the reflection on female identity are both parts of the artist's perception of losing power over her own body, and she completed this work amid self-review and the constant transformation/contradiction between subject and object. Thus we can ask why does "natural" reproduction lead to a woman's fear of losing the subjectivity of her body? Why is the physical act of the body associated with a questioning of self-identity?



10 Months By Susan Hiller (1977- 1979)

Feminists question the so-called "natural reproduction", arguing that all "natural reproduction" occurs in a specific political, economic and cultural context (Paola Tabet, cited in Yuval-Davis 1997) and is influenced by national policies, economic conditions, and social culture in a particular situation. In the study of the relationship between the women's role and the state, Yuval-Davis (1997) illustrates the contradictory position of women in the collective - on the one hand, women are constructed as symbols of the collective spirit and are responsible for maintaining boundaries; on the other hand, they are given the position of the "other" in the collective. This contradictory status reflects on reproduction, that is, on the one hand, reproduction is seen as the continuation of the state/nation, as being "great", and on the other hand, it exposes women to the risk of unemployment and the loss of their values other than child-bearing (subjectivity). In this way, it is easy to explain the ambivalence of the artist's attitude toward reproduction.

Susan Hiller used the documentation and self-analysis of her body through life as material to in turn deconstruct the oppressive discourse of women's reproduction. Rather than just treating the body as an artwork or a tool for resistance, she found a way out through "truth-telling" (Text Ten), acknowledged the paradox between subjectivity and bodily agency, internalized and reconciled it, and completed the reproduction while keeping her subjectivity from being dismantled during this process.

4.3 Language of immigrants

The next work to be mainly analyzed, *Do You Remember the Ocean, Abaayo?*, is from Lunds konsthall's exhibition BEHOLD, WE ARE HERE. Hanni Kamaly (2022), the curator of the exhibition, explains that this exhibition, which is closely related to identity politics and subjectivity, is influenced by the fascist white-supremacist terrorist

organization Nordiska motståndsrörelsen (Nordic Resistance Movement)'s march that she saw in Lund in 2019. It led her to think about the relationship between politics versus individuality and art. In art, who is seen? Whose stories are remembered and whose stories are forgotten? Whose body is seen as political?

Ikram Abdulkadir is a poet and photographer. For her, the photographer is a mutation of the poet; the photograph is poetry written in the language of the body. She uses her camera to document the experience of being a female Muslim immigrant living in Rosengård (part of miljonprogrammet -the "one million dwellings program" in Sweden during the 1960s) while focusing on the female relatives, friends and the world around her (Kamaly et al., 2022). Her work should be understood alongside her poetry.

Trust me, the only ones who are there for you are your own
And our neighbourhoods teach us to divide early
What is mine, what is yours, and particularly that everything is theirs¹



Do You Remember the Ocean, Abaayo? By Ikram Abdulkadir (2021)

There is an invisible border between so-called citizenship collectives and immigrants, even if some immigrants have citizenship in the legal sense. To understand the formation of these borders, it is necessary to first understand what constructs exclusive citizenship. Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that citizenship is not just about legal responsibilities and

¹ Ikram Abdulkadir, *Fria Fåglar* (Free Birds). Recited by Abdulkadir in the final of the talent competition Ortens bästa poet (Best Poet of the Neighbourhood), streamed live on YouTube on 3 December 2017.

rights, she associates it more with the "community" than with the "state". The "community" here is more of the construction of ideology and a myth of common destiny, and immigrants are given "otherness" because of their inability to integrate into a particular "community".

The most striking of these borders is the body difference. Colour, religious costumes, and facial features separate people from one another. These body differences have become identity symbols for immigrants/outsideers as well as leading to the misrepresentation of Third World women. Mohanty (2003) questions "sisterhood", stating that this concept obscures the experiences of Third World women and assumes that women around the world share a situation of oppression, which is a colonial, Eurocentric assumption. In anti-racist transnational feminism, she proposes the construction of an "imagined community"(Mohanty, 2003, p46) that respects difference through "feminist solidarity", especially in light of the intersectionality of race, gender, and religion.

In the series *Do You Remember the Ocean, Abaayo?*, the artist recalls her long journey from Nairobi to Malmö as a child, documenting the different feelings she and her sisters had when they viewed the sea in their home country and that in Sweden. In this photograph, her sisters hold hands, convey strength to each other, look directly into the camera and convey complex emotions to us through their body language (Muslim costume, physical and facial expressions). In another work *Salmas Gaze*, from the series *We Meet in Paradise*, collected in the Malmö Konstmuseum, Muslim women in white robes symbolize the Islamic burial ritual in which the dead are dressed in white for the journey to paradise². A girl looks back into the camera, thus detaching herself from religious divinity and embodying humanity.

² Introduction to this artwork from the Malmö Konstmuseum



Salmas Gaze (from the series *We Meet in Paradise*) By Ikram Abdulkadir (2019)

Ikram Abdulkadir captures those fleeting moments in her works, striking the viewer with the subjectivity, storytelling, and those complex emotions presented in the images. She narrates her own story with a clear, determined voice that refuses to be objectified by the gaze and misrepresented. On the question of how to treat her body, she is not troubled by the reality of bodily differences being treated as collective borders from which she is isolated but uses them as a language to express solidarity with her sisters, extremely creatively using body language against an identity constraint.

4.4 Paradigm of Sexuality

The final artwork is a silkscreen print called *For My Love*, from the Malmö Konstmuseum's exhibition, HOME. This work is placed in the Powerless Structures section of the exhibition, in which it explores the idea that the home as a private sphere is governed by certain social norms, not intimate and natural, but constructed, culturalised, and politicized. The key to transformation is to break down these norms. "Which social systems are reflected in the home? And what societal structures affect the home from the outside?"³

This work challenges the norm of sexuality in the private sphere. But before turning to the sexual part, it is necessary to understand the power relations between the private and public

³ Introduction to this exhibition from the Malmö Konstmuseum

spheres, for example, is there a "private sphere"? Yuval-Davis (1997) critiques the binary between private and public spheres, questioning its simplification by associating the private sphere with the family (that is, associating men with the public sphere and women with the private sphere). It recognizes the legitimate dominance of men over women in the family while ignoring the subjectivity of women in other spheres. Feminism makes the masses aware of how power relations shape personal as well as impersonal social relations and how that shapes our bodies, including, of course, sexuality.

Women have a history, and similarly, sexual norms have a history. Foucault (1990) analyses how power relations operate within the sexual norms by tracing the history of sexual experience (how people talk about sex, what kind of sex is considered normal, and what is sexually inverted), for example, why sex is restricted to heterosexual couples, and how women are described as "hysterized", etc. In other words, how we talk/imagine/practice sexuality is limited by power relations. Feminists have played an extremely important role in the sexual liberation movement. Radical feminists have also questioned the traditional paradigm of sex, penetrative sex. Clitoral or vaginal orgasm remains a popular feminist topic today.



For My Love By Marie-Louise Ekman (1973)

This painting painted during the second wave of feminism depicts a woman's sexual fantasy in which a man performs oral sex on her while two other men stand by and praise her, which is unacceptable for a "proper" woman. This fantasy takes place in a place that is generally considered to be perfectly safe and private - her own home - and is displayed in a public space (an art gallery). The artist ingeniously uses the folded space inside and outside the painting to break down the border between privacy and public. The work is full of the

rebellious spirit - an impermissible sexual fantasy and a display of the private sphere. While submitting to the pleasures of her body, the artist breaks the "proper" social norms, subverts the power relations that permeate the family sphere, and highlights the subjectivity of her own body.

5. Conclusion

Body, Our First and Last Border. This paper attempts to explore the meaning of body based on a non-binary, non-essentialist feminist theoretical framework, using Haraway's (1991) political physiology as a theoretical foundation, reviewing Connell's (2005) and Butler's (2007) critique and reconstruction of social construction, the relationship between gender and sex, and how they think about the meaning of the body. Referring to their answers, I would like to simulate the process of body shaping as a flowing ocean in which three undercurrents (power relations/social norms, mind, and body agency) surge, colliding and influencing each other. Thus, our bodies may be influenced by social construction, but they are also fluid in the sense that no single factor can determine who we are.

The analysis of the artists and their artworks confirms this view more clearly. Also, the four artists give different answers to the question of how the body should be treated. Marianne Lindberg de Geer's sculpture reflects how social norms and mind shape the notion of body beauty, but the goal of the "perfect nude" is not always achieved, even through effort. It suggests that we cannot ignore the body agency. In Susan Hiller's work, we can see how power relations play a role in women's reproduction, and how women's double roles trap them in contradictions about reproduction. But she seeks to deconstruct these power relations through a transformation of mind and respect for body agency to achieve a balance. There is a powerful female power embodied in Ikram Abdulkadir's photographs (or rather poems written in body language). Her thoughts are self-consistent with her body agency, and thus she can use the body as a language for expressing subjectivity to change conventional perceptions. Marie-Louise Ekman's paintings are similar, but more rebellious - moving the intimate and "inappropriate" imagination into public space. She gives full play to the body agency, using it as a weapon to subvert conventional patriarchal social norms.

In conclusion, through reflection on theory and analysis of artworks, I believe that body is a language of fluidity, closely linked to power relations, the mind, and its agency. Every choice we make, and every way we "become" are the result of the interaction of these three factors. For social relations as a whole, we need to subvert capitalist patriarchy in a self-consistent way; but for the individual, although we sometimes oscillate among these three undercurrents, we can still achieve a balance by embodying agency and transforming our thoughts.

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