

FA3HAD

Open Wound;
an extended analysis.

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Internal Matter // /ɪn'tə:nl/ /'matə/

3. Prologue // /'prɒlɒg/
5. Glossary // /'glɒs(ə)ri/
7. Abstract // /əb'strakt/
9. Opening // /'əʊp(ə)nɪŋ/
16. Epidermis // /,ɛpɪ'də:mɪs/
28. Dermis // /'dɜ:mɪs/
37. Hypodermis // /,hɪ-pə-'dər-məs/
42. Closing // /'kləʊzɪŋ/
45. Illustrations // /,ɪlə'streɪʃns/
46. Bibliography // /,bɪblɪ'ɒgrəfi/

Dermatitis Factitia

I sit to write. Two separate entities divert my devoted attention to this submission. These being skin and machines. Between each fleeting burst of tapping on the keyboard my finger tips believe there is something better to do. To pick, peel and pluck at the skin I sit within. The weight on the other side of my perfectly balanced scale of unproductivity is this venerable desktop. Which interrupts my flow in a similar manner. Yes, the one that seems to take pleasure in warning me that the browser is *no longer supported* and an update *is required*. The irony is that I know full well this fifteen year old lump of once extremely desirable californian-designed chinese-made hardware will continue to be my scribe until the bitter end, even though its software says otherwise. Typing, (not to be conflated with writing) can be a frustrating mix of impatience and irritation. The former pertaining to my machines' painfully slow reaction times and the latter the tangible distractions that I scavenge for upon my body. I can, however, look past the fact that the computer demands a constant feed from the mains supply, like a thirsty newborn creature sucking from the breast of its mother, because I need to keep it satisfied enough, or *alive* enough to translate the words that

permeate my mind and escape through my fingertips. Alas, I stare at the scattering of dead skin that lies camouflaged on my dirty cream carpet beneath my feet at the desk where I write. Those dry fleshy offerings have become synonymous with my academic attempts. It seems I can only write a few sentences before I remove my hands from the keyboard to examine the lifeless skin on the undersides of my feet. I know I have to ignore the self made little islands of epithelial debris, but my body seems to be a waiting room in which the only thing I can do to pass the time is survey my skin. I've taken my ticket. Now I wait for my name to be called. The deadline I find myself intertwined with is looming ever closer and I do so desire freedom from the tyranny of arranging sentences in such a way that will make any sense at all to you, discerning reader. For this reason I yield to the superior dual force that perpetuates the delicate stasis of skin and machine. I'll allow my writing to become not only earnest, but discreetly grotesque. Focusing on the localised relationship between flesh and machine seems like the most natural starting point. I must show my appreciation to my internal and external and these *machines* because without them, none of this writing would be possible.

Machine | mə- 'shēn

Robotic, lo-fi mechanisms that are non-human. But may appear to replicate certain human characteristics. But are not particularly anthropomorphic. Specifically, the newly built motorised turbine that is a key element in Mire Lee's *Open Wound*, the main object of focus for this text.

Semantics | si- 'man-tiks

The analysing and assigning of words to their meaning, and their relationship to other ways of communication, be it visual or visceral.

Skin | 'skin

The skin is the first interaction between the body and the external world. A surface that simultaneously provides us with and protects us from interaction from the external. Thus, the skin serves as both boundary and vessel. Allowing some things in and others not, the skin can be defined as a semipermeable membrane. What lies within is perhaps just as vulnerable as it would be without its fleshy membrane.

Skins | 'skin s

Mire Lee's sculptural elements presented in the installation *Open Wound*.

Soma | 'sō-mə

By definition, it is the body of an organism that exists as distinct from the mind. For the purposes of this text I have taken a slight artistic licence with the semantic values ascribed to this word. Thus, soma pertains to the sensation of feeling. Somatic responses therefore are instinctive reactions to a stimulus or situation.

Skin as diagrammatic.

Skin as decoration.

Skin as dispersed.

Skin as *dis*represented.

Skin as disorganised.

Skin as division.

Skin as drawing.

Skin as separator.

Skin as signifier.

Skin as space.

Skin as sensitivity.

Skin as soma.

Skin as semantic.

Abstract // /əb 'strakt/

In this text I avail the three interdependent layers of skin, the dermis, epidermis and hypodermis, as individual lenses with which I look through to critically respond to Mire Lee's monumental sculptural installation *Open Wound*. These three separate surfaces coalesce as one connected whole. Be that as it may, it is necessary to traverse each individual layer separately in order to understand Lee's *Open Wound* as a body of work that functions as such.

Layer one, the dermis, consists of an analysis of appearance, the *how* of seeing at surface level and an ultimate submission to the visceral feelings that emerge from material focused, sustained looking. In Layer two, the epidermis, the connectivity of semantics and somatics is key in understanding Lee's references in conjunction with connotations of labor and maintenance, particularly within her main reference point of the miners changing room. Finally, we reach layer three. In the hypodermis, I seek to unveil deeper meaning by considering *Open Wound* as it was

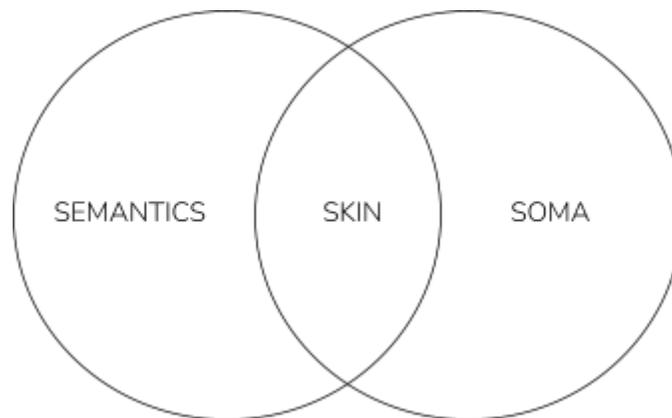
intended; an *industrial womb*. Both in the wider context of contemporary sculptural practice and within current cultural climates as discussed by critics and thinkers.

It can be said that the skin is neither where the body starts nor ends. But without the skin, where would the body be, *how* could the body be? The skin is both restrictive and regulative, insofar as its semi-permeability grants access to some substances while defending against others. Our *internal spaces* are contained and whatever seeks entry, material or otherwise, is filtered through the skin via a selection process that science defines as *dermal absorption*; a microscopic transportation of chemicals from the outer surface of the skin, in which substances enter into the circulation of the body. In this way, whatever is outside of the body ignores the boundaries set by the skin. This non spatial division means that 'skin only separates a living inside from a non-living outside.'¹ So, the skin exists as an inbetween, a formed state of flux, a grey area with silver linings. 'It may be, therefore, that skin is not part of the body but a condition of its intelligibility, a marker of the oppositional difference between inside and outside, body

¹ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, P.36.

and world.’² This holistic acknowledgement of flesh leads me to the first non sensory organ, aka appendix that will aid this text.

Figure 1.



The venn acts as a textual speculum that pries into and diagrammes the space within which the skin becomes contained and constrained by how it is defined, and how it is expressed. Illustrating the interconnectivity of language and feeling. The skin is the fleshy membrane that relinquishes the internal into the external. It is for this reason that the skin becomes a simultaneous barrier whilst opening as a pathway. Perhaps the journey of the skin is how it is alive with sensation, a big red button for pleasure and pain. Communication through touch allows us to understand

² Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, P.279.

the way we react to external environments. And so the body becomes a fluid entity, (un)contained and (un)organised, held together by the skin. 'The skin is often associated with wholeness and entirety. The skin after all, is not located at any one point in the body, like the other sense organs. Indeed, the skin provides the medium in which the other sense organs are located, and the element of which we feel they are largely made.'³ I propose that the skin acts primarily as a vessel. A vessel that we all utilise. 'Flesh has a different constellation of meanings than skin, some of them involving metaphors of liquidity, as if the body is a bag of skin holding a fluid interior. In general, the invisible inside of the body has been considered too painful to represent, and few artists have made pictures of the open body.'⁴ Although there are distinct disparities between what is felt and what is thought, the mind and body's enabling axis is the skin. Thus, when 'pain pales, thought takes its place.'⁵ Categorization of the skin's functionality pertains to protection, production, excretion and sensation. These actions work in conjunction to regulate and maintain the inner body. What

³Connor, *The Book of Skin*. P.34

⁴ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*, P.29.

⁵ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*, P.53.

is felt somatically can be described semantically, yet the two ideas also exist as mutually exclusive. By this I mean to say that if semantics is concerned entirely with linguistic meaning, it is inevitable that misinterpretation will ensue. Especially when considering objects that produce *objectively subjective* responses, i.e. works of art. It is common to maintain the qualities of misinterpretation through use of language, proper or improper, hence why so many arguments are lost on semantic grounds. However, the skin rarely miscommunicates. 'If skin isn't the place where all sensation is at its most precise, or - to invert the equation, in accord with the preeminence and priority of the body itself – if sensation doesn't speak most eloquently using the language of skin. Perhaps the forms and possibilities of skin are the words and grammar of sensation, and everything else somatic (the viscera, the excreta, food still to be eaten, the disembodied self) is only a reflection, an abjection, or a falling echo, of that primary source.'⁶ Alas, how can you be more succinct than a feeling? For using words may never fully articulate the nuance of visceral perception. The skin tells us what happens in the outside

⁶Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*. P.35

world, locally via its visuality and physicality. The skin is like parchment paper, each body a carbon copy scroll that duplicates and communicates the universally understood characters of somatic script. It is a language that will always be alive. 'Skin may be the most sensitive and eloquent signifier of the body.'⁷ I propose that semiology concerns itself with the body, insofar as the ways in which skin can be read. There is no skin without feeling, but it is not infrequent that there appears to be no words to describe a feeling. 'The skin, as we see it, uses the outside world to help it express what needs to be said.'⁸ This speechlessness of the skin does not necessitate its inability to communicate. Infact, the skin is able to disseminate its messages via all of the senses, since the skin covers all of the sensory organs whilst also being an organ itself. So, albeit a lack of linguistics, the skin has a unique language. It changes colour, its temperature fluctuates, marks appear and disappear. Pain is felt. Openings heal. Unless they demand to be left open. Perhaps this is why visual equivalents of the skin become disturbing images,

⁷ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*. P.36

⁸ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*, P.52.

verging on violent. This is certainly true of the intentions of artist Mire Lee in the installation commissioned by The Hyundai motor group. 'Mire Lee's sculptural installations are visceral, emotional and existential. By combining industrial materials such as steel, cement and silicone with machineries to create fantastical environments with kinetic elements, her work explores the tension between soft bodies and rigid systems.'⁹ The skin, the way it, and the living *being* it covers responds to the external will always be varying. Varying *sensitivities* mean that particular ideas, feelings and responses are manifold. Put simply, this is subjectivity. 'The biochemist sees it (*skin*) as an assembly of enzymes, the cytologist as an assembly of cell types, the anatomist as a formed structure.'¹⁰ I'd like to consider the skin as a formed structure and the only viable vessel for somatic response to the external world. It is the point at which we encounter the world and that the world is able to encounter us. Consider the skins functionality as an entity constructed entirely of entry and exit points. 'Although the actuality of the skin may have been invisible to the anatomist, or

⁹ Li, *Mire Lee: Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.18

¹⁰ Tregear, *Physical Functions of Skin*, Preface V.

interesting only as impediment, a formal idea of the skin began to play an important structural role in maintaining the relations between the body and the world.¹¹ The skin can not be defined as purely sensory for it is also the immediate ocular sense of self. It pertains to recognition, beauty, pleasure, pain. It is a window to individual identity. 'It is interesting how far the optical metaphor takes us in a domain where there are no eyes: in skin, everything is immediate, bounded, instantaneous and sharp. Skin is like the thin plane of perfect focus in an optical system: everything beyond it (outside the body, in the world) and everything in front of it (in the body, in the more-or-less hidden insides) is blurred.' Lee's work has always considered the blurred boundary of inside and outside, and what deviation from these binary positions looks like. When overseeing the delicate and grotesque operation that is Mire Lee's *Open Wound*, you are subjected to the precise choreography of emotion that is just as uncomfortable and tender as cut flesh.

¹¹ Connor, *The Book of Skin*, P.15.

Layer One //

Epidermis / ,ɛpɪˈdɜːmɪs/

Skin as superficial surface

Entering into the vast expanse that is the Tate Modern, the airless space between each steel armature was instantly felt. The *skins* float in various states of equilibrium and decomposition. The sheer size of the room granted the forms with the luxury of not having to compete with one another in their enclosure. In this ruthless real estate, we are invited to bear witness to the drama of failed and failing membranes. Lee was struck by the ‘animalistic horizontality’¹² of the turbine hall, ‘which made her think of an animal lying down.’¹³ In this way, the textile constructions could be observed like hunter's trophies, the eyed catharsis akin to the brutality of a cruel

¹² HyundaiWorldwide, “Hyundai Commission: Mire Lee: Open Wound | Curator Walkthrough,” December 5, 2024, 01:07-01:09.

¹³ HyundaiWorldwide, “Hyundai Commission: Mire Lee: Open Wound | Curator Walkthrough,” December 5, 2024, 01:22-01:24.

bloodsport. Here, the Tate's elongated architecture proliferates with organisms that should have been put out of their misery. What transpired in the turbine hall eluded less to the notion of purification and more so to a repulsive act of purging. Soon the virgin *skins* will present differently. But for now, in the preliminary stage of the exhibition, the off white, threadbare complexions must await their promised intravenous drip. The gauntly gauzes will absorb the lubricants concocted by Lee as if they were elixirs for life. Mandatory medicines were force fed to the fabric husks through 'Peristaltic pumps, which originate technologically in blood transfusions, (they) imitate the swallowing and movement of food through the digestive system and the production of waste, while hoses and tubing *act out* a circulatory system, their leakages and spurts mimicking physical damage with the theatrical flair of comedic horror.'¹⁴ Shuffling through the derelict scrapyards of *skins*, the twitching discomfort of wanna-be bodily organs stimulated the senses. The dregs of life contained in these sculptures

¹⁴ Li, *Mire Lee: Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.36

adjure for our attention, we recognize their limp attempts and proceed into an atmosphere that elicits discomfort in the same way unsolicited attention makes you feel. A certain empathy was felt for the scraps of fabric though, because they were being displayed in some sort of cruel parade, a peculiar pageantry, minus the pomp. Dangling from above, the textile offerings appeared to be mutilated off cuts of multi-celled organisms who never quite earned sentient status. The defective parts await inspection, uncertain of their fate. Suspense loomed and they marked time just to be deemed unfit for purpose. 'An open wound being either relief or horror, you're trying to figure this out really quickly. So, there is a sense of emotion but uncertainty as well.'¹⁵ The assistant curator of international art at the Tate Modern, Bilal Akkouche, confirms the ascertained ambiguity that the installation instilled.

¹⁵ HyundaiWorldwide, "Hyundai Commission: Mire Lee: Open Wound | Curator Walkthrough," 00.25-00.35.

Figure 2.



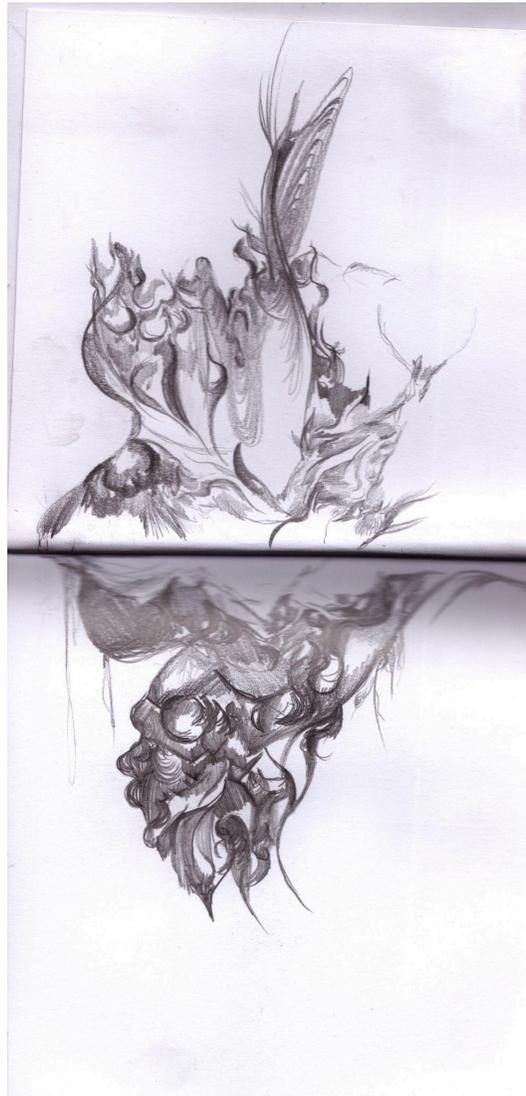
The *skins* were installed at multiple stages throughout the show ‘culminating in March, where it becomes most full.’¹⁶ For this reason, and to further aid the structure of this text, I visited the show on three separate occasions. The first encounter was in October, when the *skins* appeared like empty

¹⁶ AP Archive, “Eerie Dangling, Dripping Sculpture Dominates the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall,” 01.21-01.25.

anthropomorphic tapestries that only alluded to life. Living or would be living, existing or existed. In December there was more decipherable evidence of the passing of time. Or at least I had a deeper understanding of the way in which the exhibition was to unfold. The *skins* were, by now, showing signs of acceptance of the process they were being continually subjected to. The scatological spurting of liquids pumping frantically through PVC hoses, as dictated by lo-fi mechanisms was an injurious watch. The fabric *skins* were being wetted with Lee's purpose-made liquids, a seemingly simple procedure was made to appear arduous and painful. I understood it to be a futile course of action, like the picking of a healed scab. The work performed like a misbehaving body, one that needed medical intervention. A sickly body's perceived deteriorating functionality is what denotes and perpetuates the idea of a hierarchy of health. A healthy body is one that looks *well*, but 'when the sick rule the world, mortality will be sexy.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*, P.36.

Figure 3.



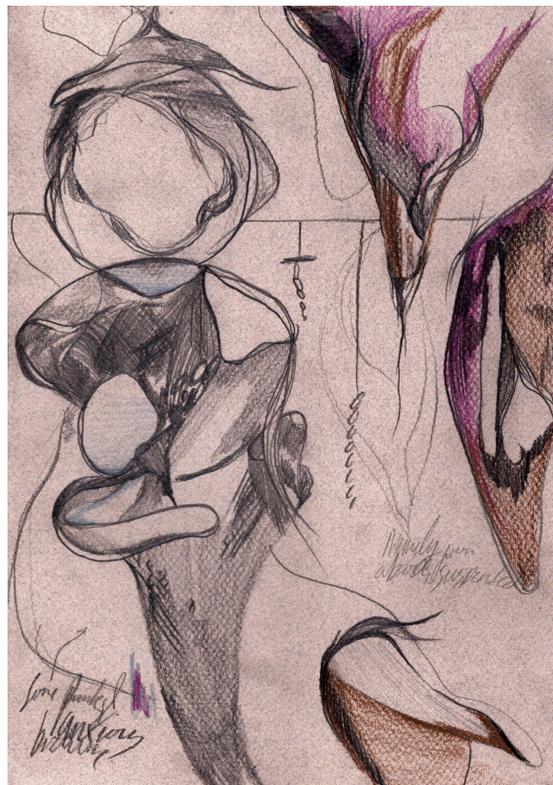
Broken, but still working, here, the repercussions of a clunky physiological process were visible on the *skins* like a rash or

graze. An internal malfunction presenting itself externally. This being said, Lee's mechanical intervention was able to transform the appearance of the *skins* in a way that was visually similar to the process of pupation. However, the ultimate results still resembled their original forms, insofar as the *skins* remained *skins*, thus metamorphosis was minimised. The procedure was more like a factory reset of a personal device, the *skins* were returned to their original format, only to be recalibrated and mutated once again at the hands of another user. The surging of glycerin, ceramic glaze and other liquids serve as the soundscape for *Open Wound*. The pitter patter of echoing rainfall would sound far less ominous if it didn't look like spilled guts. A pink viscous liquid could be seen accumulating in the oversized drip tray in the central point of the space. Convulsing and throbbing in some sort of concentrated malfunction, desperate energies infused the atmosphere. Laying low on the cold grey concrete floor, no effort was made to conceal the ringmaster that conducted this

corporal circus. It was the beating heart of the exhibition; the motor that drove the newly built turbine slowly turned, discharging its secretion onto the *skins*. Protruding tentacles moved with the cumbersome mechanics of the turbine and as the *skins* ossified, they created indeterminable territories of skin and machine. Pumping out at intermittent intervals, the tubes excreted liquid pigment for the rags one by one. At un-announced times, installation crews would ascend into the space to retrieve the *skins* hanging in limbo, the ones left recoiling from this messy assault. They were then transported with the same urgency as medical goods, a time critical delivery to the far end of the turbine hall, where they existed as relics for the remainder of the exhibition. Lee decided to remove the cladding from the bridge, which is synonymous with the characteristics of the interior of the Tate modern. This architectural intervention became important when considering the palpable levels of exposure in every part of this installation. The ability to encounter the work from tiered

viewing points promoted an aseptic environment, similar to that of a surgical operating theatre. Viewers were given the agency to observe the work in whatever way seemed safest. Historically, these specialised rooms were built in such a way that allowed spectators to watch surgeons carry out often gruesome bodily procedures.

Figure 4.



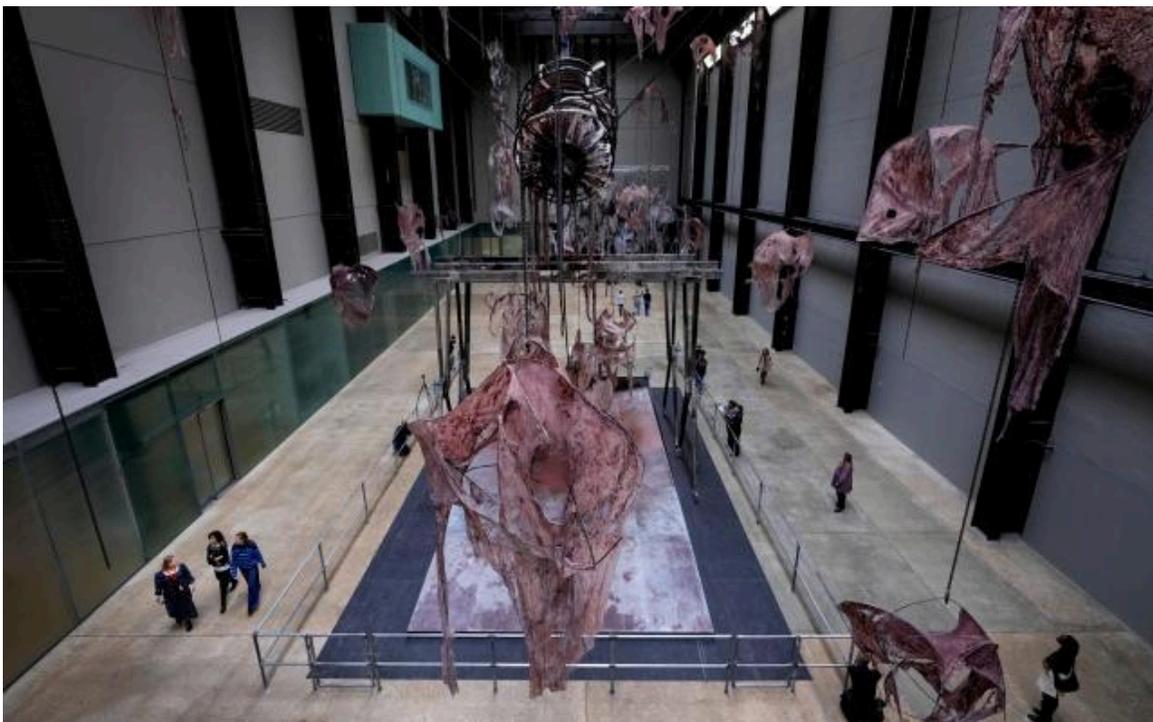
In March I observed the work in its final form. Sore pinks and anxious browns eloquently communicated bodily discomfort. Soft, lingering pinches of tenderised flesh coloured the constructed textile rags. The sort of hue that insinuates that blood is about to run dry. 'Dead, her sculptures play alive. When they simulate living, they stage dramatic deaths.'¹⁸ As aforementioned, the *skins* began life as unmarked, translucent white meshes stretched over their steel skeletons. Punctured and ripped, they sag despite their own weightlessness. The very scale of the production process followed a certain performative narrative, insofar as the installation was an ongoing voyeurism. With each visit the subtle variations in tonal and textural qualities were seen to accumulate on the *skins*, amounting to how the passing of time can be viewed on human skin. Signs of aging denote a deterioration of beauty and therefore a decline in aesthetic value. This may be true when we assign value to human skin, in particular woman's

¹⁸ Li, Miree: *Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.37

skin. We are told that creasing, discoloration and a lack of elasticity can be *cured* by magical potions marketed as skin care. But these textural qualities are what makes *Open Wound* so attractive. I'll note here Lee's attention to detail when considering how *real* skin is reactive to topical intervention. Not everything is absorbed into the skin. Some substances merely sit upon the surface. In this instance, her *skins* absorbed the liquids changing their colouration, and for a period of time the texture of the works, when wetted, did appear hydrated. Alas, they dried up and arrived back to their shriveled state. Having observed the *skins* as individuals presented together in a twisted choreography, the varying qualities and textures of each piece were somewhat ephemeral. And although they are all suspended in the same ways they behaved very differently. Lee's material choice is certainly reflective of skin. Although it was not really a choice at all, more so a carefully considered creation of a self-made material that she has aptly named as *skins*. I'd like to suggest

they are surrogate skins. Insofar as they carry the weight intended for someone else, reaping no rewards and remaining stripped and separate from its own regenerative / reparative work. The feelings that are structured through Lee's visual orchestration of a malfunctioning body continue to perpetuate ambiguity. And a certain repulsiveness is what grants the work its abject beauty. I'll note here Alvin Li's, (the curator of international art at the Tate Modern) comment on the success of Lee's attempts to "obliterate the communicative and intellectual capacities of the audience" through *Open Wound*.

Figure 5



Layer Two //

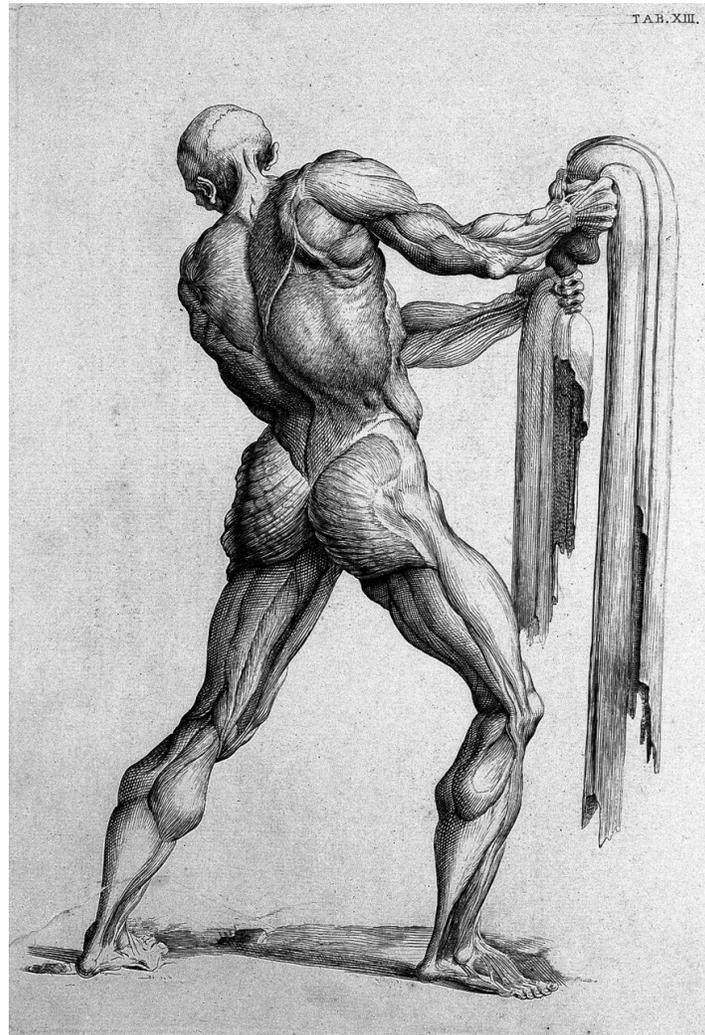
Dermis / ' d3:.mIs/

Confronted with a familiar comfort that is the intimate sensation granted by material against skin, we are abruptly asked of the necessity to conceal the body or, more specifically, why is material used to assimilate the skin? Perhaps it is because textiles can get close without verging on the uncanny. Although Lee's work has been noted to exist in these fluctuating realms. 'Unafraid of pushing the boundaries between beauty and the grotesque, the familiar and the uncanny, her experiments in materiality and form challenge norms of acceptance to unsettling effect.'¹⁹ Well, the other options may be an uncomfortable display of *so close but so far*, materials such as liquid latex perform like replicas, serving a likeness to flesh that may be more believable, but far less emotive. So, I ask, how can one look at textiles and not think of

¹⁹ Li, Mire Lee: *Open Wound* (Hyundai Commission). P.23

the body? Upon entering the turbine hall, the understanding and acceptance of the materials used is instantaneous, no guesswork is needed to decipher what is being displayed in front of you. Shredded and sewn back together, it is understood that a reparative effort is being made. Membrane or tunic, it may be noted these works in particular appear to be like wearable fashions - clothing that can be removed, and put back on when the time is right. Ambivalence only arrives once you begin to question what it feels like for skin to be taken away.

Figure 6.



The handing over of flesh as depicted in the above drawing appears to be an offering not of ceremonial necessity but an imperative separation of the skin from one's body. The popularised technique of observational drawing, mastered by the Italian renaissance artists, is curious for they looked within

in order to depict the external. Artists of this time would study the appearance of the muscles for the purpose of better representing the body. The way in which the internal spaces are structured, the layers within, all had to be accounted for when drawing pictures of a body. 'Here, as in many other areas, gross anatomy is a well of metaphors for artistic practice. Where it once seemed that visual art could make do with just the skin, contemporary art is exploring somatic forms in a much more thorough and empirical fashion, and the medical distinctions between membranes have echoes in current practice.'²⁰ It could be argued that the ambiguity about the skin's layering and how this articulates the body is what perpetuated much curiosity of what lay beneath. This particular drawing connotes the desire to pull flesh from yourself in order to be perceived. The figure faces away, head turned ever further from meeting the eye of the observer. The expression, although we can only imagine it, implies the figure's futile effort of anonymity, a meek modest moment cut

²⁰ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*. P.37

short by the surrender of his own flesh. Pain is not the desired inference here, merely an implication of the skin's continuing functionality once it is deemed separate from the body it came from. Lee's primary reference for *Open Wound* was the miners changing room, 'Prevalent in western europe during the post war period.'²¹ These were spaces where individuality is put aside in order for a collective act, in this case, manual labor, to take place. I will liken the offering up of skin, as depicted in the drawing, to the way in which miners would declathe, placing what they removed from their body into baskets then they would hoist their belongings back up to safety. So, they could start their working day without having to worry about dirtying the clothes they arrived in. In this way individuals become a collective. The basic mechanisms of chains on a pulley system is similar to the way Lee's installation structure functioned. The *skins* can be seen getting mapped out in the spatial consideration drawings published in the catalogue for the

²¹ Tate, "Mire Lee Creates an 'industrial Womb' in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall | Tate," 01:35-01:40.

exhibition. In these depictions we can certainly see visual similarities to the way in which the miners' changing rooms functioned. A separation of oneself from your skin, your covering, your being, is the stripping of your existence. As discussed in the opening for this text, the skin is a vessel and our primary source of soma. *Open Wound* does not denote the skin as separate from the body. But more so as an ongoing exchange of sensations felt and removed. Surface and depth in the hollowed out scenarios that are individual and collective pertain to where we are positioned in space and how we desire to be perceived. 'Efficiency competes with an enduring need for connection. As these pulsating forms evolve within the Turbine Hall, they remind us of our shared human experience, as well as the collective vulnerabilities and aspirations that drive us forward, towards each other. Lee's work dissolves the boundaries between the self and the collective and offering a profound meditation on existence itself.'²² Our eyes connect what we see to what we know.

²² Li, Mire Lee: *Open Wound* (Hyundai Commission). P.23

What we know can be communicated through language. Stitches can be semantically scientific, as a medical intervention that repairs the skin once it has been torn. Here, in *Open Wound* we see the textile *skins* as threads and patchwork holding together the idea of the skin. Perhaps textile representations are simply the best placeholder for the skin. One that keeps itself distinct and in contact with one another simultaneously. The breaking of the skin and the breaking of boundaries determining the body and the skin leads us to understand the reparative nature of gauze, fabrics as gathered forms alluding to transformation and healing. Thus, once again, semantics and somatics meet in the middle. Where the twain become one is at the point of the skin. Referring back to the venn diagram in the introduction for this text, I would also like to note the latin origins for the word complexion, con meaning with or together and plectare meaning to plait or twine. Considering the way in which the *skins* gained their colour, the combination of wet and dry

textures further aids this connection. Together and apart. Apart and then together. 'Interdependency is not a contract, not a moral idea - it is a condition.'²³ We are connected to one another by way in which we rely on one another in every aspect of life. We are each other's ecosystems, and in ourselves we find complexities that define the interconnected systems that we call our body. You can look through the skin but you can't see past it. Like the invasive idea of perfection, are people just husks of meaning waiting to be fulfilled with someone else's idea of them? I propose that *Open Wound* is what it looks like to be reduced down to skin. Being a suspension of your physical self, augmented and homogenised (to make uniform or smaller) I see this as similar to the notion of flayed skin. The stripping and separation of skin in order to understand the body by dissection. Or to understand people as a whole. Lee was able to define the skin in its multiple iterations as a scientific, symbolic and cultural enigma. Frameworking the skin in such a way that that

²³ De La Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes Without Its World": Thinking With Care." P.

positions the skin as an organ and the ocular sense of self, whose functionality is clear but it becomes obscured by her use of material. Skin may be a window to the soul, the individual person within, thus the removal of skin is what sees you become generic. Here, there is a constant revealing and re-covering of what once was but no longer exists. In *Open Wound* cloth comes alive to conceal a healing body. A collection of points that we all accept is that the ambivalence of the show reminds us of our collective fate; mortality.

Layer Three //

Hypodermis / 'dʒ:.mɪs/

We have reached the point where specific questions have arisen pertaining to the way in which human skin is characterised in contemporary sculptural practice. Lee's *skins* perform as an allegory for abject vulnerability but they are able to act out regenerative behaviours. I will liken these disparate concepts and the resilience shown by the *skins* to the perceived functionality of the vagina, which 'gives way to skin along an irregular, fleshy contour'²⁴. Vulnerable, for females are the *weaker* sex. Regenerative as the only sex strong enough to necessitate giving birth. The skin has been examined and threaded through the eye of a semantic needle and sewn back through itself. Now in the hypodermis the skin is displaced as an object and converted into a homogeneous concept, which houses exterior concepts pertaining to the semantics of skin and the somatic responses that it allows.

²⁴ Elkins, *Pictures of the Body : Pain and Metamorphosis*. P.37

We are in the deepest part of our very surface now; the realisation of *Open Wound* as an industrial womb.

‘Reimagining the Turbine Hall as at once a factory and an industrial womb, Lee intends for the space to appear to shed increasingly over time, in a dual process of gestation and deterioration.’²⁵ Does shedding here pertain to the monthly process of the internal womb lining shedding if an egg is not inseminated? Or the outcomes of gestational work; birth.

‘The everyday miracle that transpires in pregnancy, the production of that number more than one and less than two, receives more idealizing lip-service than it does respect.

Certainly, the creation of new proto-personhood in the uterus is a marvel artists have engaged for millenia (and psychoanalytic philosophers for almost a century). Most of us need no reminding that we are, each of us, the blinking, thinking, pulsating products of gestational work and its equally laborious aftermaths. Yet in 2017 a reader and thinker as compendious as Maggie Nelson can still state,

²⁵ Li, *Mire Lee: Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.23

semi-incredulously but with a strong case behind her, that philosophical writing about actually doing gestation constitutes an absence in culture.’²⁶ I put forward that in *Open Wound*, Lee has constructed a parasitic body, much like how a fetus deprives its *host* of nutrients, a selfless act of human labor. Italian novelist Elena Ferrante illustrates the tyranny of pregnancy as follows, ‘I was like a lump of food that my children chewed without stopping; a cud made of a living material that continually amalgamated and softened its living substance to allow two greedy bloodsuckers to nourish themselves.’²⁷ A similar amalgamation occurs within *Open Wound*, where the macabre act is the dismissal of the *skins* once they have carried out their purpose. What ‘particularly fascinates’ theorist, critic and translator Sophie Lewis about pregnancy is its morbidity, ‘the little-discussed ways that, biologically speaking, gestating is an unconsciously destructive business. The basic mechanics, according to

²⁶ Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, Introduction // P.1.

²⁷ Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment*, P.91.

evolutionary biologist Suzanne Sadedin, have evolved in our species in a manner that can only be described as a ghastly fluke.’²⁸ If the skin is a literal embodiment of self, the skin of the vagina and its ability to expand and repair itself in order to carry out gestational work means that this heavily structured object does not allow for vague sensation. Being pregnant is an isolated experience in many ways. Gestational work is taken on by the person with the womb and that person only. And so, when the idea of a mechanical womb punctuates the write up for the installation it is clear to the viewer that this is no ordinary representation of gestation but an inorganic dystopian one. But for a contemporary sculpture of such monumental scale, *Open Wound*, required intense planning and curatorial assistance. It was very much a collective effort. Like many large scale projects of this size and expense, a whole crew is required in order to set them up in the way the

²⁸ Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, Introduction // P.2.

artist envisioned. I can't help but to think of the phrase it takes a village, this referring to child rearing.

The grey area between human life and machinery is perpetuated in *Open Wound*. The turbine that acted out bodily functions created an indelible line between mechanics and skin. Upon closer inspection of the turbine, the traces of use inscribed on it became more visible. To some extent this is like what happens to human skin; scars and malfunctions leave marks on the body. Sometimes, things that appear to be *necessary* can actually contribute to the degradation of the body. The recent exposure of the vaginal mesh scandal reminds us that medical and therefore mechanical intervention is not always beneficial, and can lead to 'pelvic organ prolapse'²⁹.

²⁹ "Vaginal Mesh Scandal: New Evidence Reveals Further Failings."

I will conclude this text by proposing that Lee has induced a process by which she mimics thinking/thought *through* the skin. In the same way that *thinking* of the sensation of pain makes skin cringe and crawl back into itself; it's a visceral reaction to a thought or an image. Similarly, with *Open Wound* we are asked to engage in the proximity of thoughts and feelings whereby 'Their abject horror speaks directly into bodies, while their distinct forms and part forms force their way out of and beyond a somatic relation to the human body.'³⁰ Since the skin's functionality is as vast and expansive as what lies beneath its very surface, the cultural significance of this sculptural artwork does not rely on the fact that it is representative, formally and conceptually of the skin. This being said, Lee utilised the skins infinite capacity and ambiguity alongside the grotesque and disturbing nature of the separation of skin from the body. Mire Lee expresses

³⁰ Li, Mire Lee: *Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.36

clearly through *Open Wound*, the importance of the togetherness of inside and outside. Since the warm scaffolds are what holds the *skins* pieces together but also offer them up as individualised entanglements of the self as a whole. The processes that occur on a molecular level on real skin are not conveyed here, but knowing how the skin behaves provides us with the opportunity to be hyper-aware of its biology and physiological implications. I maintain that Lee is in this hyper aware state of mind, where she sees the skin as a dirty window and the body can be seen waving through it. *Open Wound* is not only open to expressing embodiment but also disembodiment. Lee's approach is indirect, but her undoing of 'both body and psyche'³¹ is unequivocal and quivering. We simply can not look at the Lee's *skins* without considering actual biological functions. In the introductory essay for the Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art (Health), entitled *The Wound is the Land of Healing*, Rodriguez Munoz eloquently summarises what Lee was able to achieve with

³¹ Li, Mire Lee: *Open Wound (Hyundai Commission)*. P.35

this installation. 'When health is divorced from its politics, the entanglements between the individual and the social body are rendered invisible. More so, the language with which to articulate suffering becomes a grammar of heroic recovery and artworks depicting suffering are dismissed as self-absorbed. However, when health is reimagined as a space of agency, the intersections between body, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, species and coloniality are exposed allowing ecosystems that sustain life to be reconceived.'³² Lee's *Open Wound* exposes these topics through the construction of the installation, as if they could be compartmentalised and easily ingested. Lee's *politics* is the acceptance of the presence of pain. Felt by all of us. It is not routed in vanity, nor is it a reflection of ego. But more so a collective experience which she is able to articulate like variations of the word love. Mire Lee's *Open Wound* has demonstrated, through installation art, the way in which a collective experience can dissolve elements of ego or vanity pertaining to the surface of the skin. It takes guts to speak

³² Muñoz, *Health*, sec. Introduction // The Wound is the Land of Healing. P12-13.

about the body. And the resilience shown by the *skins* will allow conversations to continue.

Illustrations // /,ɪlə'streɪʃns/

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Figure 2 // Mire Lee, *Open Wound*, Installation View. Image: Larina Fernandes; courtesy Tate. Page 19.

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Figure 6. // William Cowper, *Myotomia Reformata*, Image: Wellcome Collection. Page 30.

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