



The Whole and the Sum of its Parts.

**Kate Scardifield**

MOP Projects

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Cover image:

*Ritual (The Sum of its Parts)*, 2010.

Fabric, heat set adhesive, dress pins on wall. Dimensions variable.

Image courtesy the artist and Jessica Tyrrell.



# The Cultures of Dissection: Kate Scardifield's Women Wielding the Knife

Fae Brauer

A silhouette of a woman looking just like Jane Austin is framed by a glittering aureole in gold lamé. Far from being truncated, her body stretches below her. Far from her body being an empty shadow, her intestines are ribboned in red as they snake their way from her mouth, by her bronchial tube, heart, lungs and spinal column, onto her colon. Seeming as still as Jane Austen when her silhouette was first traced in Bath in 1800, her passivity seems shattered by the torso below her womb of a woman's body silhouetted in the *arc-de-cercle* phase of hysteria. Yet unlike Jean Martin Charcot's hysterical patients photographed at Salpêtrière, she has a fist clenched and raised. In a second silhouette in which a woman's body is engaged by a bustle, she points at the first woman while throwing her head back as if laughing at her. In the third silhouette, in which her floral laced body seems to have been chain-sawed in two, she takes a knife – the very violence of this gesture being reinforced by its reiteration in a reverse image.

The unspecific nature of Kate Scardifield's titles *Going into Theatre I and II* raises questions as to whether this is occurring in the anatomy theatre or the operating theatre or whether the very act of making a silhouette is a form of surgical theatre entailing the use of a sharp instrument like the scalpel. If this 'theatre' is not necessarily one of these but the interrelationship between all three, does the title of this exhibition, 'the whole and the sum of its parts', allude to the network of practices, surveillance structures, violent rituals and destructive impulses that Jonathan Sawday calls 'the culture of dissection' in which the body was incisively reconfigured?<sup>1</sup> While the male and female body were both subject to forms of violence and surveillance in this culture,

the female body was, as Sawday points out, "the *locus* of a quite specifically gender-determined fear."<sup>2</sup> By focusing upon ways in which this culture of dissection was forged in the eighteenth-century, through 'shadow painting' and 'the art of physiognomy' devised by Johann Caspar Lavater, this essay will try to address this question.

First invented in the eighteenth-century by Etienne de Silhouette, 'shadow painting' did not become popular until publication from 1775 of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.<sup>3</sup> 'Physiognomy is the science of the correspondence between the external and internal man', Lavater explained, 'the visible superficies and the invisible contents.'<sup>4</sup> This pseudo-science was essentially semiotic: It entailed decoding internal life from external signs on the body, particularly the face. Since the face was the least covered part of the body, Lavater reasoned that it could bare moral and psychological character concealed by clothing and distorted by such status symbols as jewellery.<sup>5</sup> To unmask the face, the physiognomist needed to draw not only upon art, according to Lavater, but also upon science and medicine, as exemplified by his friend, Dr. William Hunter, who was inaugural professor of anatomy at the Royal Academy of Arts with his own anatomy theatre and museum in Great Windmill Street, Soho, Anatomy Theatre. In linking these disciplines, Lavater deduced that physiognomy could act as an art and science of dissection able to reveal "every part and every member of the human body separately, the connections, relations and proportions which they have to one another".<sup>6</sup> Since the heart and soul extended speakingly over the entire face, no cardiac surgery was required: Dissection of its exterior would yield the interior from an accurately executed contour.

So important was a single contour that Lavater devised one hundred rules and a machine for drawing them. This machine ensured that the sitter was firmly wedged in a chair, motionless and expressionless, illuminated by candlelight, with the shade of their profile falling on oil-paper behind a polished glass. With the aid of a sharp, black-lead pencil, a magnifying glass or solar microscope, the silhouettist would then outline their profile with a steady hand after which it would be cut out with scissors or a surgeon's scalpel. "If the light has been cast on a clean surface and was sufficiently parallel to it", Lavater explained, then the silhouette represented "the truest and most faithful image of a human being that one can give."<sup>7</sup>

For the physiognomist to decipher the silhouette, Lavater divided the profile into nine sections. Noses were a prime signifier of sensibility, artistry and the ability to command power; foreheads signified comprehension and intellectual capacity, while eyes signified acuity, honesty and sincerity. An aquiline nose conveyed strength, he maintained, while a receding forehead signified intelligence. Long heads were a sign of obstinacy or weakness while short heads signified inflexibility or sensuality. His ideal was realised by his close friend, Goethe, whose nose "expresses in full productivity, taste and love; in other words, poetry"; his forehead "true and rapid understanding" and his eyes, "traces of powerful genius".<sup>8</sup> This ideal was never achieved by woman, especially those who were weak, unintelligent, inflexible and sensual as signified by their short noses, flat foreheads, concave chins and small heads, like those performing in Kate Scardifield's *Theatres*.

Deferring to the Dutch physiologist, Pieter Camper on ethnic differences, Lavater nevertheless maintained that "the energy or weakness of the character of the individual" was primarily dependent on the shape of the skull.<sup>9</sup> The more perpendicular it was, supposedly the more it was aligned with purity, uprightness and beauty; conversely the more it was acute or obtuse, the more it was equated with anarchy, deficiency, evil and ugliness. Drawing on theological notions and Kantian philosophy, Lavater then linked beauty to inner goodness and intelligence and conversely, physical deformity to moral turpitude and stupidity. "The face's beauty and ugliness have a true and exact relationship to the beauty and ugliness of a person's moral condition," he explained. "The better the morals, the more beautiful; the worse the morals, the uglier."<sup>10</sup> This was purportedly demonstrated by the 22,000 portraits Lavater assembled in his archive, the *Kunstkabinett*, Hans Holbein's engraving of Judas Iscariot's face as hideously gnarled and Semite illustrating, according to this Lutheran Paster, incorrigible evil.

Consistent with the culture of dissection, Lavater's physiognomy and silhouettes were predicated upon known surfaces being connected to unknown depths, parts signifying the whole. His theory was, as I have argued elsewhere, premised upon an anagogic epistemology whereby the external body reflected its inner psychology, morality and the soul just as nature seemed to mirror heaven and the microcosm mimed the macrocosm.<sup>11</sup> Not without its critics during Lavater's lifetime, the most vituperative attack of physiognomy was mounted by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. Since contours became distorted and human edges eroded due to events beyond human



control not innate evil, he argued that Lavater's art of prophecy was no more reliable than weather forecasts. In Lichtenberg's counterculture of Pathognomy, Lavater's physiognomy was parodically belied by a compendium of paupers, vagabonds, imposters and street performers, drawn from the back, displaying their deformities and moral backsides. "Why can't an angel's soul reside in a hideous body?" he asked. Yet Pathognomy was no match for Physiognomy.

So famous did Lavater's Physiognomy become in Europe, Britain, America and Australia that by 1810, there were 55 editions of his *Essays with a Pocket Lavater* and a *Female Lavater* priced to accommodate every purse. Prized as essential to each family as the Bible itself, neither a servant could be hired nor a betrothal engaged until the descriptions and engravings of Lavater had been consulted about their facial features as betrayed by the profile. Even thirty years later, the Captain of the H.M.S. Beagle, Robert Fitzroy, was ready to demonstrate its accuracy when reading the face of a twenty-one year old applicant, Charles Darwin. As Darwin recalled: "I heard that I ran a very narrow risk of being rejected on account of the shape of my nose. He was an ardent disciple of Lavater, and was convinced he could judge of a man's character by the outline of his features, and he doubted whether any one with my nose could possess sufficient energy and determination for the voyage."<sup>12</sup>

While physiognomy was quantified by phrenology and anthropology, it proved seminal to Francis Galton's 'Science of Eugenics' and, as I have argued, the development of his 'composite photography'.<sup>13</sup> It was widely accepted as, Barbara Stafford surmises, "an

idoltrous fixation of a single unified method for arriving at universal truth. In ignoring the need to pay attention to discontinuities, and in the radical simplification of empirical complexity, it was not unlike contemporary systems analysis."<sup>14</sup> Far from its influence abating, physiognomics can be linked to corporeal normalization in its inculcation of a norm, ideal and type, having reached its apogee, according to Stafford, with cosmetic surgery.<sup>15</sup> It has induced conformity to culturally defined standards of normalcy, which one cosmetic surgeon, Dr. Mark Kaplan, calls "facial harmony" and intolerance towards physiological difference – particularly in relation to women.<sup>16</sup> It is this 'culture of dissection' and its inculcation of feminine normalcy that appears to be the subject of Kate Scardifield's subversions in which it is women who take the knife.

To emblazon a body is, according to Sawday writes, "to hack it into pieces in order to flourish fragments of men and women as trophies."<sup>17</sup> So accurately drawn appear Scardifield's women with their single contours so precisely-cut into silhouettes that she may seem to have followed Lavater's one hundred rules and even compressed her models into his machine. Yet rather than being emblazoned as the 'trophies' of a physiognomist's dissection, Scardifield's women defy physiognomic readings. Far from portraying the exterior of the body as a blank black surface, she exposes the interior of the body in some of its organic complexity operating like a surgeon in her mediation between the exterior and interior worlds of the body. Far from the body being frozen, like a life-cast or, following Stafford's analogy, like a corpse perturbed by "neither motion, nor light, nor volume, nor features", it is captured in movement.<sup>18</sup> Far from their bodies

being stripped of clothing and such status symbols as jewellery for the physiognomist's gaze, Scardifield's women are fully fashioned and adorned, 'the cut of clothing' being according to Lichtenberg, a far more reliable betrayal of their sense of self.

In painting them with fabric, their bodily constriction in starched collars, bustles, heavy undergarments and brocaded gowns is conveyed as is their confinement to a private feminized space swirling with fabricated flowers, rather than the public masculine sphere pulsating with commercial transactions and political machinations. The violence rituals and destructive impulse inherent in their physiognomic dissection only seem to be accentuated by their garments pinned like nails directly onto their bodies. Yet they do not appear to be passive objects waiting to be cut out or cut open. They seem to refuse to accept the imposition of an ideal type of face or body and to conform to culturally defined standards of normalcy, just as Charcot's hysterical patients did at Salpêtrière. Rather than resort to a cosmetic surgeon, like Orlan they take the surgical knife into their own hands. In so doing, they expose the ultimate fallacy inherent in physiognomies of woman: That of female agency and alterity.

4. Johann Caspar Lavater, *Von der Physiognomik* (Zurich, 1772); *Essay on Physiognomy*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1789-98), Vol. I, 19.
5. Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 34.
6. *Essays in Physiognomy*, I, 1792, p. 76.
7. *Ibid.*: *Machine for drawing silhouettes*.
8. *Physiognomischen Fragmente*, III, p. 218.
9. *Essays in Physiognomy*, II, p. 159.
10. Lavater, *Essays*, p. 76.
11. Fae Brauer, 'The Transparent Body: Biocultures of Evolution, Eugenics and Scientific Racism', *A History of Visual Culture: Western Civilization from the 18th to the 21st Century*, eds. Jane Kromm and Susan Benforado Bakewell (New York and Oxford: Berg, Oxford International Publishers, 2009) pp. 89-103.
12. Charles Darwin, *Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character, 1876-1881: Voyage of the Beagle from December 27th 1831*, as pb. In *Charles Darwin: Evolutionary Writings (including the Autobiographies)*, ed. James A. Secord (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 384.
13. Fae Brauer, 'Framing Darwin: A Portrait of Eugenics', *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms and Visual Cultures*, eds. Fae Brauer and Barbara Larson (Dartmore: The University Press of New England, 2009) pp. 124-154.
14. Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (The MIT Press, 1993) p. 118.
15. *Ibid.*, 128.
16. *Ibid.*, 119.
17. Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*, ix.
18. Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p. 105.

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1. Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the human body in Renaissance culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur, 1775-1778); translated from the French translation by Henry Hunter as *Essays on Physiognomy, designed to promote the knowledge and the love of Mankind, with engravings by Thomas Holloway and William Blake after Henry Fuseli* (5 vols., London: John Stockdale, 1810)











LIST OF IMAGES.



*Going into theatre I*, 2010.  
Cut fabric, heat set adhesive, dress pins on wall.  
280 x 164 x 2.5 cm.



*Remnants of relics*, 2010.  
Cut fabric, heat set adhesive, dress pins on wall.  
190 x 110 cm.



*Piece by piece I*, 2010.  
Laser cut MDF, oak timber, acrylic paint, fabric,  
found tassels. Dimensions variable.



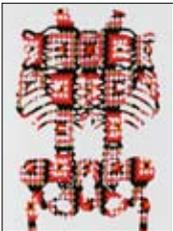
*Going into theatre II*, 2010.  
Cut fabric, heat set adhesive, dress pins on wall.  
189 x 152 x 2.5 cm.



*Going into theatre III*, 2010.  
Cut fabric, heat set adhesive, dress pins on wall.  
168 x 179 x 2.5 cm.



*Piece by piece I*, 2010.  
Laser cut MDF, oak timber, acrylic paint, fabric,  
found tassels. Dimensions variable.



*Cerebral ceremony*, 2010.  
Silk, dress pins, heat set adhesive on board  
1000 x 700 cm.

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Dedicated to the beautiful memory of Ted Scardifield.

Love you Dad, thank you.

**MOP** \_\_\_\_\_



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