MORPHING THE BODY: EATING DISORDERS AND (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS

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MORPHING THE BODY: EATING DISORDERS AND (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

MORPHING THE BODY: EATING DISORDERS AND (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS

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VISUAL ARTS AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN M.A. THESIS, JULY 2023

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Keywords: Visual Culture, Visual Arts, Gender, Body, Eating Disorders

Based on multidisciplinary research on eating disorders from a gendered perspective, this thesis is an investigation of the visual and verbal culture around women's bodies. It brings together certain artworks that touch on the subject, as well as the artists that have inspired my own art practice. In an expansive and non-hierarchical approach to "visual culture" with a focus on both the visual language of advertising and fine art, it aims to show and discuss how visual culture affects the perception of the female body. Alternative visual strategies, specifically by female artists, are brought to light in an attempt to reflect (mis)representations of women's bodies, pointing to art as an important medium in raising awareness around the social aspect of eating disorders.

ÖZET

BEDENİ BİÇİMLENDİRMEK: YEME BOZUKLUKLARI VE (YANLIŞ)TEMSİLLERİ

ZEREN SEVİM SİPAHİOĞLU ARKIN

GÖRSEL SANATLAR VE GÖRSEL İLETİŞİM TASARIMI YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, TEMMUZ 2023

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Görsel Kültür, Görsel Sanatlar, Cinsiyet, Beden, Yeme Bozuklukları

Yeme bozukluklarını cinsiyet perspektifinden ele alan çok disiplinli araştırmaya dayanan bu tez, kadın bedenleri etrafındaki görsel ve sözlü kültür üzerine bir araştırmadır. Kendi sanat pratiğime ilham veren sanatçıların yanı sıra konuya değinen bazı çalışmaları bir araya getirmektedir. Hem reklamın hem de güzel sanatların görsel diline odaklanan, hiyerarşik olmayan ve çok katmanlı bir "görsel kültür" yaklaşımıyla, görsel kültürün kadın bedeni algısını nasıl etkilediğini göstermeyi ve tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle kadın sanatçılar tarafından üretilen alternatif görsel stratejilerin gün ışığına çıkarılması aracılığı ile, hem kadın bedenlerinin (yanlış)temsillerini yansıtma konusunda hem de yeme bozukluklarının sosyal yönü etrafında farkındalık yaratmada sanatın önemli bir araç olduğuna işaret etmektedir.

Dedicated to my late father, Ziya Nur Sipahioğlu

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1. INTRODUCTION

My personal experience of eating disorder –bulimia nervosa, to be specific– led me to pursue the topic in my field of study: I wanted to speak up against the social pressure that creates silence and shame around the issue; I wanted to raise awareness and show how the "personal is political." While everyone's experience with eating disorders may differ, conventional social norms that create these disordered behaviors and patterns are common. The visual culture pertaining to the female experience and the body mirrors this situation. We are surrounded by images that promote shame, hatred, and control towards our bodies through the promotion of certain ideals. This common ground is what makes this a social subject beyond personal concern.

My first introduction to eating disorders was through a social circle. Casual conversations between friends regarding appearance, especially geared towards an understanding of "pretty equals skinny" can easily have psychological effects, as in my case: A nine yearlong battle I am still fighting today. But would social interaction have the same power if the visual culture surrounding us was not totally reflective of the same value system? As the ever-present mainstream media constantly manufactures a certain body ideal, many women embark on a struggle of bingeing, purging, and countless other ways to reach that ideal. My experience is simply an example of how disordered eating patterns and bodily dissatisfaction are passed through society to individuals.

It took me a long time to feel alarmed by my own bulimia since I was never as thin as the images I saw in the mainstream media representing "too thin" female bodies associated with an eating disorder. (Fig.1.1)

Figure 1.1: One of the first images that come up when you search “eating disorder” on Google Images

Similarly, most individuals are unaware of the scope of their problematic behaviors, as they never feel they “look” concerningly thin or fat by the standards taught to us through images in visual culture. Unfortunately, many sufferers, including myself, reach out for help too late, specifically because of this lack of representation of diverse body types in the framework of eating disorders. This misrepresentation, or lack of representation of different experiences of eating disorders in the visual media is one of the central concerns of this thesis.

Along with my frustration with visual culture that feeds into disordered eating, I also observed during my undergraduate study that eating disorders were not considered an issue of significance or simply not vocalized, much similar to conventional public perception around the issue. Just like the misrepresentation in visual media, the topic was underrepresented and marginalized in visual art studies. I felt this was exactly what needed to change in society, visual culture, and academia. And although eating disorder has been considered a mental illness according to the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) since the 1980s, my own experience leads me to question the perception that there is no social framework for this personal condition. The reason that this is so important is that it only prolongs the diagnosis and recovery process of sufferers. So I inevitably question, could eating disorders be avoided if misrepresentations in the media were corrected? Could eating disorder patients look for help earlier, before they reach a state of “skin and bone” as in mainstream media imagery? How can I help recreate a new visual language that inclusively speaks of these issues as a visual communication designer? Am I bothered by the visual culture around eating disorders because of my designer

background? As I ask these questions, I believe I must write this thesis, share my perspective and highlight the misrepresented reality of eating disorders as well as the visual culture that feeds into these behaviors.

The female body is a sensitive and anxious subject as it is, so the production consists of an intense thought process in order to avoid reproducing the male gaze that is behind the beauty ideals that victimize and oppress women. I am well aware that women are not the only ones suffering from disordered eating; men are also the victims of these illnesses; however, as I am basing my research on my own experience, I am approaching the subject from my perspective as a woman. I also firmly believe that ideals forced upon women's body image produced by male-dominated media are responsible for at least some women suffering from EDs. I do think this is still very much a gendered problem, considering all the societal/cultural oppression towards women's bodies. Anorexia, though not any less important than bulimia, orthorexia (which is not defined as an eating disorder to this day however is still a form of problematic behavior towards nutrition and body image) or binge eating disorder, is already a popular subject among scholars, and I have not experienced these personally; therefore, I will be aiming this dissertation mostly towards bulimia nervosa based on my own experience. However, I will be mentioning other eating disorders as I connect both my readings and analysis of artworks to the subject. It is critical in my opinion, to discuss this matter in the context of artistic and visual representation. And while this is not an unfamiliar topic for disciplines like psychology or gender studies, it is rarely discussed amongst fine arts scholars, especially based on first-hand experience. This absence is the main drive behind my artistic research process. I believe more scholars should incorporate their own lived experiences into the subject, especially in visual culture studies, and this was my motivation when beginning my master's degree.

At the beginning of my research process, I wanted to look at eating disorders from a contemporary perspective, as it is still very much a contemporary topic. Thus, I focused on a subject that has gotten correspondingly more popular with social media usage, especially Instagram and Snapchat filters, along with apps used in editing pictures such as FaceApp and FaceTune. Photo manipulation can be examined alongside eating disorders, as body dysmorphia is an important symptom/aspect of EDs. These apps, when used to change the shape and form of our bodies, serve in favor of worsening such symptoms, enhancing further disassociation from the body. This community is already alienated by culture, and these applications only serve to cause further psychological alienation. However, with time and further research, it became clear that focusing on social media filters alone was not enough to raise awareness on the topic; there was so much more potential in approaching visual

representation as an issue. The problematic nature of the framework inspired me to write a dissertation from a much broader perspective and focus on the misrepresentation of eating disorders, combining my visual communication background and my own experience with an eating disorder. Especially considering the toxic culture surrounding women's bodies, I believe my voice could help represent the topic both in the context of media and academic research, as well as try and find new ways of representing this lived experience without victimizing sufferers nor feeding into the already corrupted visual imagery created by mainstream culture.

Hence, this dissertation can be seen as a form of visual auto-ethnography, adopting a collective perspective towards the issue and creating a collection of artistic production that experiments on alternative ways to represent eating disorders, specifically with care not to victimize the bulimic body.

Figure 1.2: an image that comes up when you search "eating disorder" on Google Images

A "mocking" attitude seems to be present in many conventional pictures in representations of eating disorders, where the images almost come across as caricature-like. Looking at Figure 1.2, we can see the unrealistic and exaggerated version of a woman struggling with an eating disorder. The tape measure represents her obsession with her weight and measurements, stopping her from eating that sandwich by covering her mouth. The sandwich is held in an awkward way to showcase the shape, which is quite phallic. So here, her hunger for food symbolizes her sexual hunger as a hidden visual message.

Although coming from an art and design background and being aware of the impacts of visual representations of eating disorders as well as bodies with eating disorders, I was quite focused on writing a theoretical thesis about the issue. I had not thought about doing a visual project on the subject. I am unsure if this was because I kept elevating art production to an unreachable standard in my head or because I was too focused on eating disorders from a cultural, psychological, and feminist standpoint. After further discussions with my thesis advisor, I was encouraged to direct my frustration into art practice and create an alternative visual language to try to find a more inclusive representation that is ideally less open to be interpreted as sexualizing or marginalizing. Looking for a new visual language and challenging the oppressive language that is engraved in our lives was critical, especially since eating disorders are often underrepresented compared to other feminist issues, fat activism for example. In terms of thinking about representation, I was inspired by bell hooks and the way she touches on the power of words in her book Talking Back. In Chapter 5: On Self Recovery, she recognizes the importance of discourse: "We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle." However, she does not only recognize the language as a place of struggle, where trauma lies beneath, but she also invites us the create a new discourse, build an opposite language to those who hurt us and not engage in the oppressive, negative language spoken to us. The entity of language mentioned here contains the visual language that surrounds us, and it takes a lot of creativity and courage to have the drive to make a difference (Hooks 1989).

We constantly fear being bombarded by those unwanted comments on our appearance, but rarely do we stop and think about how we can change it. In this framework, art can be seen as the greatest form of activism. Especially in the context of feminist art, female artists have fought the shame put on our bodies as women for years (Battista 2012). Thus, creating a new visual language through art has the transformative power to create change. This artistic research process both helps me cope with my own trauma and discover the potential of visual art's impact on raising awareness about social issues.

In addition, throughout this thesis, you will be introduced to the changing language and discourse around the body and beauty ideals through terms like "thinspiration" or "slim-thick" that entered the cultural sphere in the 21st century. This drastic change in terminology shows us how much these issues have penetrated our lives.

Hence, based on multidisciplinary research on eating disorders from a gendered perspective, this thesis is an investigation of the visual and verbal culture around

women's bodies. It not only looks at the visual culture of mass media and advertising but brings together artworks that touch on the subject from an alternative perspective and all the cultural sources which have inspired, in both negative and positive ways, my own art practice.

2. THE BODY, EATING DISORDERS AND REPRESENTATION

There are three specified eating disorders, as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychological Association: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder (Moore and Mycek 2014). The American Psychological Association describes bulimia nervosa shortly as bingeing, then turning to compensating habits such as self-induced vomiting, known as purging. This definition may sound sufficient as a generalization of the disorder; however, in reality it is much more complex. These compensating habits may seem as innocent as exercising or taking laxatives to the extremity of self-starvation for several days after the binge. While there are several compensatory behaviors, visual media is very stuck to the image of a woman standing by the toilet, vomiting or shoving her finger down her throat. This visual culture and promotion around bulimia may cause many women to not consider their disordered habits as bulimic, and it shows that medical discourse is one of the factors behind these images. This connection goes both ways, as social perceptions of EDs also affect medical literature and health professionals' attitudes towards them (Klump et al. 2009).

Figure 2.1: Image from a private hospital's website, used in an article that defines bulimia nervosa

When eating disorders are discussed, someone who is a stranger to the topic may visualize a certain woman who is extremely malnourished, skin and bones, perhaps staring at a mirror as to show her obsession over her body or struggling with a small portion of food in front of her to represent restriction of food. This depiction is constructed by visual culture by reproducing the same anorexic image of a woman to represent eating disorders repeatedly. While being an accurate yet shallow representation of an extreme case of anorexia nervosa, it excludes a large portion of the issue, discarding the bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder and EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified), which is a term used for people experiencing disordered eating patterns yet not fitting into a certain type of diagnoses. It even excludes the "milder" cases of anorexia, where the person might seem at a healthy weight or "fit" while experiencing many other complications of the disorder. This restrictive description is not only seen in popular media and visual arts, but also in academic research. Most research on eating disorders focuses on anorexia, while briefly mentioning other eating disorders. A good example of this is an article written by Moore, Lisa and Mycek, as it discusses the illnesses and the socio-cultural factors behind EDs in detail, yet mainly looking through anorexia nervosa (Moore and Mycek 2014). In addition, while some literature has been written by women who experienced eating disorders themselves, most research on the topic is done by third persons, causing vague and inaccurate descriptions of how EDs are experienced

One of the main reasons for these inaccuracies is that the lived experience of an eating disorder is much more complex and multi-layered than the symptoms listed by medical resources suggest. We increasingly see more examples of academic writing that make use of personal experience as data other than literature studies, such as auto-ethnographic research by anthropology scholars (Chang 2016).So why not start doing the same on visual arts and visual culture studies or while discussing feminist theory? These personal experiences are historically and socially significant documents, containing information on the social, psychological, and sexual dynamics behind eating disorders in addition to examining the individual's relationship with food and their own bodies. This lack of personal stories and perspective in research has been recognized by Keisinger in her dissertation Anorexic and bulimic lives: making sense of food and eating (Kiesinger 1995). I believe written sources such as academic research and literature plays an important part in the context of representation. Thus, it is just as important as the visuality aspect when it comes to solving the issue of misrepresentation and/or underrepresentation of bulimia, along with other eating disorders.

Thinness is an important subject when discussing eating disorders as the historical context and construction of being thin helps us grasp some of the motivations behind such disordered behavior as a result of societal pressure to be thin. Chernin calls this "the tyranny of thinness" (Chernin 1985). One of the dilemmas of eating disorders is the fact that thinness has been idealized throughout history, though the thin ideal first emerged between 1880 and 1920s and has been seen as a standard in order to be healthy (Rothblum and Solovay 2009). However, extreme measures taken toward this goal result in complete body deterioration. So, the desire to be thin (although we will discuss the factors behind ED pathology later on) based on the idea that thinness equals healthy, evolved into something destructive and lethal

The admiration towards the thin body ideal correspondingly reflects itself as the hatred of fat and fatness. Hatred of fat is so strong that many individuals continue their eating disorder cycles as they fear gaining weight or becoming fat; these individuals choose death over fatness in most cases (Gilday 1990). Fatphobia takes another form in the context of how we perceive eating disorders: individuals who are above average weight are often dismissed from ED research. The only discussions where overweight individuals might be mentioned or represented is the case of binge eating disorder; however, the bias towards the extreme is also reflected there, as the image created of an individual with binge eating disorder is often morbidly obese. Another aftermath of the obsession and focus on the thin ideal is that anorexia is the only eating disorder discussed in detail, even though most research claims to be focused on eating disorders in general. However, there are times when they are openly limited to anorexia nervosa. This limitation occurs not only in psychology or cultural studies, but also in media studies and medical research. The most serious and threatening outcome of such exclusion is a lack of recognition of an already difficult-to-diagnose disorder such as bulimia. Bulimia nervosa is the most difficult eating disorder to notice and diagnose because the individuals who suffer do not experience extreme weight loss in most cases nor are morbidly obese (Cooper, Cooper, and Fairburn 1989). In addition to most bulimics being on average or slightly above/belove average weight range, the binge-purge cycle and other disordered behavior patterns are mostly done in secret, so it is already challenging to detect in individuals, hence the lack of representation.

Another point in how anorexia and bulimia is represented is the historical and cultural perception of food restriction and self-discipline. The state of restricting food to such extreme measures takes a lot of dedication and discipline, so this behavior is often admired (Cooper, Cooper, and Fairburn 1989). In addition to the thin ideal and thinspiration culture, the diet culture is a reason behind such admiration, since diet culture suggests restricting food at all costs. Just like fatphobia, we become

afraid of normal bodily needs like hunger. In some cases, anorexia is described as the noble and honorable of the eating disorders, reminding us of devout believers who fast for months at a time, losing extreme amounts of weight as a symbol of being rid of bodily pleasures and reconnecting with one's spirituality. By stark contrast, bulimia is an ED that is stigmatized with shame as it alludes to a complete lack of control, the giving up to bodily needs and desires, the appetite, consuming grotesque amounts of food at a time, and purging them as the bodily limits of consumption are exceeded. It represents the uncontrolled, leaking, disturbing body; it represents shame and guilt. The same impression can be made about binge eating disorder and fatness (Kiesinger 1995).

This thin ideal is very much a gender-focused issue, as it is impressed upon women. Feminist theory discusses the motives behind this ideal extensively, but again, with a focus on anorexia. While still grasping the dynamics behind such pressure, feminists have seen the obsession towards thinness as an expression of patriarchal gender relations (Pollack-Seid 1989). In this context, the thin female body is contained and controlled, and the female body is a thing to be disciplined as it is untamed according to both Western and Eastern cultures. Moreover, the "slender body" is also small and non-threatening as Bordo argues, thus easier for men to dominate (Bordo 2004). The "fat" or "large" female body is undesirable and must be feared/hated upon, as it takes more space and is more powerful. However, further research shows that being thin is still insufficient to fulfill the ideal of male desire, as it must also be fit and tight. Any excess or uncontained body part must be rid of (Bordo 2004). That is, of course unless the fat and excess are in the desired parts of the female body, such as buttocks and breasts.

The contemporary ideal for women favors the thin waist and legs, yet still requires large breasts and a curvy figure with no fat, belly, cellulites, or stretch marks –however impossible that may sound. Research suggests that one of the motives behind the extreme thin ideal of anorexics lies in the desire to get rid of the sexualized curves of the female body, to be genderless and undesirable. So, unlike the general idea, the motivation behind extreme weight loss and such disordered patterns is not to be desirable to the opposite sex in all cases. It can be the opposite, especially in many instances in which the eating disorder is a result of a sexual assault or trauma. This is also witnessed in Japanese women, who desire to stop or postpone the development of the female body as if there is a subconscious fear towards maturity (Pike and Mizushima 2005). The same theory can also be applied to binge-eating disordered individuals who continue their behavior to the point of morbid obesity, where the desirable curves evolve into being almost shapelessness. Research proves this by observing a relationship between eating disorders and sexual trauma (Madowitz,

Matheson, and Liang 2015).

While there is a lot of visual and written coverage on the obsession of thinness in the context of eating disorders, rarely do we see representations of individuals who have unhealthy relationships with food and their bodies, falling into disordered eating patterns out of other concerns such as sexual trauma, lack of emotional support and many other social and psychological factors. In addition, not all ED sufferers, including anorexics, are thinner than average, so even though the motivation of the starting point of the ED patterns might be the desire to be thin, the results may not show extreme thinness. The focus on thinness may bring an explanation to some disordered eating patterns and behavior, but it does not create an accurate and inclusive representation of what eating disorders might look like.

The body comes first among all the subtitles we might talk about throughout this thesis. Women's bodies are the main target of oppression and the male gaze; thus, it is a war ground for eating disorders, where both the internalization/reaction to underlying factors and the aftereffects of such factors occur. Suzie Orbach's book Bodies is a well-rounded, invaluable source in the way it handles and analyzes the cultural, medical and visual factors affecting bodies in detail (Orbach 2019). Body image problems are both quite personal in ways that they are formed and experienced, and collective as an overall issue. There is a neverending pressure against individuals to look a certain, pre-determined way, and this pressure is at the center of body image troubles for all age and gender groups. However, the societal pressure towards body size and weight are historically targeted at women, again, making this a gendered issue. Roberta Pollack Seid touches on the history behind thin privilege and the societal pressure towards fatness, as well as mainstream movements of the 1960s and by extension, the increasing size discrimination that changed how women perceive their bodies (Pollack-Seid 1989). These "developments" caused us to see our bodies as things to be improved and worked on, promoting the idea of a perfect body, which in most cases is almost impossible to achieve without going to extremes, especially with contemporary plastic surgery trends and digital manipulation tools. While most people would say their need to alter their body or their dislike towards it is an internal issue, research shows that being exposed to the visual culture around thinness and beauty ideals is linked to increasing body dissatisfaction in both women and men, hence the development of disordered eating (Fernandez and Pritchard 2012). This ideal of beauty we try helplessly to achieve is internalized ideas and standards society reflects on us. Through internalizing such value systems, we begin developing this misconception of "self-worth" linked to our appearance. Orbach additionally invites us to see the effects of forced visual culture on people and how it's much larger and broader than we realize, how it's embed-

ded in our society and our personalities (Orbach 2019). No matter how personal these problems are, it's also a collective problem, and research also suggests that it is a cultural process carried through mothers to their daughters (Chernin 1985). All these evaluations in the perspective of beauty ideals can be applied to eating disorders. The amount of people who struggle with symptoms of eating disorders, are unaware of the gravity of their problems, as most of the habits/symptoms are normalized by popular culture.

In this framework, what is basically an illness can be commercialized as the new miraculous diet program celebrities abide by! As the diet culture took hold of society and our subconsciousness, we have almost normalized and internalized problematic behaviors such as starving, drinking laxative teas, naming them as "intermittent fasting," "cleansing" or "detoxing." Interestingly, these are the procedures I experienced as a bulimic, and treated with medicine for it, while in popular culture, it is exactly what is suggested and advertised. An interesting example is a popular retreat called the Ayahuasca Cleanse.

People buy trips to Costa Rica to be a part of this "shamanic" ritual. The cleanse consists of a very strict grain-based diet, and at the end of each night, participants drink the special Ayahuasca tea that makes them violently throw up for hours. They believe this process cleanses their body and soul. It is interesting to see the advertisements for this cleanse. Medically speaking, someone who voluntarily restricts their food intake, then still makes themselves purge must have been diagnosed with an eating disorder, yet we see vacation packages for this retreat being sold and advertised for trauma healing.

Figure 2.2: an Instagram ad for Ayahuasca Retreat by Samai Spa.

Yet this retreat seems quite peaceful compared to how magazines choose to advertise weight loss and "detoxing." We look at the images of thin women, looking very happy. At the same time, the choice of words is very intimidating and violent, with women "blasting" belly fat, "erasing" their extra kilos, and "trimming" their bodies. There is a constant underlying message and desire to annihilate the fat.

Figure 2.3: (Magazine covers on weight loss and detox)

There is a never-ending dilemma of visibility/invisibility when it comes to women above the average weight and eating disorders. As a result of the aforementioned fatphobic culture, fat women are generally very visible, automatically becoming the center of the gaze in social situations. The visibility or unwanted attention a fat woman gets is not always caused by fatphobia, however, as the male gaze can always find a fragmented object that can turn into a fetish in relation to a woman's body. This situation is beautifully expressed by Carla Rice in her article "Bodies at Intersection": "...abject body parts that shift into sites of desire and pleasure..." (Rice et al. 2020). While larger women struggle with acceptance, the body of a "fat" woman can either be fetishized or found repulsive. As a result, the body becomes a site of discomfort.

However, the dilemma begins when we consider overweight women in the context of eating disorders, as the concept of "thinness" and "being thin" are at the center of most arguments regarding eating disorders (Green et al. 2008). This arguably makes fat women invisible in case of eating disorders. I am used to receiving surprised looks when I inform others that I am/was bulimic. The image of a sickly thin anorexic woman is so engraved in people's brains, they do not expect a women of average or above average weight to have an eating disorder. The medical concern around fatness creates the expectation that fat bodies are not only undesirable, but they

almost certainly suffer from health issues caused by obesity, but this expectation of bad health does not include eating disorders (Orbach 2019). This conclusion is a result of the stereotypical representation of eating disorders in visual culture. This stereotype is one of the reasons that drive me to create an alternative visual as an informative source for society.

Figure 2.4: A stock image with the tag "eating disorder"

As I started researching medical discourse around bodies, a specific subject I wanted to argue about in depth was what has come to be called "fat shaming." Bell Hooks touches on and recognizes the importance of discourse and the power of words in her book Talking Back (Hooks 1989) and asserts that Language is also a place of struggle." Hooks discusses this topic of attachment and violence in terms of physical violence women experience in their intimate relationships. Yet, her argument can be easily applied to verbal and psychological violence regarding body shaming. She frames these intimate relationships not only for romantic partnerships, but also family relations. Parents often comment on their children's appearance, carry on their experience with their own bodies and internalized cultural messages that transport between generations, in order to guide them, and give health advice. However, these well-intended comments can be full of negativity and oppressive language. In this sense, body shaming can be seen as a form of verbal violence. Most of this discourse is shaped around the same ideals. Contemporary ideals mostly refer to a slender woman, that has no fat, or has the fat in the "right" places. A body that is very much contained and tight, thus the negative and hurtful language is directed towards overweight women. Further discussing the family and the complex nature of body shaming discourse, hooks also gives an in-depth analysis of expressions of

love in the family in All About Love (Hooks 2000). The toxic discourse we witness can be disguised under good intentions, and as a way of showing love, and knowing the depth of the effects it can have on individuals is critical. Being aware of the dangerous nature of body shaming in the family and the traumatizing potential of our daily language can help us break the circle of verbal violence. Since most of the danger is thought to be online as a form of cyberbullying, we can easily oversee the toxic discourse in our close circles and families; however, as Hooks also emphasizes, we are deeply affected by our family's ways of showing love and their use of language, joining in on the tradition most of the time. In case of cyberbullying the language is rarely subtle. The language in the context of cyberbullying can be seen as comments on social media posts but often it comes across as images such as striking YouTube thumbnails. The contents of these YouTube videos differ from being very insulting to having a passive-aggressive undertone. Yet the negativity and attack towards the body, especially the bodies that are not considered ideal is constantly present.

Figure 2.5: YouTube video Thumbnail by content creator Nicole Arbour

When we look at this YouTube thumbnail, we can see the content creator mocking the notion of being fat by blowing her cheeks. This expression is quite similar to pulling the corner of your eyes to mimic being Asian as a way to insult the race. It is a recreation of a stereotype, just like a body language expression where someone widely opens their eyes to describe someone who has a big body mass. On the left side we see a message that says, "Dear fat people". Although the message seems quite kind and considerate, the passive aggressive and demeaning language is felt strongly. It is difficult to understand what she means by "fat people." What type of people is she describing? Morbidly obese? Or is it referring to anyone simply

anyone who has enough body fat to have prominent cheeks? That is up to the viewer to decide without watching the actual content. But I believe that just seeing this as someone with an eating disorder, even if you do not consider yourself as a fat person, you would start thinking about it since it is so clearly targeting a viewer, any viewer. It makes you question whether you are one of the fat people, and even if you do not believe you are the target here, it creates a negative image towards a group of people, mocking and marginalizing them. Now let's compare this recent image to an ad example that is from the 1900s.

Figure 2.6: A 1903 advert on weight loss belonging to Henry C. Bradford, M.D., USA.

Here at least we know that the creator of this content refers to "fat people" but again, speaking to them, calling their attention and inviting them to lose weight. We see a "fat" woman looking at a "slim mirror" seeing her "potential," the hidden thin woman that hides behind the layer of fat. This scene may be familiar as it is constantly recreated in reverse to describe women with eating disorders and body dysmorphia, where women misperceive themselves as "fat." This alone shows the relationship between the visual culture around the female body and eating disorders, simply in their ways of being visually represented.

Figure 2.7: The Mirror (TV Ad) by Anorexi Bulimi Kontakt, a support agency from Sweden

Even though body shaming in our daily discourse can be underrated in contrast to hate speech and extreme cases of violence, or an insulting image that pops out in our social media stream, it is embedded in our lives deeply. We must be aware of both the constructive and destructive power of words. Verbal abuse is just as traumatizing as physical abuse and must be recognized in order to make a change. Body shaming is present in love letters from lovers, advice from family members, billboards, social media comments and on almost every representation of verbal and visual culture. The body is not a place of shame, and through art, we can change the body from being a place of shame and oppression to being a place of freedom and acceptance, as well as change the negative discourse on the body, both visual and verbally, that is deeply engraved in every aspect of our lives. It is difficult to escape from this negative discourse is one of the cultural factors that drive women to the point of hating their body, as if it is a separate entity, as it is constantly recreated.

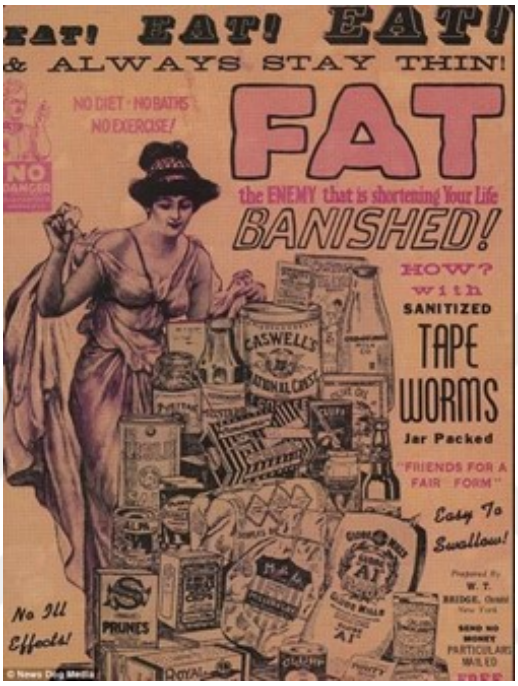
Figure 2.8: Fig. 1, Rubber Garment Ad Belonging to Dissolvene Company, USA, Fig. 2„ Medicated Rubber Garment Ad Belonging to Dr. Jeanne Walter, M.D., USA, from 1910s

This negative discourse around the body has a long history in the visual culture, dating back to 1920s advertisements. Above, we see garments from the 1910s that slim the body. These garments work by restricting the body. The history of garments like these, which are also called corsets, is often thought to go back to 1500s as in the Victorian era they represented the ideal shape for a woman. So, we are not strangers to this concept. What is striking here is the message that says, "reduce your flesh." As if the flesh is something separate from the body and can be manipulated accordingly.

Looking at this hatred directed towards our own bodies as women through feminist theory and cultural studies reveals the problematic aspects of the issue. Payton refers to all this thin privilege, abusive language around women's bodies and beauty ideals quite clearly as a "war against women's bodies" and an "assault on the adult female form," using a metaphor by Wolf (Payton 2012; Wolf 1992-2002). This assault is not limited to our daily language. Unfortunately, we are surrounded by a visual culture that serves the same cause, and body shaming is embedded into it. These images are the weapons used in what Payton refers to as war against women. Most people may not see the motivation behind the creation of such imagery. However they are "far from benign," and they feed body hatred (Orbach 2019). Discussing body hatred and how it is consumed unconsciously through media is critical, as research shows a direct relationship between media consumption and eating disorder symptoms (Stice et al. 1994). This argument goes to prove my point in terms of personal being political; while eating disorders are seen as the extreme effects of

these interventions, they are the perfect examples of how far patriarchy can go to preserve its power over women. This ongoing visual and verbal attack targeting the female body has a history that goes back to 1930s advertisements and has continued its streak until today, while changing its form throughout the years.

Figure 2.9: an Ad for Jarred Tape Worms by W.T. Bridge, Chemist, USA, from the 1920s



This attack on the body is often focused on the “fat”. As you can see above, “fat” is described as the enemy. As a graphic designer, what attracts my attention the most here on this poster is the use of typography. Starting from the top, the word “eat” is repeated, and on each repetition, it becomes a couple of point sizes bigger. This almost represents the never-ending, and in-fact, growing appetite of a woman. As discussed earlier, the appetite represents more than a woman’s desire to consume food; it can also allude to sexual appetite. It gives us the message that women want more, and they cannot control their appetites. Continuing with the word “fat” we can see the typography also accentuates the notion of being fat. It is thick, puffed up and rounded. This advertisement is the perfect example of how much thought goes into designing these product posters.

Figure 2.10: Fig. 1, a Newspaper Ad by Liggett Drug Stores, USA, 1949, Fig. 2, Reduction Salt Ad by the Brand Louisenbad, USA, 1911

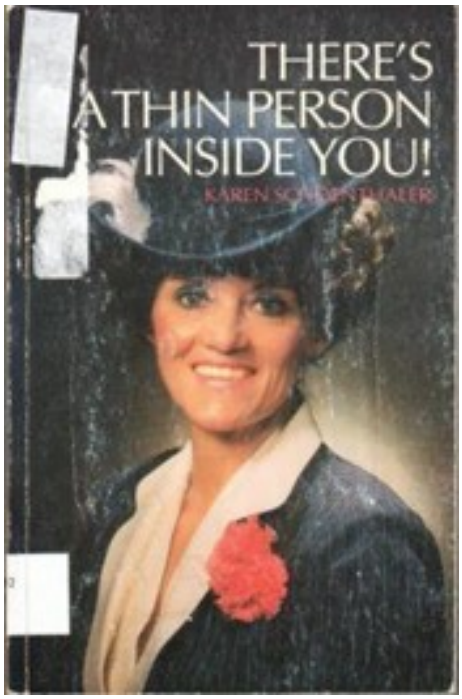
The attack towards the body is far from simply forcing a beauty ideal upon women. The attack on the body is an attack on the integrity of women's existence, and women who suffer from eating disorders are the fallen soldiers of this battle, referring to the silent war metaphor mentioned in Payton's article (Payton 2012). However, the speech/discourse around eating disorders is rarely grounded on the fact that the subject is a victim: women with eating disorders are always depicted as self-inflicting harm on themselves, as a fault, and a weakness.

Many scholars have discussed this intervention as a political strategy to discipline the female body. Foucault is one of the pioneers to state how the body plays a significant role in power relations in his book Discipline and Punish (Foucault 2012). Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand puts it more poetically, in that losing the confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself (De Beauvoir 1952). However, for this strategy to work, internalization is necessary. The diet culture, the thin ideal, the words of "empowerment," "choice," "willpower", the admiration towards self-discipline and the idea that our bodies are something to be worked on, to be improved helps this internalization to take place in our subconsciousness. Combined with the fatphobia and thinspiration mentality, women are "motivated" to "improve" their bodies (Orbach 2019). While physical control of the female body can be seen throughout the In Western and Eastern history, such as corsets and feet-binding, this mental/psychological control over women's bodies is just as gruesome. It being a mental issue and coming from an internal instinct is the reason we believe dying

from an eating disorder is suicide, while it can be seen as the perfect crime of patriarchy.

Going back to the issue of discourse, we see similar patterns in medical discourse toward fatness and thinness. Thinness is seen as the symbol of health and success (Gremillion 2003). Success stories of weight loss is all around us, in magazines, television, billboards, YouTube videos and Instagram posts. We are constantly worried about our weight, BMI, and fat percentage, terrified of being "unhealthy." While on the other hand, being fat is medically seen as a sign of laziness and gluttony (Moore and Mycek 2014). People are more terrified of dying from obesity than of a complication caused by an eating disorder. Bulimia nervosa is often underrepresented compared to anorexia nervosa, while in fact, bulimia is almost four times more common than anorexia. However, since it is often undiagnosed, estimating the number of deaths connected to bulimia is difficult, even though it causes many complications such as heart and kidney failure (Boskind-Lodahl and White Jr 1978). Therefore, anorexia is considered a deadly ED, while bulimia is often taken more lightly by society. However, bulimia nervosa is the second most lethal eating disorder, coming right after anorexia nervosa. In addition, bulimia is much easier to hide than anorexia, since the sufferers are usually on or above the average weight limit, also making close social circle of the sufferers less likely to notice something about it (Schaumberg et al. 2017).

Figure 2.11: Bookcover of There's a Thin Person Inside You by Karen Schoenthaler, 1983



Women suffer from ideologies of both Western and Eastern societies' perception of the female body or the positioning of women in the society. Interestingly, we can see reflections of a west-centric dualistic attitude towards the female body in visuals from popular culture. This goes back to Ancient Greece, where Plato defines the body as an alien entity that is glued, nailed to the self in Phaedo (Eggers Lan 1995). Being Plato's student, Aristotle also defines females as "mutilated males" who were "prisoners of their body functions," which includes hunger (Hesse-Biber 1996). The duality of body/mind can also be seen in Cartesian thought. Similarly, Descartes sees the mind as a prisoner inside the body and defines the body as a mere prison for the mind. This duality is quite problematic and limiting when it comes to analyzing and treating eating disorders, as well as playing a critical role in gender roles throughout history. As an extension of this split and a reflection of duality in the Western society, men are associated with the mind and reason, while women are associated with the body and irrationality.

Touching on the medical aspect of the issue, this split between body and mind can be seen as one of the reasons eating disorder sufferers struggle to stop the disordered actions even though the body starts showing serious symptoms of illness, such as heartburn and muscle pain. The disconnection towards their own bodies often stops them from facing the consequences of the addictive and harmful behavior. In a study that examined the motor functions of eating disorder patients, evidence showed that even though the motor-based activity was not directly impaired, a lack of recognition towards one's own body was connected to motor functions in the brain (Campione et al. 2017). In the study, outcomes reveal that patients with ED do struggle to distinguish their own bodies from other's bodies: Resulting in lack of cognitive sense of one's body. In this framework, women who experience eating disorders see their bodies and minds as two separate entitie (Bordo 1997). A study on Japanese women has been pointed to as revealing an eastern aspect to the same problem (Ogura 2001). Japanese women's description of this split, where there is self and "the other self" can also be seen as a very accurate expression of misogyny, since the other self is described as a dominating male that lives inside of the self, dictating it and keeping it under control. This power mechanism is experienced through hunger. Similarly, a Western study on anorexics defined the other-self as a male, "a dictator", "a little man who objects when they eat" (Bruch 2001). The female "self" was associated with hunger and sexual instability, while the male "other self" was linked to will and values of higher spirituality. With this ongoing power battle between the will/reason (the other self) and hunger/insensibility (the self), thinness is the triumph of will over the body (Bordo 2004). This goes to show that in case

of feminine bodily experience, studies reveal similar results in both Western and Eastern cultures, where a split between the self and the body can be observed with traces of misogynistic power structures. Below we can see an image that supports the same mentality of "having a thin person inside you". An ad for a weight loss medicine suggesting that "a slim person signals to be freed." Going back to the Cartesian thought of the body being a prison, the fat body is a prison where a thin person is locked up in, waiting to be "freed."

Figure 2.12: Weight loss Ad for Preludin, a type of amphetamine, by the pharmaceutical company Geigy, Switzerland, 1950

Furthermore, the split between the body and mind makes the body vulnerable towards oppression and control as a separate, material entity. Feminist academics such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz also discusses this duality in the context of body image and materialism of women's bodies; their discussions can be a pathway to understanding the social and collective reasons that cause these eating disorders and their triggers. In addition to analyzing the motives and reasons behind such division. It is almost as if the culture adopts the "divide and conquer" strategy in this war against the female body; as Caroline Knapp puts it, hatred of the specific (a body part), becomes the hatred of the self (Knapp 2003). The body in a way, becomes the warzone, becomes the "site of both the oppressor and oppressed" (McGilley 2004). All the protests and reaction the self gives to these factors take

place in the body and against the body (Brown and Jasper 1993).

To expand the issue of the female body and its division through the visual culture, this forced hatred upon it is far from simply being thin or fat. It is about having constantly changing standards of beauty around femininity. For example, we have reviewed a lot of advertisements starting from 1920s to today. Yet there were times when these ads would advocate a curvy figure and link the thin female figure to being "not feminine enough" and being "undesirable." Even then, however, the ideal was to have fat around specific body parts to fit those standards. A thin waist is almost always necessary to remain "desirable", even when you weigh more. So, it is never really about the liberation of the body and accepting a "fat" body.

Figure 2.13: Ad by Ironized Yeast Company, USA, 1935

We see the word “flesh” come up often in these advertisements and it says a lot about the perception of the female body. It is as if the flesh was something that can be removed or added and the body is something that can be broken into pieces, dismembered. The use of verbal language in these posters is just as provocative as the visual language. Previously we saw an ad commanding women not to be fat. Here we see the opposite order, “Don’t be skinny.” Instructions are clear: don’t be skinny, don’t be fat. Lose weight, gain weight. But this is not any kind of weight; it is instructed to gain “firm” flesh specifically, and of course, only in the right places where it pleases the male gaze, which is the breasts, hips and thighs. The reduction of the female body to the word “flesh” is just an example among many metaphors.

Figure 2.14: an illustration of different body types in women

It could be presumed to imagine that it would be very difficult experience for women to try and fit into an everchanging standard. Sadly, the same fast changes still happen today in the 21st century. It continues to be an impossible-to-reach standard, yet the modern medicine and plastic surgery industry is quick to develop ways to achieve these looks. In the last couple years, celebrities and ads influenced many women to reach a specific body type: the hourglass shape, which is also mentioned in the illustration above. Starting from the ads of the 1920s, the shape that constantly makes a comeback is the hourglass shape. Other body types are often depicted as being “unattractive” in the modern and contemporary examples we have seen so far. (See below)

Figure 2.15: Warner's Little Fibber Bra ad, 1968

To reach the hourglass shape, women reach for surgical procedures, since every body's way of storing fat naturally varies. One of the most significant procedures is the BBL, short for Brazilian Butt Lift, also known as Gluteal Fat Grafting, even though it is one of the plastic surgery operations that has the highest mortality rates (Mofid et al. 2017). While the skinny body ideal was on the rise in the late 90s and early 2000s, women could find alternative ways of becoming slender. Just like the rising popularity of BBL today, liposuction which is a procedure that sucks the fat from different parts of the body, also known as body contouring, became a popular procedure with lethal results (Grazer and de Jong 2000). Following extreme crash diets and developing an eating disorder is one of the alternatives to reach a beauty ideal as well. Unfortunately, these are the harsh truths of what the hatred of the body, and the self, can result in through visual culture. Furthermore, it goes to show the level of internalization that can happen to go as far as permanently and surgically altering one self's own body.

Bordo and Knapp recognize eating disorders as a silent protest, yet Bordo finds them to be working in favor of the cultural conditions that produce the reaction in the first place, so she sees is as a "crystallization of culture" (Bordo 2004). Caroline Knapp, on the other hand, looks at it from another perspective, where the body becomes the text and makes all these issues visible to the society (Knapp 2003). This theory goes hand in hand with the concept of Alexithymia, which is the inability to express

emotions (Preece et al. 2020). One could consider eating disorders as an expression of discontent and emotion, which women are unable to define or describe, through the body. Therefore, eating disorders become a representation of discontent and protest, and the body becomes the arena for the protest (Brown and Jasper 1993). Some choose a different language to define eating disorders in this context, as "a reflection of the powerlessness to change the world" where women turn to change what they have power over, which is their bodies (Nasser 2004). Eating disorders are not only an exemplification of the societal pressure and beauty ideals of the patriarchic ideology, they are also symbols of consumerism. Especially bulimia, where there is withholding and then overcompensating. Bulimics both abide the rules of what a woman must look like and internalize that image, and answer to the seductive calls of consumer culture. Consumer culture speaks to both genders, of course, but again, just like women are both the oppressors and the oppressed, they are both the subjects of desire, and the desire's object.

I am aware of the possible criticism I might receive for looking at this issue from the female perspective, yet research shows that women are less likely to be satisfied with their bodies (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson, and Kristjansson 2012). Around ninety-five percent of those who suffer from eating disorders are women (Berg et al. 2011). In addition, traditional gender roles push women to be more feminine, and higher levels of femininity results in higher levels of ED pathology (Boskind-Lodahl and White Jr 1978). This goes to prove that this is in fact, a feminist issue that needs to be analyzed through a gendered perspective.

3. REPRESENTATION IN VISUAL ARTS

Art is an imporant medium that reflects social ideals within changing historical contexts, and this chapter focuses on art practice as a form of visual culture. The social pressure around the female body can also be observed in works of art throughout history, but there is also a critical approach within art practice that aims at an alternative way of looking, seeing and thinking. Changing ideals of body imagery are represented in art, showing us that not only the body, but those ideals are prone to change. For example, in some eras, the ideal may not be about being skinny, but about being "curvy," and paintings by the 17th Century Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens can be seen as examples.

Figure 3.1: Peter Paul Rubens, The Three Graces 1635, Oil on oak pannel, (220,5x182 cm), Museo Del Prado

The painting we see above is titled Three Graces of Greek Mythology, and represents Zeus' three daughters. His daughters were the symbol of beauty and youth. And we see clearly that these women were painted with body fat, back rolls, cellulites, and relatively small breasts unlike the beauty standards of today. Although being painted for the male gaze and can be interpreted as many other paintings that are created for the male desire, one could admire the freedom of the body form, especially after all the images we have seen so far which constituted an attack on the female body. Though it does not make it any less demeaning of the female body and reducing it to be an object of desire, the difference in interpreting these paintings is grounded in a discussion topic amongst feminist scholars from different fields, especially in the case of Renoir's The Bathers. Renoir's women, like those of Rubens, are not skinny; on the contrary, they are curvy, and "fleshy."

Figure 3.2: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, The Great Bathers, 1884-1887, Oil on canvas, (117.8×170.8 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art

Caroline Knapp, for example, herself an anorexic during her lifetime, interprets Renoir's The Great Bathers with admiration in her book Appetites: Why Women Want (Knapp 2003). As a woman who has had an unhealthy relationship with her body and her weight, she finds this representation of the female body liberating. Today in the 21st century, a body like this is considered wrong, flawed, and even disturbing to some. These are two "fat" women, whose appetites got the best of them, representing the "loss of control to fat" as Knapp expresses, which is a very disordered thought she would mention she had about food. It is likely that most people looking at this painting from a feminist perspective would find it demeaning and misogynistic.

These are women painted to be admired by men and to satisfy their gaze after all. This scene is all about male voyeurism and a feminine display of homoeroticism. Yet, is it possible to see it the way Knapp sees it? As a celebration of the female body, the liberation of fat and flesh? Art historian Linda Nochlin finds this different analysis of the painting intriguing and suggests that perhaps there is more to Renoir's paintings than simply speaking to the male audience of the time and that it enables a feminine fantasy aside from a traditionally male one (Nochlin 1971). Considering the beauty ideals and the practices to achieve the desirable, feminine look at the time in the West Renoir's women do indeed look liberated; we can think of women with all kinds of clothing that shaped and pushed their bodies in a way they could hardly move or breath in, manipulated to be a certain figure with high pushed up breasts and a tiny waist constricted by tight corsets. It must have been exciting to see this painting and think of the possibility of bodily freedom, just like how Knapp sees it as a way of bodily liberation, an embracement of fat and flesh.

Though looking at this through intersectionality, it still represents a Western ideal of fair-skinned women and leaves women of color outside the traditional beauty ideal. It suggests that anyone thinner, fatter, or darker skinned than these women are not desirable by heteronormative male sexuality and not "feminine." Also, images like this often "accept" this body type by simply sexualizing it and many women are victims to this sexualization and fetishization of the "fat", as well as marginalizing anyone outside of the standards it represents. Any kind of beauty ideal that we see in visual culture objectifies the body and reinforces certain race, gender and class norms constructed by power relations (Rice et al. 2020). One could perceive this contradiction as being hypocritical towards women of color as it empowers a certain body type that is now percieved as undesirable, while also reinforcing other standards such as fair skin, excluding many women from different ethnicities.

Figure 3.3: Fig. 1, Kim Kardashian on the cover of Paper Magazine, Winter 2014 edition, Fig. 2, Photograph of Sarah Baartman, from 1800s

This hypocrisy of the beauty standards throughout history can be seen in many other examples. One of which is the trend of having larger hips beginning its popularity after the reality show celebrity Kim Kardashian first made an appearence in the world of entertainment in 2007 (Sastre 2014). Her hourglass figure and large hips made an alternative beauty ideal available after the ongoing rise of skinny trends. While her body type began to be the new ideal of a sexually desirable woman in the 21st century, this figure was marginalized and caused extreme suffering to black women in the 18th century. Sarah Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, a South African woman born in 1789, was exhibited in freak shows as her body type was considered "obscene" as it was not considered desirable at the time; she suffered even after her death for having the praised large hips of our generation (Netto 2005). While Kardashian's advertisement of her figure can be seen as empowering just like The Great Bathers of Renoir, at its core, it is exoticizing and overtly sexualizing the female body, especially for women of color, for the male gaze, in a different way than it was for the Hottentot Venus. This difference can also be observed in how society is affected by the display of two different women's bodies. While Sarah Baartman was simply an object of entertainment, just like Kim Kardashian is today, Kardashian's hourglass figure has become the new ideal very quickly through Reality TV and media exposure. Her constant media appearance affected consumers of reality TV to reach for cosmetic surgery in order to reach this new ideal. Although most people suggested her figure was a result of cosmetic procedures such as the deadly operation called the "BBL" as discussed in the previous chapter, Kardashian stated that her hips were natural and are a result of her Armenian heritage, again making her body

an exotic object through her Armenian identity (Sastre 2014).

Figure 3.4: Fig.1, Paparazzi photo of Kim Kardashian, 2014, Fig.2, Paparazzi photo of Kim Kardashian 2022

While this "Slim Thick" ideal continued for a decade, in 2022, Kim Kardashian once again shaped the beauty standards of our generation by going on an extreme diet to fit into the late Marilyn Monroe's dress for the Met Gala. In the interview for Vogue magazine, she stated that "I would wear a sauna suit twice a day, run on the treadmill, completely cut out all sugar and all carbs, and just eat the cleanest veggies and protein," With her continuing weight loss even after the Met Gala, she brought the skinny trend back. This goes to show how fast these beauty standards change and how arbitrary this process can be, and how difficult it is for women to follow every trend to feel beautiful and desirable. It is inevitable that as a result of this constant attempt to catch up and manipulate their figure according to beauty trends, the body does become a battleground for many women who internalize these ideals. This "battle" has been a subject of many feminist artists.

Figure 3.5: Barbara Kruger, Your Body Is a Battleground, 1989, Silkscreen on vinyl, (284.48x284.48 cm)

One of these artists is Barbara Kruger, a postmodern feminist artist born in 1945, coming from a graphic design background. Her work utilizes discourse as a tactic to give a clear and strong message to the viewer. She has taken this bodily battle as a subject of her work, which was highly inspired by the Women's March for abortion rights in Washington, in 1989 (Mirzoeff 2002). It is possible to interpret this work in terms of all kinds of struggles women endure about their bodies, including body dissatisfaction caused by the constant attack on women's bodies in visual culture. Looking at this work, we can see the political and cultural influences that inspire Kruger's artistic style. The split face of a woman in the background has been interpreted as multiple messages, including a luminous vision linked to nuclear war, a more straightforward war metaphor, an x-ray of the woman's face, or it not being an image of the same woman at all (Mirzoeff 2002). After discussing the dynamics of eating disorders and how the attack on the female body targets the separation of the body from the self as a separate entity, I see the fragmented body of a woman looking at this image. The dissolving self of a woman from the "flesh" it is imprisoned in. This fragmentation of a woman's body is a way of conquering the body, dividing it in order to reduce women's existence to pieces. This division triggers hate towards parts of one's body, as if it was not a whole entity, and the hatred of a certain part becomes the hatred of the self. This hatred of the self, although caused by external factors,becomes internalized over time. This internalization shows its symptoms through acts such as surgical operations or as

disordered eating patterns to Manipulate, reduce and demolish the "flesh," the body. Another artist, Annette Messager, discusses how the hate towards one's own body and the internalization of the concept of an "ideal body", can progress into extreme measures.

Figure 3.6: Annette Messager, Voluntary Tortures, 1972, gelatin-silver prints in passe-partou, (19x14cm)

Annette Messager, born in 1943, is a feminist artist who works against the pressure society imposes on women and their bodies, and how women see themselves through this perspective. This work especially captures the perspective of Messager as it is clearly focused on the "tortures" women impose on themselves as a result of internalizing social expectations communicated through visual media. Here we see multiple black and white photographs of women trying different procedures in order to achieve a "better self". At first glance, this work can easily be seen as a collage of scenes from horror movies and Messager emphasizes the grotesque nature of these procedures by naming the work "Voluntary Tortures". Through her work, we can understand this torture against the body does not simply come from an external place/factor; it can become something self-inflicted, consciously and voluntarily as we see in the examples above, or unconsciously such as a disordered eating patterns and unhealthy relationship with food that gets out of control, thus turns into a full-blown eating disorder. Although not shown in this work, eating disorders are also painful also for the many physiological side effects that result in discomfort. Research shows that there is a neurological disconnection between the body and the brain of

eating disorders patients and they may be perceiving their bodies as a foreign body as previously mentioned in Chapter 1 (Campione et al. 2017). This could easily be the case when these painful or uncomfortable procedures are demanded on purpose, for the sake of achieving the "ideal beauty". As the old saying goes, "beauty is pain" and this motto is highly internalized by women, and Messager's work clearly captures it. It has been fifty-one years since this work was created and the procedures have multiplied, even became more and more extreme, to the point of being lethal, like the Brazilian butt lift. Furthermore, as media has become a bigger part of our daily lives and our exposure to it has become inevitable, the demand towards these procedures continues to increase (Sood, Quintal, and Phau 2017).

Figure 3.7: Stock image of a woman grabbing her abdominal fat

Another reflection of this exposure is the desire to self-mutilate. Self-mutilation may sound harsh at first yet it is used to describe a spectrum of tendencies. In mild cases, it is named "delicate self-mutilation" which can be used to describe behaviors such as self-cutting, skin picking or hair pulling. Studies show a correlation between the delicate self-mutilation and eating disorders in terms of how they are developed through childhood traumas such as early sexual abuse or assault (Rosenthal et al. 1972). Yet I believe our desire to cut off parts of our body or feel discomfort with parts of the body can develop later in life through visual culture. While extreme cases of self-mutilation were looked at separately during these research processes because they are linked to paranoid schizophrenia, it is hard to ignore the similarities between the desire to cut off a limb versus the desire to cut off belly fat. There is specifically one gesture that we are familiar with visually, which is a woman grabbing her "unwanted belly fat" as if she wants to tear it apart. I would like to ask, why we do not question our desire to get rid of parts of our body, such as our belly, or our arm fat, and yet be so disturbed by people who mutilate their limbs? Is

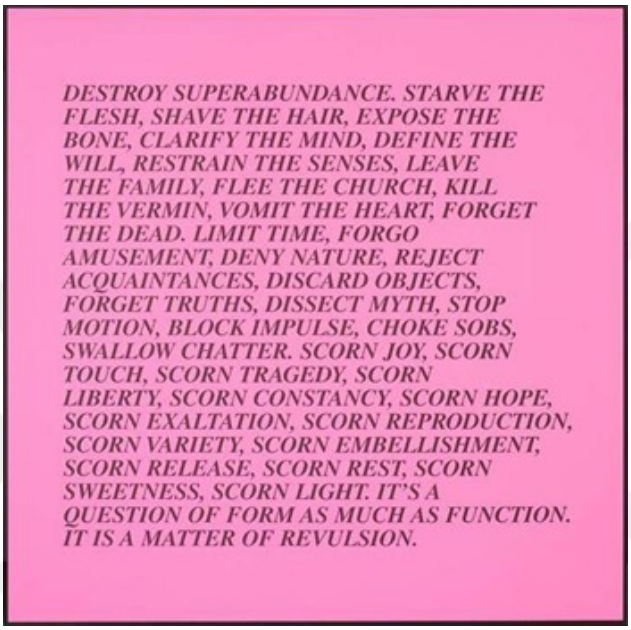
body fat not as much part of our bodies as our limbs? Why is one desire acceptable since it is for the good cause of being healthy, while the other is an extreme case of mental disturbance? Women do cut their bodies apart to achieve the ideal beauty, they suck fat out of their bodies, then cut the excess skin left behind, and they pay hospitals and surgeons for it. Could we just easily go to a surgeon and pay them to remove our legs because it does not look good?

Figure 3.8: Jenny Holzer, Protect Me From What I Want, from Survival 1985

These intrusive thoughts around women's own bodies become so normalized that bodies are "morphed" into "ideal forms" constantly; advertisements almost always suggest that these procedures are the way to become "better versions of oneself". Artist Jenny Holzer touches on these intrusive thoughts in her work. Holzer is an American, neo-conceptional artist born in 1950. Her work is often focused on delivering words to people in public spaces. The work we see above can be interpreted in other ways, yet I see how it can be linked to desires we have that can end up hurting us, or the things we can do to achieve our desired goals, like being thin and being beautiful. At the beginning of the chapter I talked about BBL being lethal and illegal in most countries, yet there are still people going out of their ways to get this procedure done. Another good example would be eating disorders. It is not that ED sufferers do not realize the damage they are doing to their bodies by their habits; it is almost impossible to ignore the painful side effects. It is just that they do not care as long as they satisfy their emotional or bodily needs and desires. ED patients do not only have unhealthy eating habits, their unhealthy relationship with their bodies is also expressed through extreme sexual activities, such as bulimics showing

tendencies towards sadomasochistic sexual encounters or binging on sex similar to binging on food (Lower 1971). Lisa Warren Cross explains the link between sex and food for a bulimic as "Food, feces, menstrual blood, the penis, and finally the fetus can all be experienced as the "other" within, an internal presence whose continuity with the self is ambiguous." (Cross 1993).

Figure 3.9: Jenny Holzer, Inflammatory Essays 1979-1982, Lithograph on paper, 43,1x43.1 cm



Going back to the Cartesian thought on the body, the body is seen as something that must be tamed, similar to how patriarchal society considers women as individuals that need to be tamed and kept under control. So, through the long history of how society perceives body and bodily needs, like hunger, both hunger towards food or sexual and emotional hunger, it is inevitable to develop hostility towards one's own body. Especially in the case of women's bodily experiences, as it is constructed around the feeling of shame as we previously mentioned. This mentality is explicitly represented in a part of Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essays" where the artist expresses her thoughts as short essays on multiple square posters. This work can be interpreted in a way that links the Cartesian thought to the feminine experience of the body, both in terms of forced beauty ideals and behaviors that develop in an attempt to reach those ideals such as eating disorders, self-harm or body modification. Throughout the short essay, we are struck with strong expressions such as "Starve the flesh. Expose the bone. Restrain the senses. Vomit the heart. Block Impulse." These expressions could be seen as eating disorders and experience of controlling the

body/fat/flesh and its desires boiled down to a couple sentences. Starving the flesh and exposing the bone can be interpreted as both a reflection of diet culture that circles around the idea of reaching the "thin ideal" and restraining the amount of food to lose weight. In extreme cases, these "dieting" habits do evolve into anorexia nervosa. We have also come across the word "flesh" often in the vintage weight loss advertisements we analyzed in the first chapter. The word flesh is often used to represent the body, as if it is a separate entity from the mind and self, just like how the cartesian duality suggests it is.

Continuing from the Cartesian duality, we are struck by another set of sentences following the previous statement, "Clarify the mind, define the will, restrain the senses." We can come across this way of thinking and discourse in most dieting, weight loss motivation posts or advertisements. In order to control the body, the flesh, one must first use the mind and logic, as it is perceived superior over the primitive and emotional body. "The will to lose weight, the will to become thin" is and must be dominant over the "hunger of the body" to reach a certain ideal. I believe this work can be analyzed best through referencing Caroline Knapp's observations of women's hunger (Knapp 2003). Knapp states that a woman's appetite comes in different forms: hunger for sex, food, shopping, and emotional validation. Her expression is a good summary of the approach to women's desires, as a woman's hunger is inappropriate, possibly even grotesque." This statement is reinforced by Holzer's sentence in this artwork: "It is a matter of revulsion." The bodily needs, and the appetite of women are perceived as a disturbing/revolting quality that needs to be ashamed of. Kim Chernin also relates this shame around the body and emotions of a woman to the development of eating disorders by suggesting that "the understanding of women's shame is indeed central to the understanding of eating disorder. Shame over the natural expression of feelings and over the natural expansiveness of the female body is the lingering mistery to which there may be many answers" (Chernin 1985).

How else do we see the control and domination over women's bodies represented in art? Similar to the advertisement and media examples we have seen and discussed in the first chapter, the body can be represented through metaphorical examples, so a similar pattern can be observed in visual arts in the case of representations. The female body is a popular subject in visual arts, thus, some feminists may feel the pressure to avoid using it in their art production. However, in cases where the body is in fact used as the main subject by feminist artists, we can remember Griselda Pollock's arguments on why women's own experiences with their sexuality and body is different than how men represent it. Furthermore, the experiences represented in visual art by female artists play an important role in breaking down conventional

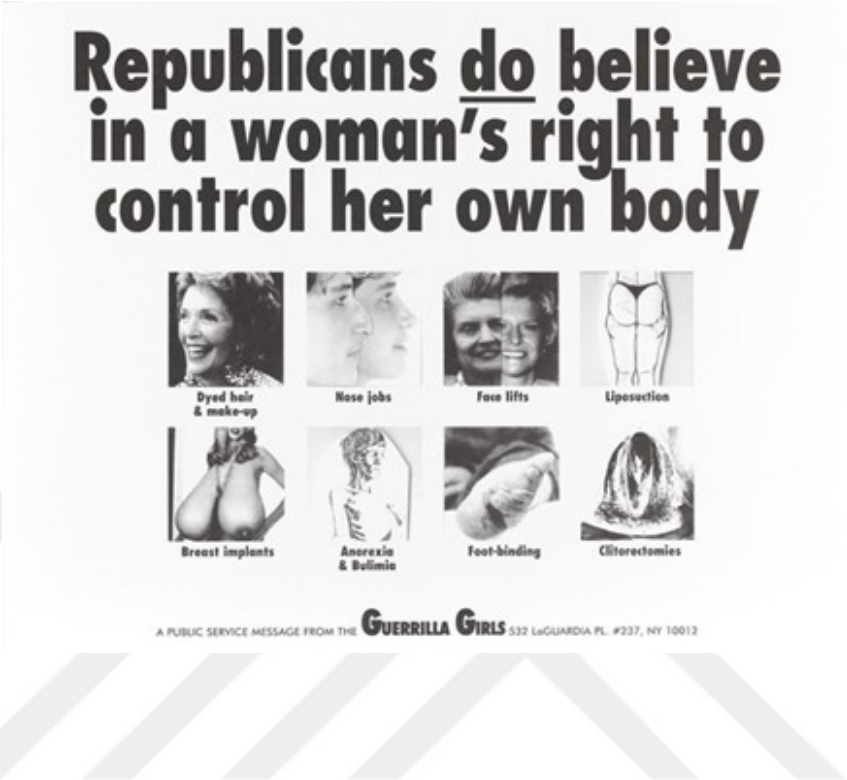
patterns in art history, constructing a counter visual language around the female body (Pollock 2003).

Figure 3.10: My Nurse, Meret Oppenheim, 1936, Metal plate, shoes, string, paper, 14x33x21 cm, Moderna Museet

Meret Oppenheim, a surrealist artist born in 1913, has produced a work that can be analyzed as a good example of how the female body could be symbolized through objects related to femininity and the female body in visual arts. This work, called "My Nurse", consists of a multi-layered symbolism that can be interpreted in many different ways. At first look, we see a pair of white heels, tied up like a chicken or a turkey, served on a silver plate. We see the metaphor of the female body and the roasted chicken tied up with strings, which is not an unpopular way of preparing a meal like this. On the tips of the heels, we see ruffled paper tips used in the preparation of these types of dishes to highlight how the heels were placed on the plate to resemble a roasted chicken. There is an allusion to how the female body is associated with "flesh" where an indirect association between the female body and "meat", objectifies women. This fetishization of certain body types and their representation stands for a certain attitude towards the female body that suggests it is ready to be consumed by the male voyeur (Bordo 1997). This objectification towards the female body both disassociates the body from the mind, as well as separating all feelings of pleasure and feeling from the female bodily experience, as a piece of flesh can neither feel pleasure nor pain. This fetish of women being vulnerable, passive and available for men to do whatever their heart desires to their bodies has a long history and we also see symbols of that in Oppenheim's work. This binding technique we see on the sculpture has a corresponding culture when it comes to oppressing the female body for the male fantasy and gaze: reminiscent of

Japanese Kinbaku, a ceremonial ritual performance on the female body by tying it up to look pleasant for the male viewer (O'Donnell 2017).

Figure 3.11: Poster by Gerilla Girls, 1992



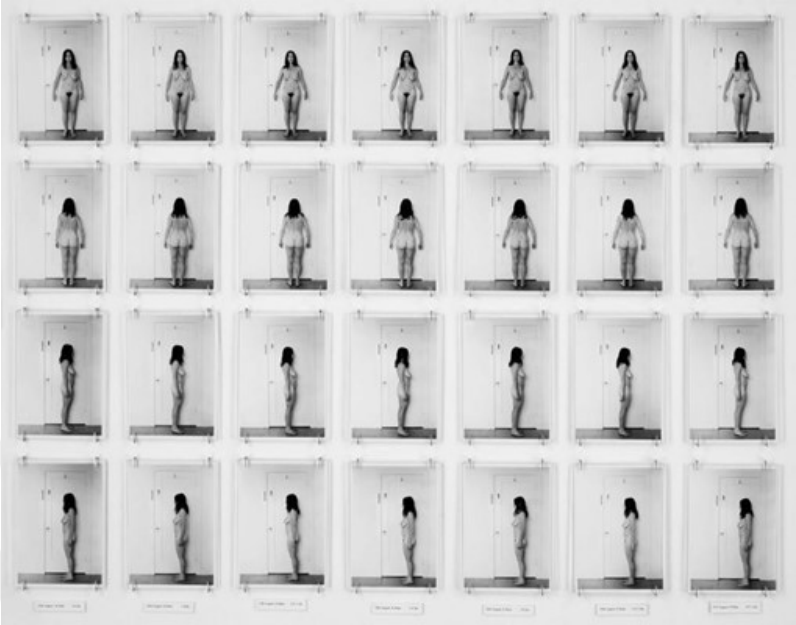
It is claimed that women have total freedom over their bodies and they have the liberty to decide on issues regarding their bodies. However, it is obvious that when these decisions contradict patriarchal power, there is a setback to those freedoms. The poster we see above was produced by Guerilla Girls in 1992 as a part of the pro-choice movement during the anti-abortion politics at the time. Guerilla Girls is the name of an anonymous collective of female artists formed in 1984. The group, utilize advertisement strategies in their favor to spread messages to the public by creating striking posters. While reproductive rights over the female body are highly violated by politics, lethal procedures such as Brazilian butt lifts or liposuction is legal in most countries. We also see the example of bulimia and anorexia in the poster as a representation of bodily "control". Somehow the culture around women wants us to believe that these procedures or illnesses are purely women's own decisions to make, and is a reflection of the freedom over their own bodies, as long as it serves the male gaze and the beauty ideals or fantasies of men. This mentality takes the guilt and responsibility off their shoulders for the intervention and oppression of the male-dominated society/culture over the female body. So, contrary to the case of abortion rights, the politics are almost always pro-choice, as long as the choices are made in order to be "beautiful" and "desirable." While the fact that some of

these attempts to control and change the body do come from internalized ideas on what is "pretty" or not is true, we must first question whose opinions and ideals women internalize in the first place, and what are the factors at play behind this internalization process. In addition, we must ask ourselves, who these procedures and actions on the female body are truly in service to?

Figure 3.12: ORLAN, From The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan 1990-1993, Video, (480x312 px)

ORLAN, a renowned French performance artist, produced some of the most radical works on how painful following these beauty ideals and going through the surgical procedures can be. Orlan's series of works, "The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan" does not only criticize the cultural norms of beauty, but also the representation of the "beauty ideals" in Western art. Throughout her series, she has publicly gone through plastic surgery operations while filming her process, turning the surgical room into a theatre for the viewer to witness what truly happens behind the closed doors of the pursuit towards beauty. In this framework, Susan Bordo's opinions on eating disorders, are also relevant when it comes to plastic surgery. "And these disorders reflect, too, our increasing fascination with the possibilities of reshaping our bodies and selves in radical ways, creating new bodies according to our mind's design" (Bordo 1997). Is this fascinating aspect not the main selling point for undergoing these procedures? Easily attainable options to radically change our bodies, we can even design and see the results beforehand. However, the risks, the pain and the grotesque nature of these medical interventions are never talked about. ORLAN's work openly shows the true, gruesome nature of self-modification procedures advertised to us by the consumer culture and the plastic surgery market.

Figure 3.13: Eleanor Antin, , Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, 1972, 148 silver gelatin prints in the complete piece, (Each piece 17,2x12,7 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago



Going back to eating disorders and the concept of "reshaping the body", Eleanor Antin, "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture" is a photo series created by the artist in 1972. This work is a great example of the reflection of bodily control and modification, perhaps a milder case, as it showcases a chronological series of photographs where the artists followed a weight-loss diet she has found in a popular magazine. She lost 12 pounds which equals around 5 kilograms, during the process and photographed herself from different angles throughout her diet progress. Antin has put out an impressive amount of effort into creating this work, by following a strict diet and documenting the whole process. This documentation can be interpreted as a representation of the cycle of self-checking habits and our obsession with weight, which I believe many women can relate to. In addition, her labor through the creation of this series represents the struggle of women trying to reach certain beauty standards and their relationships with their bodies and food. The diet culture and market, just like the plastic surgery market, is a production of the male gaze and oppression over the objectified female body. The visual culture dehumanizes women by suggesting their bodies are "things" that can be worked on. Eleanor Antin's choice of name is noteworthy of this ideology, as she carves away the fat and forms her body into the "thin ideal". Susan Bordo's analysis of this thin ideal and weight loss culture encapsulates Antin's work: "Fat is the devil, and we are continually

beating him- “eliminating” our stomachs, “busting” our thighs, “taming” our tummies. Pummeling and purging our bodies, attempting to make them into something other than flesh” (Bordo 1997). In this way, we can see dieting as the beginning stages of a disordered eating pattern and corrupted relationship with our bodies and food. As the internalization towards the hatred of the fat and the fear of “too much” goes deeper and deeper, we reach the extreme end of “eating disorders”.

Figure 3.14: Janine Antoni, Gnaw, 1992, Chocolate and Lard

While we can give examples of feminist artworks created to criticize the politics around the female body or express the feminine bodily experiences of women, it is difficult to come across works that represent the experience of eating disorders. I believe the issues of representation in the visual culture carries its effects to the visual arts, where eating disorders are underrepresented compared to other bodily experiences of women. I had to look through many works during my research process to choose good examples to analyze, yet it was a challenge. Another work worthy of mention is Janine Antoni’s “Gnaw”. While I personally interpret this work as a representation of the binging act, the artist denies any correlations between her work and eating disorders by once clarifying in an interview, “I didn’t intend to make a piece about bulimia, I was just going through the process and spit this stuff out” (Lloyd 1995). However, I find it problematic to cut the interpretation of “bulimia” off from the work in such a radical attitude, while the whole production process of the work, which is biting into these large blocks of chocolate and lard, carving it, and spitting it out both represents the act of bingeing and purging, as well as

symbolizes the reshaping of the body through eating disorders just like we mentioned earlier. While I respect the artist's own opinions regarding her work, I believe it could have helped create space for the already underrepresented eating disorders such as bulimia to become visible in the art space and perhaps touch viewers who suffer from bulimia by presenting them with a monumental work they can correlate and connect with.

Figure 3.15: Maureen Connor, Taste II,1992, Video installation, Sima Galerie

On the opposite end, adopting a more straight forward approach towards bulimia is Maureen Connor's work, "Taste II", created in 1992. The video installation shows a bathroom scale, where the part we would normally see the weight/numbers has been replaced by a small monitor. The bathroom scale is a powerful object when representing body issues and eating disorders; however, it could be seen as a cliché. Nonetheless, Connor's work is intellectually stimulating in the way it was reintroduced. Scale is an important part of a bulimic's daily routine to follow the weight gain or loss, to keep the weight under control and it is not out of place when trying to represent the experience of an eating disorder. In the installed monitor, the video of a woman bingeing and purging repeatedly is being shown on a loop. There is an induced tension between the recording and the scale. The scale represents the restrictive nature of weight as a concept, and the monitoring of it, while the woman helplessly stuck in the loop of bingeing and purging represents the lack of control in the bulimia nervosa's nature as an illness. The combination of both results in a very accurate reenactment of bulimia and the concepts such as the vicious cycle of bingeing and purging along with the constant anxiety of weighing, and measuring oneself.

All the artworks I have mentioned in this chapter reflect ways in which artists have engaged with the images of bodies and bodily "ideals". I have tried to show how they all directly or indirectly reflect how one perceives one's own body, and how we look at other's bodies and how the culture that surrounds us, is an integral and very powerful part of what we see and want to see in ourselves and others: especially pertaining to the female body.

4. A VISUAL AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

To collect everything I touched on, I want to talk about my creative process. During the course of my artistic research and production, my relationship with my own body was my main inspiration, especially my experience of bulimia, and my recovery process. As I was already familiar to working with photography during my undergraduate studies, I chose to experiment with photography as a medium. The whole production process of photography is very cathartic, and I believe it is the ideal medium to represent issues caused by the male gaze, as the camera lens can be seen as a representation of *the gaze.*

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Untitled, 2022

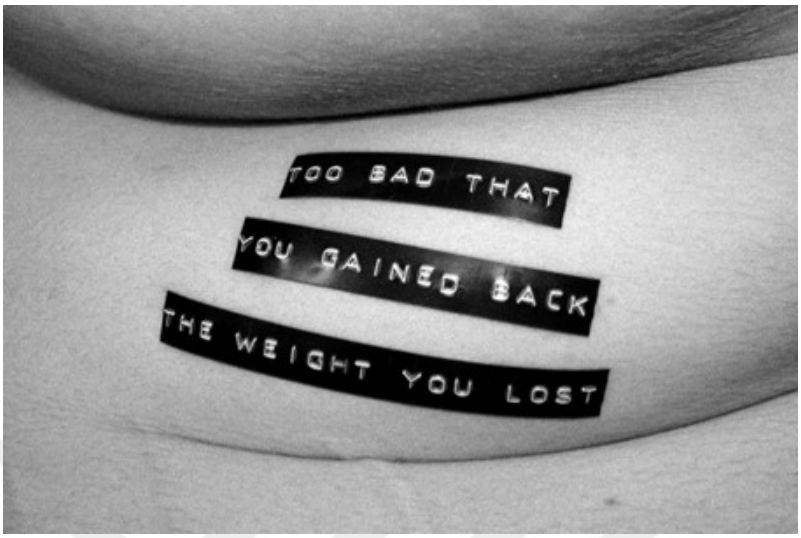
In the beginning, I thought the only way to voice the concerns that I have been arguing in this dissertation could be represented through the direct use of the body. However, I was wary about using my own body and tried to find an alternative. What I really wanted to show was how the exposure to cultural discourse acted as

an invasion on women's bodies. I wanted to include the language overweight women like myself are constantly subjected to. The solution came to me unexpectedly, while watching a video of an influencer, talking about a labeling machine. The machine is a very compact tool and works by imprinting individual letters on a slightly elastic black film, when the letter is pressed from beneath the film, it reveals the white color inside the tape to form the letter. This simple act, when looked at in detail, truly resembles the painful manipulation techniques women apply to their bodies, to "reveal the true self, beautiful, skinny self". It was perfect. After purchasing the machine I started printing traumatic phrases I had heard all my life. I revealed the language of sexualizing an overweight body, or undermining eating disorders. The process of imprinting was slower than my expectations and it took a lot of pressure to properly expose the letter forms on the black tape. This process alone was quite cathartic as I sat in my room and spent hours printing these words that I could not bare hearing anymore. Using this machine turned into a private performance of my own.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, I Like Meat, 2022

Furthermore, I believe these phrases stick to you all your life, and get imprinted in your consciousness just like it does on these tapes, and they are directed towards your body, a very private place. Thus I placed the stickers on my body before taking pictures of them. I see these comments as an invasion of my home, of my body. Although we are led to perceive that our bodies are our homes, we barely notice how damaging these comments can be mentally, and as a result, physically. Often this discourse carries some sexual undertones that reflect how the male gaze sees an overweight body, which is either an object of masculine pleasure or something

“distasteful” to look at. The popular phrase “I like women with meat on their bones” is a reflection of this interest in overweight women; and reminds us of Bordo’s reflections on seeing women as “meat” ready to be consumed by men.(Bordo 1997)



Zeren Sipahioglu, Too Bad, 2022

The discourse around weight is not always coming from a place of masculine sexuality; unfortunately, sometimes it is intended to hurt the reciever, and is defined as “fat shaming”. In her book Talking Back, bell hooks touches on the power of words in the context of feminism by saying “We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle ” (Hooks 1989). Just like the body is. Hooks discusses this topic of attachment and violence in terms of physical violence women experience in their intimate relationships, yet her argument can be easily applied to verbal and psychological violence in regards to body shaming. She frames this intimate relationship not only for romantic partners, as it might be the first to come to mind regarding domestic violence, but also family members. I find it to be the case as well in body shaming, especially as experienced by women, and specifically in Turkey’s social context. Parents often comment on their children’s appearance, in order to guide them or give health advice, however, these comments are full of negativity and oppressive language that has a passive-aggressive undertone. What I experienced after my recovery and correlated weight gain was a lot of pity. People felt sad that I gained the weight I lost during my bulimic phase and did not hesitate to let me know. As personal as this experience is for me, I know that as a woman, we can relate to hearing someone bend down to our face and tell us quietly (as it is considered something shameful by the society) “Did you gain weight?” with an inauthentic compassion and sadness in their voice.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Did You Lose Weight?, 2022

Another aspect of these phrases directed to our bodies is that they may come from people who are in our close social circles in forms of "love". These love expressions are often received from family members in hopes of motivating or "rewarding" the weight loss. However, when we consider the results of rewarding weight loss in the case of women experiencing eating disorders, this gives them the motivation to continue their disordered patterns and delay recovery, since weight loss is the main goal and motivation most of the time. I spent a good amount of time thinking about my own experience with weight loss and my bulimia, and I cannot help but wonder whether I would be struggling for so many years if my weight loss was not recognized by my close circle. As someone with an eating disorder, and thus, experiencing a serious case of body dysmorphia, my perception of the changes in my body was connected to outside viewers' comments most of the time. One thing that helped me track my process was either my weight on the scale, or how visible my bones were and how much I could feel them when I touched myself. I was obsessed with having my collarbone visible, and it was one thing I linked my weight loss to and owned as a trophy; this is one of the reasons I chose to place this specific phrase to in this photograph.

Bell Hooks' analysis of expressing love in family in All About Love is again relevant here, (Hooks 2000) since the language of body shaming and the discourse around the body is often "disguised" under good intentions and as a way of showing love. As we internalize this type of discriminatory or hurtful language as a way of showing love, we become part of this toxic circle. As Hooks also emphasizes, we are deeply affected by our family's ways of showing love and their use of language, joining on

the tradition. This language transaction, as well as our relationship with our bodies, is believed to be linked to mother-daughter relationships according to Chernin (Chernin 1985).

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Just Stop, 2022

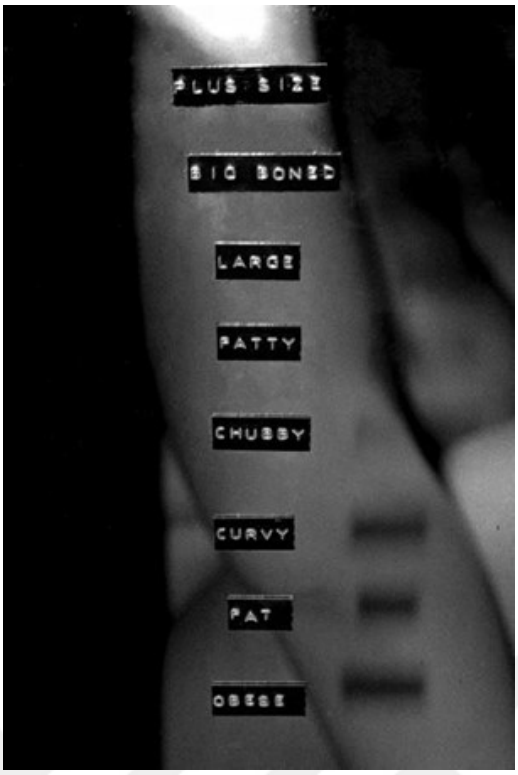
Similar to many women's experience with the language/commentary directed towards their bodies, I experienced a fair share of comments, especially on my eating disorder when I decided to come out as Bulimic six years into my disorder. This deeply affected my relationship with my body along with my recovery process. As I previously highlighted the lack of representation in the case of women's experience with bulimia, most people are unaware of the nature of the illness. We are surrounded by a visual culture that suggests bulimia is simply forcing yourself to throw up, thus, people tend to perceive it as something you do on purpose, so, something you can simply stop doing, and recover. However, in reality, bulimia nervosa is a complex disorder that affects every aspect of one's life shows up as disordered patterns, such as over-exercising. Misrepresentations in visual culture reflect the undermining and hurtful language women are exposed to daily.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, No Biggie, 2022

In other cases, the discourse around bulimia nervosa comes from how normalized these disordered behaviors has become by the "thinspiration" culture. Patterns of restricted eating being advertised as "miraculous" diets, laxative teas being sold as "weight loss" or "detox" drinks, extreme exercise programs introduced as "high-intensity workout" packs... All these concepts fit into the patterns of bulimic compensation perfectly, yet they are advertised in pretty packages, promising "great results". This causes people to normalize these disordered ways of looking at the body and manipulating the body. Subsequently, we see reflections of undermining alarming behavior, both in our own lives and others. Hearing someone say "it's not a big deal" about an illness that damaged my body beyond repair may be personally distressing to me, yet looking at the social reasons behind them and the societal effects of it makes us understand why representing this issue is significant on a collective level.

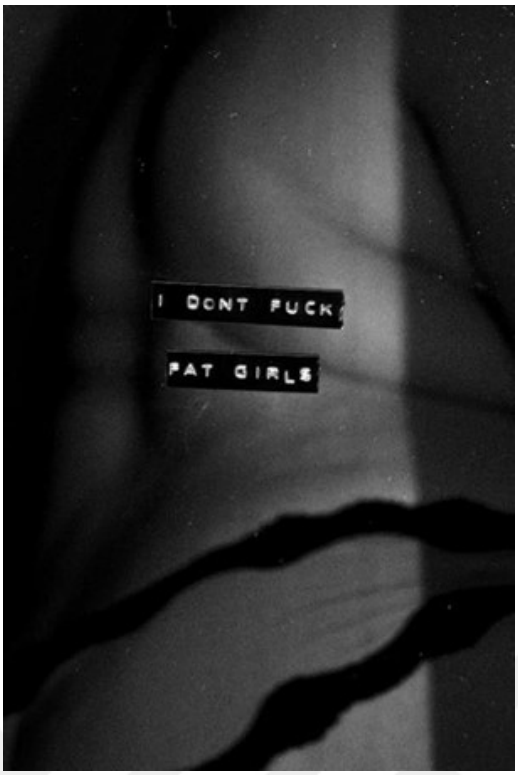
Zeren Sipahioğlu, All That, 2022

As I was looking into the relationship between my body and the language, I have come to realize that there is a connection between my disorder and some spaces. The living space I link with my eating disorder is the bathroom as I experienced most of it in there. Thus, during the production process of this series, I started placing these stickers on the objects and spaces that relate to my binge and purge sessions, which always ended in the bathroom, bent down, staring at the sinkhole, contemplating the amount of food I just ate. Looking at my reflection in the mirror with shame and regret for my lack of control. Bathroom was the battlefield for me. I fought the urge to purge; I fought with my hatred towards myself and my body trying to keep the food down. So it was a significant space for my experience to reflect in my artistic production.



Zeren Sipahioğlu, Untitled, 2022

Especially while writing this thesis, one subject that I had difficulty with was choosing the right word to speak about over-weight women sharing my experience since society already has a language that is, both sexualizing and demeaning but that has become a part of the everyday language I believe this is one of the issues women struggle with, finding the right language to describe how they perceive themselves, it resembles an identity crisis as the standards change constantly, regarding what is the definition of obese or just chubby. Am I fat, or am I curvy? Am I fat in the right places? As already discussed in the second chapter, having body fat can be attractive to the male gaze, if the fat is in the right places such as the breasts and the buttocks. There is even a popular phrase on social media: “big boobs do not count if you are fat”. Which means if you already have body fat all around, it does not matter for you to have big breasts, it is not sexually attractive. The language around the body types change in a fast phase. There is now words for women who does not fit into “regular size”, so, skinny, or “plus size”, they call it the “mid-size”. I see this as a result of the attack on the body and the self. We are so alienated from our own bodies that we are struggling to find the right words to describe ourselves, and try so hard to fit into a category to feel like an actual individual.



Zeren Sipahioğlu, “I don’t fuck fat girls.”, 2022

I always believe that there is a dilemma when it comes to women above the average weight and eating disorders. When you are a fat women you automatically become the center of the gaze in every room you walk in, for all the wrong reasons. The gaze either represents disgust, or desire. This is a result of the fatphobic culture I previously mentioned throughout this dissertation. This unwanted attention a fat women gets is not always caused by fatphobia, however, the male gaze always finds something to fetishize about a woman’s body. “. . . abject body parts that shift into sites of desire and pleasure. . . ” as expressed in the article Bodies at Intersection by Carla Rice (Rice et al. 2020). While larger women are simply trying to be accepted, not fetishized, we start feeling uncomfortable in our own bodies for different reasons. While women’s desires are constantly oppressed, the lust of the masculine sexual drive is the center of a woman’s discomfort in her own body. I expressed the same discomfort in my earlier pictures by showing my body in fragmentations and never revealing the full body image.

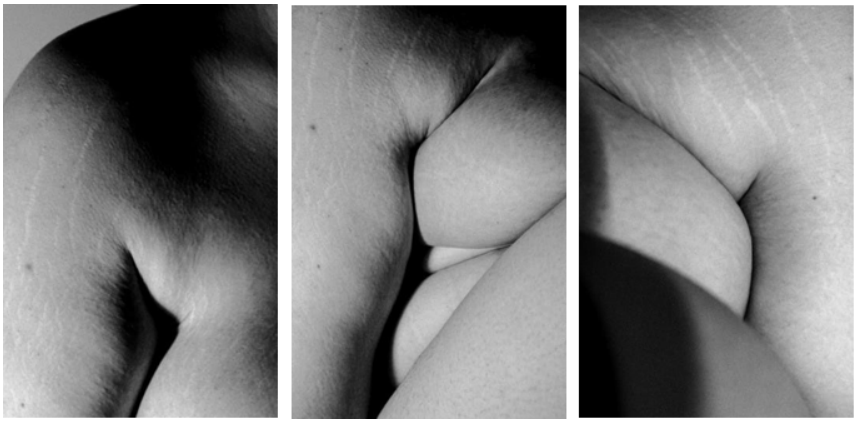
4.1 Love Letters to Myself

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Untitled, from Love Letters to Myself , 2022-2023

As I expanded my comfort zone and started taking nude photographs of myself, I was hesitant with how much of my body was displayed in the shot, especially in the previous productions. Naturally, I have had a problematic relationship with my body after experiencing years of body dysmorphia and dissatisfaction. This relationship improved with therapy yet while photographing myself, I discovered that there was still a lot of stress and tension between me and my body. I was worried about how I would look, questioning if my body would look erotic, open for sexualization, or grotesque and repulsive, which is very difficult because pictures of nude women are often perceived as both, it is almost impossible to avoid a male gaze while exhibiting your naked body. However, in these shots, the more I experimented with photography, my anxiety and dissatisfaction towards my body evolved into curiosity and compassion. This is quite significant because even though I did receive therapy to feel positive about my body, what helped me most was my artistic production. So I decided to name this series "Love Letters to Myself." However, these works are not only significant on a personal level, but also an opportunity to represent overweight bodies in the context of experiencing eating disorders.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Untitled, from Love Letters to Myself, 2022-2023

One can observe the aesthetic concern and manner in these photos, and I assume this concern arose from my graphic design background, and not from an attempt to look "beautiful" or "desirable". Though I do not deny that I want to show that there is an aesthetic aspect to all bodies, regardless of the discrimination or alienation against them based on norms and beauty standards. Through all the beauty filters and the flawless skin we are exposed to by media, we have forgotten how natural bodies can look, we become strangers to our own skin. These textures represent all the changes and deformation my body has been through during my eating disorder and recovery, and in addition they represent the "flaws" that are supposed to be covered up in a woman's ideal body representation.. I believe art can have an aesthetic concern, moreover, and can be a tool to teach us an alternative aesthetic, a different perspective to see beauty.



Zeren Sipahioğlu, Untitled, from Love Letters to Myself, 2022-2023

In the first chapter, I discussed how hatred towards body fat was forced upon women. This hatred of the partial that transforms into hatred of the self, is one of the main motivators when it comes to eating disorders or self-harming behaviors. I wanted to use photography to both teach myself and the viewer to embrace the fat we have become so terrified of. My work reflects an effort to see differently the idea that "fat" is the enemy and must be destroyed. It seeks a new visual language that could create a familiarity with the reality of a woman's body that has changed throughout the years, and that has a fair amount of fat. In addition, the conventional representation of women who experience eating disorders is more often than not anorexic and skin and bones. I wanted to highlight the soft and "uncontained" parts of the body to represent fat women whose experience of eating disorders was underrepresented by mainstream visual culture.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Split, from Love Letters to Myself, 2022-2023

This picture is a significant part of the series. It is a shot that is hardly identifiable at first glance. It's difficult to make sense of the exact part of the body it is from. It's barely a body, and intended to be this way. In addition the split was highly inspirational, both in terms of this work's relationship with art history, reminiscent of Lucio Fontana's slashes across the canvas, and as metaphors of the body/self split

women experience through body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Many male artists perceive the canvas as a body metaphor and this can result in an expression of masculine sexuality and aggression towards the female body in their artworks. One of the good examples could be Jackson Pollock and his ejaculative brushstrokes against the canvas or Willem de Kooning's Woman series which combines violent brushstrokes and strikes with the subject of (a nude woman), expressing aggression towards the female form. So the striking motion against the feminine form or metaphors of the female body can be observed through art history. Fontana's violent act of slashing the canvas can be perceived similar to Pollock and Kooning as an attack towards the female form represented as the canvas. This attack, just like any other topic in the context of women's bodies, is not only a violent act on the body, but an attack on the spirit and identity of women.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, Nurture, from Love Letters to Myself, 2022-2023

This photograph called "Nurture" on the other hand is the picture that is personally most touching to me, as it represents my recovery. I did hate my body for over eight years; I punished it by starving it, by purging, by exercising too much, for being fat and not being conventionally pretty. After starving myself of any nutrition for years, I physically suffered from many side effects. I developed hypoglycemia, I have become anemic, I started losing my teeth, my hair. I forced my body to be malnourished in order to become thinner. This image represents my recovery and my forgiveness. I forgive myself for making my body and mind suffer and this series is my love letter to my body. After years of malnourishment, I am finally taking care of my body, and my home, and feeding, nurturing it like a mother does to her child. Here I am embracing my breast like a newborn baby, resembling a mother

breastfeeding. This is almost a recreation of Mary Cassatt's nursing paintings, again referring to art history in a way. Cassatt's nursing paintings often show the tenderness between a mother and her child while also representing the female nude/breasts in a different context compared to paintings done by male artists at the time. While her paintings highlight the "sacred" entity of motherhood and celebrate the mother's body, I wanted to recreate the same feeling of ownership, care and celebration towards my own body and self as a bigger woman.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, from Love Letters to Myself , 2022-2023

Women's bodies have been used as metaphors of landscapes, even being called "body-scapes" before in art history and there are many examples. So, it would not be revolutionary to call these body scapes and relate them to nature while it is definitely reminiscent of those. However, when I looked at the final images and the textures, I was reminded of marble sculptures. Flesh, fatty flash to be exact, being something so tender yet looking hard to the touch in these pictures intrigued me. These two photographs capture a complex feeling between soft and rough. It creates tension by being caught in the between two different perceptions of how it would feel. Inevitably, there is some eroticism to it as well. Once an artwork is presented to the viewer, there is not much the artist can do to avoid it being sexualized; however

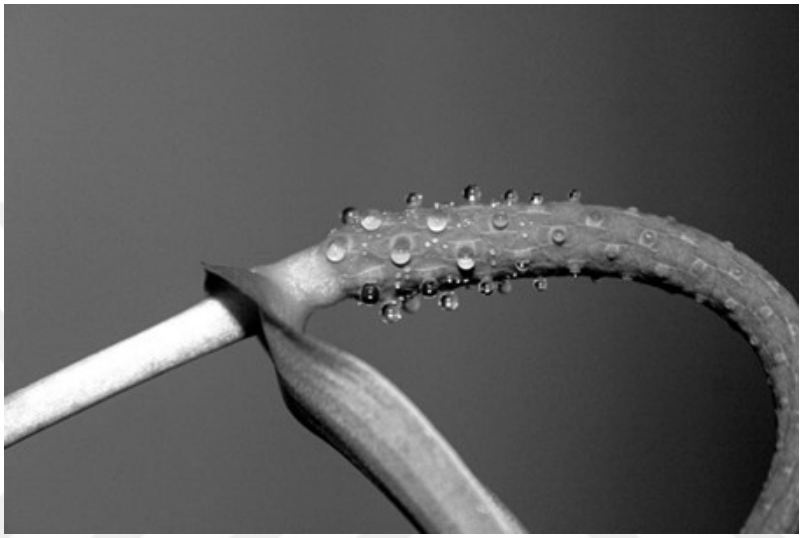
unlike the other images I produced, I completely embraced the erotic nature of this series.

4.2 Guttation

Zeren Sipahioğlu, from Guttation, 2022-2023

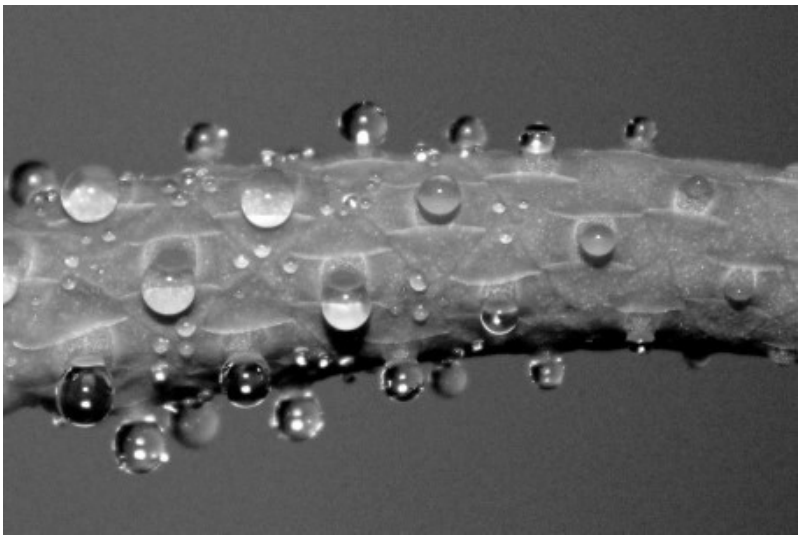
The guttation series is a metaphor for the body and the bulimic cycle. Through culture and art history, women have been linked to nature. By photographing plants as a symbol of the female body, I wanted to highlight this social and philosophical perception towards this connection of femininity and nature. The phenomenon photographed in this series is called "guttation" and as the definition clearly states above, it is a survival mechanism developed by the plant's evolutionary process to survive under extreme circumstances. The plants cannot control the rainfall and the moisture of the soil and environment they are in, and the roots take in any water they can access with no perception of how much would harm the plant. Thus, the plant has to regulate the amount of water it takes into its system to avoid rotting. Similarly, during a binge and purge episode, the eating disorder patient cannot control the amount of food they consume, thus it overwhelms the stomach and the fear of gaining weight as a result of consuming too many calories challenges the mental state of the person. To avoid weight gain and feelings of shame or guilt, the person tries to get rid of the excess amounts of food in their stomach by forcing themselves to throw up and purge.

Therefore the plant's retention of too much moisture symbolizes the bingeing episode and the guttation represents the purge. Just as plants developed this as a survival method, trying to protect themselves from the outside factors which they cannot control, bulimics develop tactics like purging or using laxatives to get the food, or calories out of their system. We cannot control the societal and cultural pressure that surrounds us and gets fed to us, so bulimia can easily be seen as an individual's coping mechanism to survive the trauma caused by this pressure to always "measure up".



Zeren Sipahioğlu, from Guttation, 2022-2023

The part of the plant we see above and used in this series is actually the inflorescence of an anthurium plant. The inflorescence first emerges as a small cane, then first matures into its first stage, which is the female phase of the flower. During the female phase, the flower guttates to catch potential pollens that may get transmitted from the air. After the female phase is complete, the inflorescence evolves into the male stage and dries out, producing pollen. As I found this process quite interesting and rather meaningful in the context of the feminine body experience, I especially chose to photograph the female phase of the inflorescence to symbolize the female body.



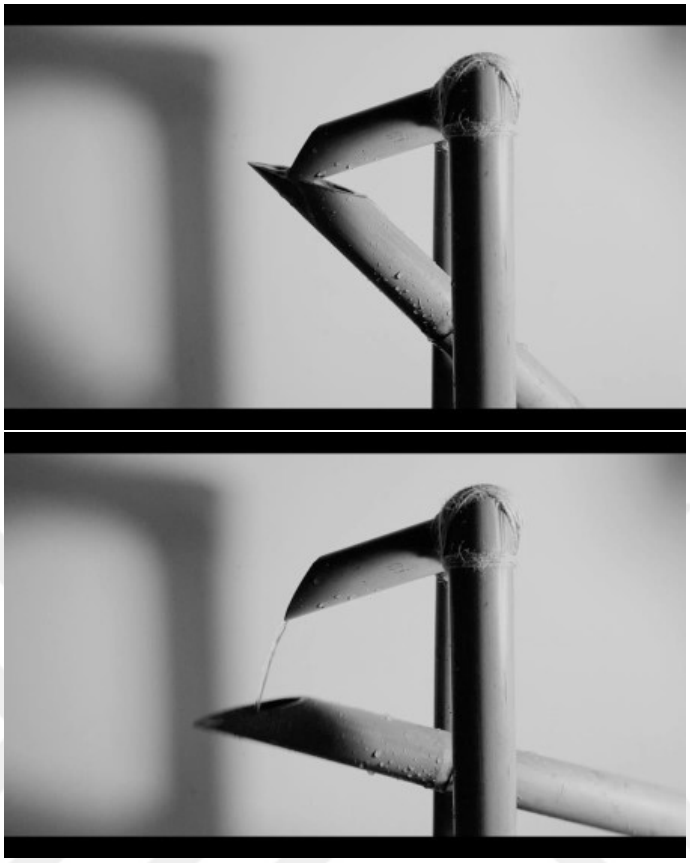
Zeren Sipahioğlu, Close up from Guttation, 2022-2023

Unfortunately, even though guttation is a survival mechanism for the plant, it can still cause harm to the integrity of it. As the excess moisture is pushed from the stem towards the leaves or flowers, the droplets and the overwhelming moisture on the surface of the leaves cause fungal diseases such as rot, or burns the leaves as sunshine hits the droplet and they substitute as small magnifying glasses. Just like eating disorders harm the body, guttation harms the plant, even though it helps it survive.

Zeren Sipahioğlu, from Guttation, 2022-2023

This image here is an homage to Georgia O'Keefe's flowers. We see the inflorescence emerging from the case yet still staying somehow intact. This form resembles a phallic object penetrating the case, thus creating an indistinct erotic undertone in the image. I believe the female body can be represented through many forms we see in nature as many artists like O'Keefe has done before. Furthermore, we see a similar pattern in many feminist artists' works like Ana Mendieta's Silueta series. Works like these criticize the male-dominated ideology that links women to nature and wilderness, unlike men, who are linked to rationale and civilization.

4.2.1 Shishi Odoshi



Zeren Sipahioğlu, Shishi Odoshi, 2023

As one of my main concerns starting this thesis was the lack of representation of eating disorders in visual arts, I have been trying to find alternative ways of representing the issue. Just like the Guttation series, I wanted to use something other than the body to bring a more in-depth, conceptual layer to my work. This visual came to my mind as I was thinking of one of my favorite movies, Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill (2003). My favorite scene was the final scene where the main character, "the Brida" was fighting her final battle with her enemy, O-Ren Shii. The fight scene takes place in a Japanese garden and the director creates tension before the face-off by showing the viewer a close-up of a traditional Japanese deer scarer, which is called Shishi Odoshi in Japanese. While it was invented to scare deers from ruining gardens, this deer scarer is used as a decor nowdays, since it is a type of fountain that cycles the same body of water. The fountain is a simple build that consists of four parts, a vessel to hold the water (or a pond), a pump that cycles the water up to the tap, a bamboo that works as a tap and lastly the bamboo stick that

fills with the water coming from the tap. The last piece is balanced in between two other bamboo pieces and as it fills with water, front section of the bamboo becomes heavier than the rear, causing the bamboo to tip over and spill the water collected. As a result of this action, the water stays in an endless cycle, as the bamboo keeps filling and emptying, making a knocking noise to scare off deers. This endless cycle is the perfect metaphor for the bulimic cycle of bingeing and purging.

After deciding on using this object, I contemplated whether I should buy this fountain or build it myself as I found plans online. While my first choice was purchasing the object, it was not available in Turkey so I had to build it myself. After having the object on my hands, I decided to digitalize it by recording a video and exhibiting it as video art. I wanted the knocking noise to echo throughout the exhibition to build tension, as the video art will be hidden in a separate room at the end of the gallery space, thus the viewer would not know where the sound is coming from until they finish the exhibition and watch the video art on a screen. This work both helped me work with motion and create a multi-layered work in the exhibition space, and helped me reach my goal of successfully representing the bulimic cycle without using the body or the actual action of bingeing and purging, as the female body is open to becoming something sexual or disgusting for the male gaze, and the actual message can easily become lost in the exhibition space.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been shown that, undoubtedly, there is a correlation between exposure to the mainstream cultural misrepresentations of the feminine body experience and women developing body dissatisfaction, often resulting in extreme effects like eating disorders. As we have seen through the examples shown in this dissertation, visual culture continuously pushes unattainable beauty standards on women and invites them to morph their bodies into the presented ideal, no matter the cost. Advertisements directed towards women present us what we must look like, in order to be desirable and successful, they also sell products, diet plans, exercise tools and cosmetic surgery procedures to achieve the "ideal look," which is dominated by the "skinny ideal." By consuming these images, women become more and more dissatisfied with their bodies, and this body dissatisfaction causes women to reach for the advertised options in hopes of "improving" and "becoming a better version" of themselves. As the visual culture sets the social norms of the society, this beauty ideal not only represents the desirable woman of the male gaze, it represents the "normal," and these extreme measures women take to reach that ideal become the "normal" way of living. As society familiarizes itself with crash diets and lethal procedures such as liposuction, we stop seeing the disorderly nature of these behaviors. Starvation disguises under "fasting" for a summer body, mutilating the fatty parts of our body disguises under "cosmetic procedures" that will change one's life. Visual culture not only presents these extreme body modifications or restrictive eating habits as objects of desire, it also misrepresents how eating disorders are experienced in reality. We are surrounded by a visual culture that suggests women with eating disorders are almost always anorexic and on the verge of death because of malnourishment. Overweight women are excluded from eating disorders representations just like they are excluded from ideal beauty representations. This discriminatory visual culture that both feeds into eating disorders and misrepresents them is not limited to advertisements; it also includes visual arts. While art has the power to create a new visual language and open up space for representation of women's experience with their bodies or eating disorders, the lack of representation unfortunately can be observed

in the art world as well. Through my artistic production process, I tried to find an alternative visual language and aesthetic to represent the female bodily experience; as well as find ways to exhibit eating disorders in the art space without victimizing the body types that are excluded from “beauty ideals” or victimizing women who suffer from eating disorders. My attempt and the examples I have given previously can prove that artistic production can be a tool to both criticize this oppressive and demeaning visual culture around women’s bodies and become a liberating space for exhibiting underrepresented experiences of women.

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