The Erotics of Envelopment Figuration in Nancy Grossman’s Art

Anne Swartz

Nancy Grossman’s art is permeated with narratives about the body, its spaces, its presence, its metaphors, and its tactility. Grossman’s work is explosively sexual but her emphasis on the fluidity of gender constructs, both masculine and feminine, provides artistic, linguistic and cultural space for a wide variety of gender-based possibilities. Grossman’s work invites all kinds of discussions of desire. How could you look at the collages, the head sculptures, and her larger sculptures and not use the vocabulary of power, punishment, or danger? Her art is sensuous in the extreme from its obsessive construction to its bold realization. Every time I have seen Grossman’s work exhibited, even recently in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 2005 exhibition Skin is a Language, co-curated by Carter Foster and Apsara DiQuinzio, I see people sneaking touches at Grossman’s sculptures. Her work possesses the attraction/repulsion quality characteristic of childhood trauma; we want it, but we must not touch it.

The two primary modes Grossman uses in her work are doubling and binding and within her surrogate representations each offers a unique prescription for countering social constraints in understanding human sexuality, for coming to terms with violence in the world and at home, and for integrating all parts of the self. Her work focuses on transgression and taboos. In an interview with me in 1992, Grossman remarked that ‘I have come back to... [the realization that] the body speaks, that the physical world has its own eloquence that then can, at any time, give birth to words.’ In her figurative works, she delineates a transposition of the mute, sometimes masked or costumed body into an expressive one through her strategies with doubling or binding. In her use of figuration, she often masks or obscures the identity of her figures, but, this device, and ones like it, paradoxically embody their opposite: what looks threatening is simultaneously helpless. These figures, thus, offer a reversal of Sigmund Freud’s equation ‘To decapitate = to castrate’ by retaining their expressive power through the loci of these seemingly beheaded bodies. Grossman told me in 2006 that: ‘The head was representing the whole body with all its possibilities. The head will stand in for the body. Beheadedness is nowhere in the work.’

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In Arlene Raven's catalogue essay on Grossman, there is the first extended discussion of the artist's childhood and this appears in a section titled 'Cacophony'. Born in 1940 in New York City, Grossman's immediate and extended family moved to a farm in Oneonta, New York at the end of World War II aiming to create a wholesome family environment for the children. Life in the rural setting introduced Grossman to the leather bridles and harnesses on horses that would eventually appear prominently in her work; moreover, Grossman's parents were employed in the garment industry which enabled the artist to learn sewing and pattern work, a skill or practice that would also be incorporated into her work. Grossman's childhood years gave her these artistic tools, but they also introduced her to much interpersonal violence. Her childhood nickname of endearment, "Cookie," came from her father and her aunt, because they implied that they wanted to take bites out of me. In a 1975 interview with Cindy Nemser, Grossman had signaled how her childhood was marked by episodes of damaging mistreatment:

Now I look back and I realize that much of my problem was getting rid of what my parents dictated to me unconsciously. I was overly handled out of necessity. I was a kid who was quite difficult so I was smacked around a lot. In the context of being the oldest child, charged with the care of the younger children, as a nine year old mother, chief cook, and bottle washer. They had to work and depend on me... I was harnessed with responsibility and how do you fulfill those responsibilities as a child... The body can be violated in one way or another. It begins a chain of circumstances in which it feels very natural to be violated, for people to violate your head, to take advantage of you. I have really suffered a great deal.

Raven notes that Grossman broke away from this environment to escape not only physical violence, but sexual violence as well.

I grew up in America in a suburban context, aware of both my conventional family structure and largely unaware of the traumatic experiences of the multifaceted abuse that shaped my upbringing caused by a family earnestly clinging to convention but unwilling to admit to the corruption within it. Unable to acknowledge my own past, thinking about the unconscious and looking at art, such as Grossman's, where transgression, trauma, and emotion all run high, helped me find my way to understanding my experiences. Grossman's formal competency and capabilities as an artist have enabled her to explore extremely psychologically provocative and socially charged content. Since current statistics on the varieties of abuse children suffer show it to be epidemic and the high degree of social repression expected in American society is a long term reality, it is not surprising that Grossman's art so fascinates many people. For me, it seems to be a response or need to create strata of psychic protection.

An evolution exists from the early bound works to the later ones as Grossman psychically, metaphorically, and
lately loosened the bindings over the years. Grossman began to make representational images of the contained figure in the 1960s and these eventually dominated her oeuvre. Initially the "dirty secret" aspects of these drawings confused her and she kept them hidden from public view while she worked in the 1960s as an illustrator to make money. After this period, she was able to afford to devote herself to her work. She then came up with her extraordinary figurative images, which she first exhibited in 1969 and they have become the most continuously refined series of images within her drawings and sculptures.

In Grossman's work, even when the bodies are coded as female or male, they often elide into a nebulous region that challenges this simple binary division. The artist's own assessment of gender reveals some of the criteria for her works' elusive sexual categorization:

Whenever I wanted to say something specific, personal, to the effect that I am a woman, I would use a woman's image if the work were figurative. It seemed natural. But if I wanted to say something in general, I would use a man. It's as if man was our society. Yet I don't feel that the male forms are outside of me.

As Judith Butler has noted sex or gender is often regarded as peculiarly female because the male or masculine is universal and therefore unmarked. As Grossman has told me gender is not as fixed as society often asserts but in discussing her work she pointed out that her sculptural heads do have a masculine tendency. 'They are very male, but sometimes women are very male. Not in general [but] to take advantage of the separation of gender.' With regard to the cryptic and often enigmatic substance of gender identification, she remarked:

I think I am specifically female and specifically male. And so is everyone, sometimes less one, and I don't mean just what you're acting out at the time... It's much more arbitrary than people think.... I've lived long enough to see both men and women shift.

This elaboration of a gendered subjectivity demonstrates how her work can be read as speaking to other women and to women's experience.

Grossman's work has generally been associated with homoeroticism and marginal sexual practices. Arlene Raven's major 1991 monograph on Grossman and her art, which accompanied a traveling exhibition, a text on which this current discussion relies, attempted to broaden this categorization. Her writing on Grossman provided a scholarly framework for reading the layers of biographical, intentional, and interpretative mechanisms embodied in the work and for revealing its highly political nature as an important statement of feminist art. Raven's role as art historian/artist critic/artist monographer intersected with their personal life together. In 1983, Raven had moved to New York City from Los Angeles, where she had been involved in founding the Women's Building, to start a new life with Grossman who was a devoted New Yorker.

Raven's critique of the artist's work also placed her reading in the context of postmodern dialogue which is both intimate and scholarly. She cites many critical texts of feminism and postmodernism, ranging from the work of Mary Daly to Michel Foucault to Angela Carter, to highlight the significant, the engrossing aspects of Grossman's work. Raven notes that the artist's sculptures embody the mystified and excluded "other" in an often confounding manner: For Grossman...[her] personas can contain personal and social dichotomies. And for this reason, she says, her figures stand against cultural estrangement — on "the other side of the other."

Remarking on several substantial references that Grossman's work creates to ideas of inhibition and repression, Raven notes how the:

"Self as other" is a contradiction in terms that evokes the image of the human being forged in isolation from yet

as part of the world community. The outcast becomes an authentic hero. Grossman’s male figures are par excellence images of the exalted “self as other”, in a state of grace.

One of Grossman’s first significant experiments with doubling as entanglement between two aspects, either the single figure’s interlacing of several elements or the coupling of personalities, is the monoprint woodcut Narcissa (1961). The other main work focused on in this discussion is the sculpture, Male Figure Sculpture (1971). This work is coded as male and provides a focal point for examining the metaphor of psychic enclosure through fetishism and physical bondage.

The title, Narcissa, is a feminization of the mythological character Narcissus, suggesting that these figures are feminine, despite the lack of female body parts. The intertwined helix on/as the buttocks acts as a metaphor for interpersonal entanglement. Grossman said that the doubling figural elements in her work emanate from a desire to integrate or to couple: “To support itself it needs an other, a double ... [as] different aspects of one person, [it is] the self separating and reuniting with itself.” This integration and unity offers balance and support to the individual.

As one possibility, this doubled form signals the dual features of the binary opposition of male and female and the point of conjunction between these two identities. Grossman described her own use of doubling as signaling the curious space between genders:

It's about how mysterious it is when we move from one gender to the other... We have no way of knowing about the interior, we mark it, we signal it with our exterior inventions and metaphors, there's nothing except metaphor [it is] a better way [than the binary opposition of] male/female, active/passive.

Grossman used the tactic of binding as a method of enclosure in the Male Figure Sculpture. In this sixty-eight inch high sculpture, a male figure, identified as such not only by the title but also by the defined volume of the genitalia, appears in a state of isolated combat. The image is sexualized through the flexibility of the leather as it delineates the musculature of the figure’s physique. Grossman uses the zippers as a linear element that contrasts with the black of the leather and intensifies the figure’s straining motion. These zippers act as expressive lines of force all over the figure and particularly over the mouth and eyes. The multiple bindings have the effect of fragmenting the surface and intensifying the chaos of the exterior, visually reiterating the anxiety of the figure’s contorted pose.

In its enclosed state, Male Figure Sculpture suggests the relationship between sex and power, because of the associations of covered, leather-clad figures with sadomasochism and domination. Leather-clad figures have connections in the modern period with torture and dominance because of visual resemblances to executioners; such coding effects of leather, hooding, and envelopment have been employed by fascist, separatist movements including the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis, and then in the later twentieth century by motorcycle gangs and the homosexual movements.
particularly participants in sadomasochism. The figures or figural body parts are contained within the leather, allowing for the reading and experience of their pleasure within these encasements, because the figures have allowed themselves to be contained entirely within the leather and limited by its surface.

By revising the myth of Narcissus, we can read Grossman’s Narcissa as a story of self-love and self-care accomplished through doubling. A beautiful youth, Narcissus was loved by many, particularly Echo. He trifled with the affections of others, only to have Nemesis punish him by having him fall in love with his reflection in a small pool. Grossman’s Male Figure Sculpture (1971) resembles the experience of the mythological figure Echo. Echo pursued Narcissus and he rebuked her advances; as a result of her disappointment at his rejection, she metamorphosed into a voice that called after Narcissus, endlessly repeating itself. The sculpture is encoded with dual associations of domination and submission, including executioner/prisoner and torturer/victim. But the marginalized status of this individual in the dominant discourse complicates exactly which aspect of the power relation is engaged.

This content also recalls the Surrealists’ interest in wrapping, masking, doubling, and binding. The best comparison is in the work of the Surrealists in their paintings and objects of the 1930s and 1940s. The use of the enclosed, shrouded, enveloped, or encased figures and objects permeates Surrealist imagery. The commonality of the Surrealists’ sources lies in the fascination with the perverse: the co-mingling of sex and death. Two unrelated incidents in the early decades of the twentieth century occurred which were necessary to cement the association of wrapping with connotations of Eros and Thanatos: the re-assessment of the writings of the Marquis de Sade and the discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamen. The reputation of the eighteenth century writer de Sade benefited greatly at the hands of proto-Surrealist poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who re-edited and published de Sade’s works in 1903 and 1913, and Apollinaire’s Surrealist associate, Maurice Heine, who dedicated himself to interpreting and revising de Sade’s work. Heine published the first version of Juliete in 1930. de Sade represented for the Surrealists a politically and socially liberating force combining eroticism and scatological extremes in his writings (and in his life, admittedly), which in turn influenced the Surrealist metaphorical use of wrapping as both bondage and confinement. The Surrealist attitude toward the heightened moment of erotic love as it approaches orgasm and afterwards a supposedly death-like condition—le petit mort during sexual encounters refers to de Sade’s writing.

Though Egyptian Revival had been a popular style for nearly a century, the interest in mummies rose dramatically after the highly publicized discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamen by Howard Carter in November of 1922. In the emerging, and eventually quite popular, Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s, reverberations of Egyptian themes and motifs recurred consistently. As cinema theorist Antonia Lant has pointed out in an article on Egyptomania and the cinema, movies involving Egyptian themes and subjects proliferated in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the figurative painting and photography of Surrealism, extensive allusions to wrapping also followed this 1922 discovery. Egyptian culture, as understood through evidence from excavations, provided the Surrealists with necrophilic material based on the Egyptians’ supposed conquest of death and the enshrinement of the corpse. The themes of Eros and Thanatos (so key in Freud) reverberate in many ways throughout Surrealist art, but the innuendo of mummies further laced their imagery with the grandeur of an ancient civilization’s physical evidence of decayed human bodies. While no Surrealist text makes explicit reference to Egyptian mythology or the excavations of the mummies, the basis of visual correspondences between unctomed mummies and regular inclusion of human figures wrapped in cloth or material is present. Lant also points out how the twentieth-century cinematic imagination was fueled by the interest in all things Egyptian, as a result of Romantic notions of death and exoticism. The Surrealists actively maintained and perpetuated such Romantic notions, strongly suggesting that they would have been interested in Carter’s 1922 discoveries.

The Surrealist interest in annihilating the civilizing repressive force of the bourgeoisie prodded the Surrealists to explore the dual elements of love and death represented by wrapping. Photographer Man Ray actively made photographs of alluring, sexualized elements of bondage. However, unlike the Surrealists, she has not been interested in incorporating found objects into her sculptures, as she remarked to art historian Lowry Stokes Sims, because that usage carries with it some kind of connection to their “language.” Yet Surrealist works that incorporated wrapping strongly influenced many subsequent artists like Grossman. Robert Mapplethorpe also appropriated many of Man Ray’s compositions and subjects and Grossman
Nancy Grossman Untitled (1985) ink and wash on paper 15 ½ x 20 ½ in Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York explored similar issues in her work. They had an artistic dialogue and a friendship in which Mapplethorpe also photographed Grossman’s sculptures. During the 1970s, he became involved in the homosexual underworld of New York City, including sadomasochistic sex and drugs. His own participation in (and fascination with) this world promoted its interest as a subject for him to photograph. Grossman regarded Mapplethorpe as: ‘a sufficiently secure kid, he was a very middle-class kid, so that he could be excited by outrageous things, he found them outrageous . . . He was disrupted plenty [by these sexual scenarios], but that was exciting to him.’¹² Grossman described how his attitudes towards sex developed into his content:

He thought that there was a certain amount of his own horror and his own entertainment in passing along things that to him were shocking... He used to put out the signal – come and talk to me, come and show me everything. He was definitely a voyeur, very excited, but scared too. But he used to talk about terminal sex and that’s why I’m so sad that he got sick. He used to talk about it with big excitement, that it should be that dangerous. He didn’t believe it for a minute when he used to talk about it in the early 1970s, late 1970s.¹⁰

One of the compelling things about their friendship is their similar imagery. After encountering Grossman’s head sculptures, Mapplethorpe began to photograph the leathermen around him in the bars focusing, like her work, on their heads.

Four works by Nancy Grossman were included in the recent WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution (LA: MOCA, 2007). Holland Cotter, one of the art critics for The New York Times has recently acknowledged the importance of Grossman’s art which blew conventional images of femininity to smithereens and helped open the door for younger artists like Laura Aguilar, Nicole Eisenman, Catherine Opie and Kara Walker³¹ - all of whom were included in the Global Feminisms exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. The mythic content of Grossman’s work, its problematized eroticism and latent violence its emotional intensity, its visual recall of Surrealism, and her highly innovative expansions of it in her most impressive oeuvre are all extremely vital elements within contemporary art. The work truly confronts the presence of self in the absence of integration and balance. Underscoring Grossman’s images is the actuality that submissiveness becomes power, concealment entices enactment, and repulsion invites desire. Grossman’s work, ultimately, refuses the imperative to silence the realm of female desire.

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Notes
7. Raven *Nancy Grossman* p. 70.
9. ibid p. 344.
12. ibid.
14. I am indebted to Joanna Fruch for reminding me about the centrality of Raven's interpretation in Grossman's art and for her most kind assistance in offering me advice on this essay.
15. ibid., p. 113.
17. The artist would reject any specific identification of this figure as female. She explained that the figures are not coded for either gender. Interview with Nancy Grossman and Arlene Raven, New York City, September 24, 1993.
20. The overall black color of the sculpture contributes to its look and power as a fetish. Psychoanalyst and author Phyllis Greenacre notes in 'The Fetish and the Transitional Object' that 'the color black may play an important part in the attractiveness of many fetishistic objects... The black is associated with pubic hair and with the illusory fecal phallus. It may also add to the definite visual outline of the fetish object, causing it to stand out against the background of the adjacent skin.' (As quoted in Donald Kuspit 'The Modern Fetish' *Artforum* October 1988 p. 140 fn35) But as a fetish, the sculpture invokes clandestine, shrouded thoughts and behaviors and coercion and repressed behavior. This encasement of the body clearly delineates the sculpture's surface, facilitating the reading of that surface and defining its shape. Over-emphasis on wrapping a body or object can transform it into a fetish, either in an affirmative or pejorative manner. Generally defined, a fetish is anything to which extra value or power has been attached. Wrapping plays a significant role in fetishism because covering defines an object's parameters and limits its potential or possibility. Therefore, a wrapped object is more conducive to the obsessive impulses of sovereignty, such as ownership, possession, and irrationality. Thus, when the body or its parts are wrapped or veiled into a contained unit, it becomes the site for the celebration of sexual desire. The enclosure of the body parts in effect heightens their erotic tension, associating the aspects of the figure with the unknown. This containment negates the fear of the embraced or encircled aspect, because it highlights and foregrounds repressed not sexual experience and privilege.
23. ibid pp. 68-69
24. Peggy Schrock ‘Man Ray’s Perpetual Satism’ *Art International/Winter* 1989 no 9 p. 64
26. ibid pp. 86-112.
28. Art historian Scott Rothkopf has consistently been mentioning Surrealism in his various studies and discussions of 1960s art as an influence and an issue.
29. Interview with Nancy Grossman 1992
30. Interview with Nancy Grossman 1992

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**Mobile Fidelities**

Conversations on Feminism, History and Visuality

**Martina Pachmanová**

Interviews with feminist art historians, historians, artists and art critics based in the US: Linda Nochlin; Natalie Boyiom Kampen; Kaja Silverman; Susan Rubin Suleiman; Amelia Jones; Mira Schor; Jo Anna Isaak; Janet Wolff; Martha Rosler; Marcia Tucker and Carol Duncan.

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