

CORPOREAL EXPLORATIONS: FROM EMBODIMENTS OF BODILY EXPRESSIONS TO VISUAL RECORDINGS OF PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

Barbara Graf

The field of my artistic exploration is the human body and its forms of expression. In my works, the body is represented not only through external visible formations, but also by internal anatomical structures. Corporeal perceptions are thus embodied in membranes, and expressed as such in textile materials and paper in my work. My own body serves as an object of investigation and as a subject of performative photography – hence both as perceiving and expressing body. The surfaces and substrates of these corporeal expressions are variously interpreted as graphic representations, photographs and short films, textile coverings and objects.

As for the conditions under which the works are created, three approaches can be distinguished. The first manifests itself in sculptural body wrappings, which simultaneously protect and expose. Thus, bodily imaginations and feelings are exteriorised as sculptural emotional shell.

A second approach examines how physical sensations can be visualised, probing the problems arising from representations of subjective experiences. It explores different ways of conceiving bodies without adhering to a strictly chronological order. Whereas earlier approaches mainly referred to the expressing body where the intuitive approach is relevant, in my recent works more specific questions have initiated new processes. These can be formulated briefly as interrogation of possible representations of experienced body sensations.



Figure 1. Barbara Graf, *Jumping Out of One's Skin, Anatomical Garment III*, 1996, cotton, snap-fasteners and hooks & eyes, life-size.

Finally, the third approach is exemplified in those works created in the context of artistic research projects relating to various medical fields. Here, too, my own body is the starting point. Although the observation of bodies and their treatment in general is central to this area of research, my body serves as both the medium of empathic perception and the object of representation with respect to physical and emotional vulnerability. This position is located somewhere between the two outlined above. Even though these observations emanate from my own body, it is not a question of a personal or individual body, but rather of an exemplary one.

Since 2004, I have been working with Christina Lammer on various arts-based research projects.¹ In a process of close exchange, we have developed our work and use different media and tools to explore bodies and their vulnerabilities. For many years Christina Lammer has used a camera as an ethnographic and empathic tool in surgical operating theatres. In her embodied camera work, she penetrates the surgeon–patient relationship and its gestural dynamics. In so doing, physical tissue and the materiality of the film emulsion are merged. In a similar transfer, my work combines the physical with textile tissue, and the pencil and the sewing needle serves as a tool of investigation.



Figure 2. Barbara Graf, *Skin Dress – Anatomical Garment I*, 1989, cotton, zippers and Velcro, life-size.

The exploration of body layers – its wrappings, the interior and exterior anatomy – has always been the focus of my interest. In order to render tangible not only the development of my work, but also comparisons between various pieces, I shall take the textile work *Skin Dress* (Figure 2) from 1989 as an illustrative example. It is also the first work in the series *Anatomical Garments*, marking a new direction of research on textiles as a flexible and performative medium. This full-body suit is a membrane which, although cocooning the body, reveals nakedness. An internal body structure has also been assimilated into it – a spinal column. This can be folded away to become the point of entry to the outer covering.

At a later stage, the exposure of inner body structures – in the course of which the inner skeleton is transformed into an outer shell – becomes explicit in *Vertebral Column Garment* (Figure 3). With back and front views virtually identical, it suggests the understanding of oneself as sculpture.

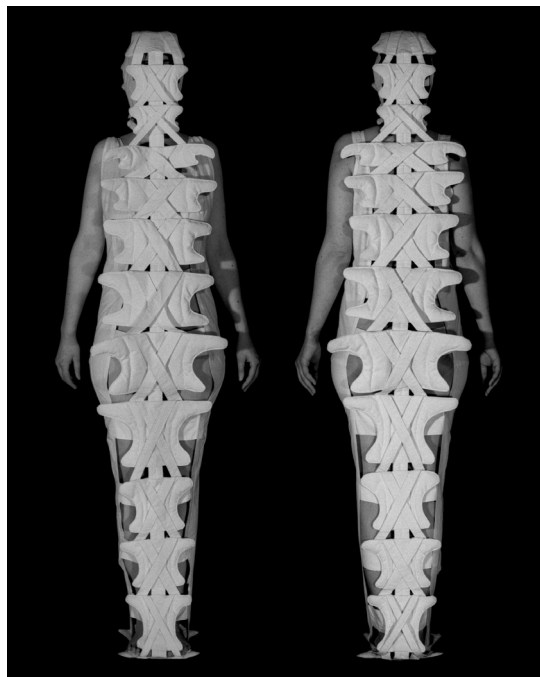


Figure 3. Barbara Graf, *Vertebral Column Garment – Anatomical Garment V*, 1996, cotton, snap-fasteners and Velcro, life-size.

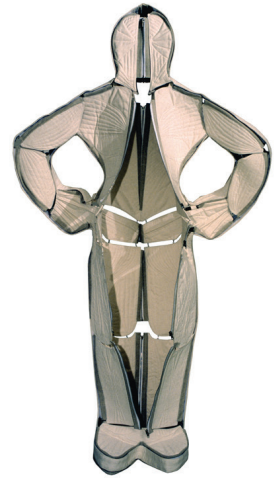


Figure 4. Barbara Graf, *Segment Suit – Anatomical Garment VI*, 1997, cotton, zippers, hooks & eyes and Velcro, life-size; bag: 65 x 40 x 12 cm.

In *Segment Suit* (Figure 4), muscle-fibre structures were sewn into textile fabric. The resulting garment completely envelops the body and becomes a fully closed suit in which one can do little more than stand. Inner structures are externally visible, although the physical space that is actually felt is an entirely internal one. Thus, this second skin determines the body position. The garment can be disassembled into its individual parts and stowed in a specially constructed bag. Ultimately, the body wrappings can be transformed into a transportable travel kit, a sculpture to be carried as hand luggage.

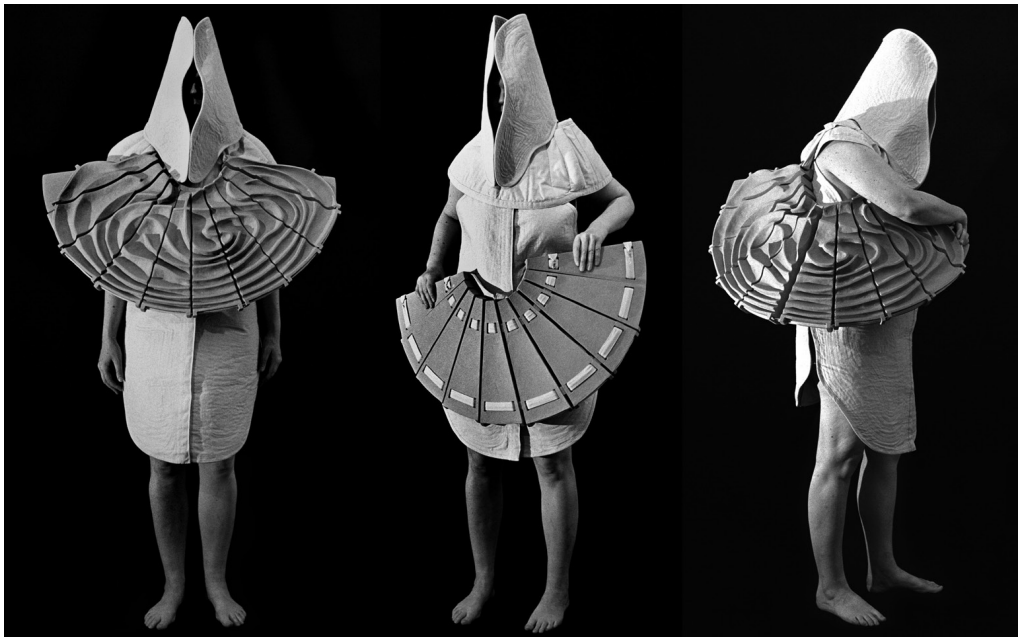


Figure 5. Barbara Graf, *Ear Dress – Anatomical Garment XIV*, 2003/04, cotton, snap-fasteners, hooks & eyes, Velcro and cardboard, life-size.

An apparent shift towards exterior anatomy can be seen in *Ear Dress* (Figure 5). An enormous ear, on which a labyrinth has been superimposed, hangs like a necklace over the wearer's chest. This allusion to a sensory organ is worn like the shield of a suit of armour.

All these works belong to the series *Anatomical Garments*; curator and researcher Cathrin Pichler has described them as "the signifiers of an imagined universe of corporeality of the mind!"

Formed, spread out, layered, smoothed, folded, tied, unfolded, separated, stretched, fastened, raised – Barbara Graf's art bodies present themselves in many ways. Astonishing manifestations and fragmentations of fantasized corporeality characterize the history of the so-called Anatomical Garments. Their anatomies are always allusions to the real anatomy of the human body, coverings fabricated from the forms and elements inside it, turning them outward, accentuating them in fragments, or peeling them off in layers. This is conceptual art based on an investigation of the human body, interjecting corporeality into the investigation while continually imagining new representations and forms.²



Figure 6. Barbara Graf, *Contours* (installation), 2005, cotton, hooks and eyes, yarn, 170 x 200 x 120 cm.

Most of the body shells consist of individual parts and can be assembled to form solid, protective or even constricting shells. Step by step, first in drawings, then in textile coverings and surfaces, I diminish their compactness: membranes become diaphanous, folds and wrinkles appear in the material, edges become blurred.

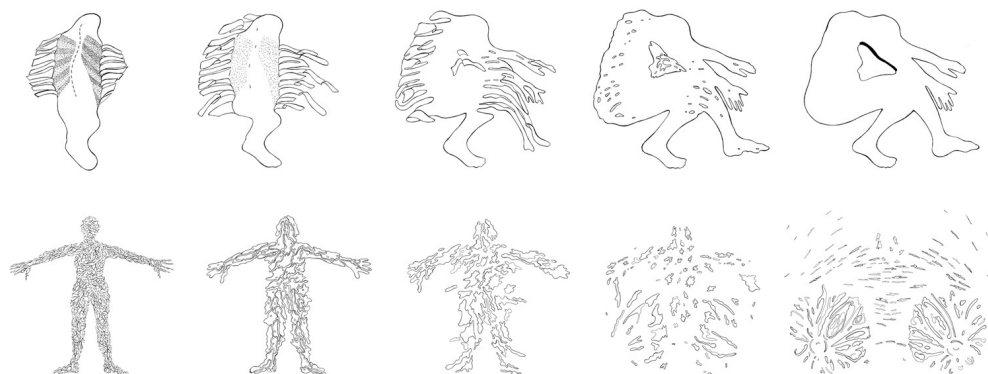


Figure 7. Barbara Graf, *Contours*, 2005-09, film, 1:25 mins; 330 drawings, ink on paper; each 21 x 29.7 cm.

From 2004 onwards, the expansion of my materials into space and permeability has become central to my artistic work. This shift in focus led to the creation of coverings for the body which allowed the body's own boundaries to expand and fuse with the surrounding space. My installation *Contours* (Figures 6 and 7) and the animated drawings bearing the same title sought to realise the objective of palpating the body as bodily space.

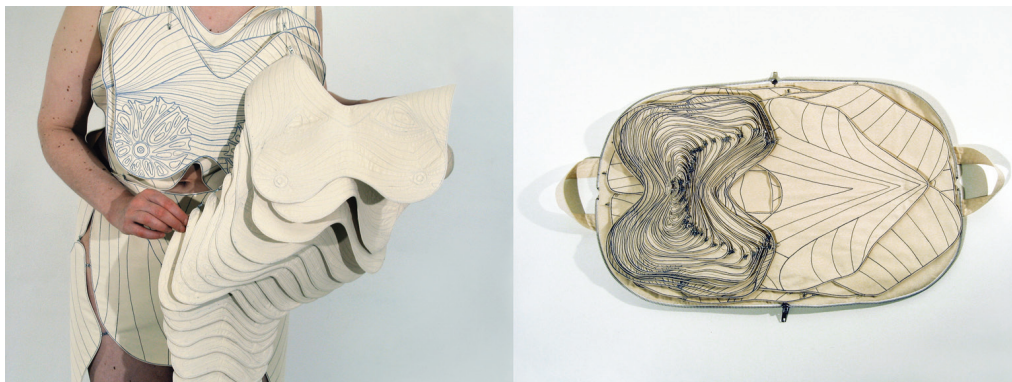


Figure 8. Barbara Graf, *Breast Layers – Anatomical Garment XV*, 2006, cotton, hooks & eyes and zippers, life-size; bag: 42 x 42 x 4 cm.

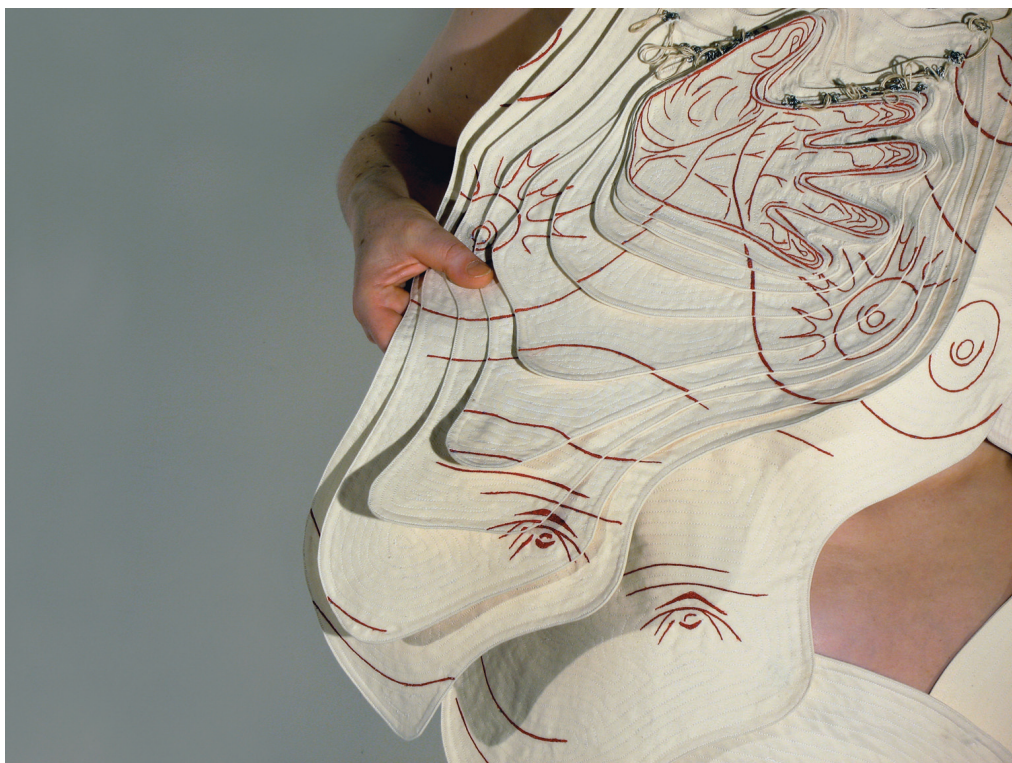


Figure 9. Barbara Graf, *Hand Breast Layers – Anatomical Garment XVI*, 2008, cotton, snap-fasteners and hooks & eyes, life-size.

Breast Layers and *Hand Breast Layers* (Figures 8 and 9) both deal with layers and the peeling back of textile covers as an anatomical and topographical principle. They also form part of the series *Anatomical Garments* which I have been working on for 30 years. Each Anatomical Garment consists of a sculptural, multi-part clothing item, a bag for storage and transport, and a scientific-looking operating manual. Through drawings, both the way of acting and possible representational formats of body sculptures are described. In addition, the process of assembling and disassembling is depicted; in so doing, it underlines an important anatomical principle, referring to both the cutting pattern as well as to the conception of the body shell as a flexible sculpture. Ultimately, the stowing of the individual parts into their corresponding bags evokes an inherent sense of the nomadic.

In the *Cloths* series (Figures 10-12), I apply materials used in the medical field – surgical drapes and medical gauze. These works emerged from the art research project *Surgical Wrappings*,³ in which I again collaborated with Christina Lammer. The aim of the project was to examine the operating field and the gestures of surgery. The investigations that my colleague made with the camera in the operating theatre, but also through interviews with surgeons and patients, formed an important basis for our exchange. We asked: What role does contact and touch play in the clinical context? We were also concerned to investigate proximity and distance with reference to both clinical personnel and patients, and also the materialities of the operating theatre – for example, surgical drapes. Christina's work led to the development of filmic topographies. Hers is no mere documentary approach, but rather she reveals the mysterious and even poetic nature of surgical procedures, the sensitivity with which the surgeon's hands touch human tissue. Although the hand never touches the patient directly, but is always mediated by gloves or tools, in Christina's short films and video clips these 'touching' moments are rendered visible. In order to prepare the operating area, for example, lines are drawn on the skin, hands reach inside physical cavities, wounds are closed by means of surgical stitching and sutures. The tactility of surgery and the interpersonal contact it involves are impressively represented in these films.

In my own work, I transform these surgical techniques into textile fabric. Shifted threads, cut-out areas or embroidered lines in the fabric represent the surgeon's hand gestures and the physical structures of the body. Here, the fabric became a corporeal membrane, a medium for body expression and body perception. In the photographic layouts, I thus bring cloth and body very close to each other. As a result, the operating field is transformed into an image field, and textile fabric and human tissue overlap.



Figure 10. Barbara Graf, *Cloth 2 – Hand Images*, 2012, surgical drape and medical gauze, 186 x 93 cm; photograph: 26.7 x 35.6 cm.



Figure 11. Barbara Graf, *Cloth 5 – Hand Images*, 2013, medical gauze, green and white threads, 186 x 93 cm; photograph: 26.7 x 35.6 cm.

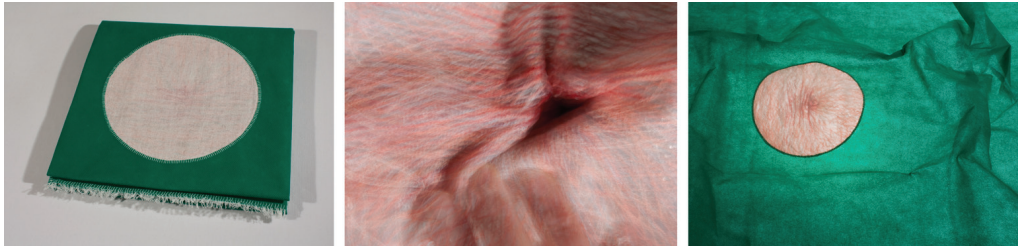


Figure 12. Barbara Graf, *Cloth 6 – Hand Images*, 2013,
surgical drape and medical gauze, different coloured threads, 186 x 93 cm;
photographs: 26.7 x 35.6 cm.

The resulting images have the potential to reconcile ambivalent or contradictory modes of expression or operation: covering and uncovering, proximity and distance, interior and exterior, touch and intervention. As for the fabric structures, these again allude to surgical meshes and overlap with organic textures.

Cloth 6 is based on an experience I had during a laparoscopic procedure. It depicts the sterile operating window, showing the structure of the navel, its associated folds and organic structures. This image is intended to evoke a smooth transition to images within the body. Layers of medical gauze seem to dissolve the organic structures, which only reappear when the cut-outs of the green surgical drape are illuminated. The round endoscopic internal image overlaps with the outer operating field. As a result, the perception of one's own body is in an ambivalent relationship with the distanced view of the veiled body. The cloth, applied to the body and arranged photographically, blurs the boundaries between textile and physical tissue.



Figure 13. Barbara Graf, *Large Glove in Motion (Glove as a Garment)*,
2016-18, 210 x 135 cm;
photographs, each 34 x 25.5 cm.

A similar merging of body and shell is depicted in *Large Glove in Motion* (Figure 13). This work is part of two projects *Performing Surgery* and *Visceral Operations/Assemblage*.⁴ Here, the action itself – the gestures of hands – forms the central element of the work. Analysing the movements of operating hands – from the slightest touch to the deepest intervention – prompted me to sew a glove the size of the human body. Set in motion and photographed using a stroboscopic apparatus, these operating hands and the body to be operated on fuse into one. In this way, the entire body merges into a single movement or transforms itself into an internal organ. It is this very movement that is ephemeral, but at the same time penetrates deeply.



Figure 14. Barbara Graf, *Wrinkle Lines 4 – Bandage* (Body Mapping), 2011, photograph, 26.7 x 35.6 cm.



Figure 15. Barbara Graf, *Wrinkle Lines 7 – Bandage* (Hand Mapping), 2016, photograph, 26.7 x 35.6 cm.

A series of works, *Wrinkle Lines – Bandages* (Figures 14-16), illustrates the interweaving of corporeal and textile tissues, of topographies and textures. Here, the bandages embody not only vulnerability, but also protection and healing. The photographs are taken in such a way that external body structures are transformed into internal body structures by the wrapping of bandages around the entire body or a part of it. Body wrinkles are embroidered into fine fabrics reminiscent of cartographic drawings. In this way, a new order of bodily components is created by spreading them out, arranged into folds or layered, ultimately revealing the body's fragility.



Figure 16. Barbara Graf, *Wrinkle Lines 8 – Bandage* (Foot Mapping), 2016-18, photograph, 26.7 x 35.6 cm.

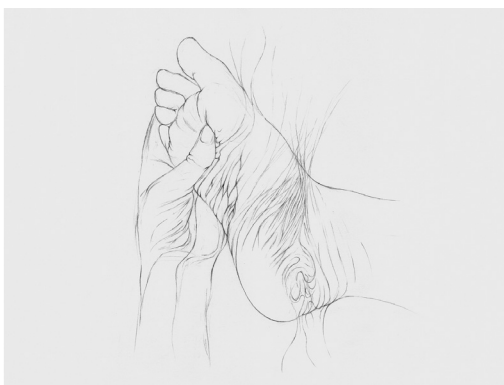


Figure 17. Barbara Graf, *Drawing No. 174*, 2009, pencil on paper; 29.7 x 42 cm.

A major turning point in my work occurred in 2017 when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). The sensory disturbances associated with this disease constitute both an impediment and a challenge to approach my work differently. Until then, it was not important to me whether emotions or physical sensations were expressed through my representations of the body. As the boundaries of emotional and physical perception are naturally blurred, this intermingling was something that I could usefully exploit. However, as a result of my altered body sensations – such as paraesthesia – I have increasingly focused on the possibility of visualising physical perceptions.

A few years before the onset of the first symptoms of MS, I created a drawing of my hand showing my thumb pressing the ball of my foot, as if to check its sensitivity. Fibre-like lines establish a link between hand and foot, extending beyond the body. This work anticipated the sensation of a momentary physical experience, thus combining the element of bodily expression from earlier works with the representation of perceptions in my current work. Arising from the experience of bodily injury, there is a feeling that the entire self has been violated in its inherent sensitivity. The affliction of MS causes a number of sensory disorders, including paraesthesia (resulting in numbness), spasticity, the sensation of largeness or tightness, and band-like sensations. In order to deal with these altered perceptions, I began drawing the alienating sensations I was experiencing. In this way, I was reminded of earlier drawings, underlining for me – in an disconcerting way – their similarity to the sensations I was now experiencing. For example, the feeling that one is wearing a glove is a common phenomenon with this illness.



Figure 18. Barbara Graf, *Drawing No.3*, 1995, pencil on paper, 48 x 65 cm
Drawing No.218, 2019, pencil on paper, 29.7 x 42 cm.

My artistic reflections on the relationship between bodily expression and physical sensation once again prompted me to engage intensively with the work of Maria Lassnig.⁵ In her visual embodiments, she navigates through perceptions that are sometimes focused on emotions and sometimes on physical sensations – if they are even distinguishable. In the process of painting or drawing, she investigates the sensations in her own body in order to portray a visual reality through corporeal experience. The result is a 'sensitive' depiction, which mainly portrays recognisable bodies or body parts, but is sometimes completely abstract, and yet still forcefully conveys body perception. Her work connects an inner vision with an outer seeing.

Maria Lassnig has always been an important reference point for me – not only because I was her student, but also from the viewpoint of taking oneself as the subject of investigation. And from the moment my body experienced disturbance and uncertainty due to my illness, I've become even more concerned to reflect on the connections between physical and emotional perception.

Visualising physical sensations is inherently difficult. A number of questions suggest themselves: Which modes of graphical representation are feasible, under what conditions and by what criteria are the drawings to be created, and how are they to be conveyed? Perception cannot be delegated to others and is a uniquely experienced phenomenon. However, if it is a question of proprioception, then the object of perception is the same as the perceiving subject. How is it possible to distance oneself from the self in order to be capable of subjective objectification? How can artistic manifestations of this phenomenon be formulated? As close as such expressions are to one's own person, they must be abstracted by taking a step back in order to be mediated.

This question of proximity is a challenging one. Although Michel Foucault does not answer this question in his lecture "Utopian Body," he is deeply concerned with this seemingly ambivalent body, one that is dissolved – never being exactly 'there,' but rather being everywhere. According to Foucault, everything goes from and through the body in a simultaneity of proximity and distance:

My body, in fact, is always elsewhere. It is tied to all the elsewhere of the world. And to tell the truth, it is *elsewhere* than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. [...] The body is the zero point of the world, this small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine.⁶

An important question in the graphic formulation of lived experience is where the images of bodily sensations originate. An interesting phenomenon I have observed is that many of my sensations of nervous disorders feel as if textile objects are the stimulus of perception. It is as if touch is perceived without one being touched – for example, the feeling of wearing a sock-like textile without actually having a sock on. I ask myself why the disturbances of my nervous system feel so textile-like. Is it my own work that gives a language to the perception of what I feel? Physical sensations are intrinsically linked to our previous experiences, whether they are artistic or everyday ones. Subsequently, they become perceptions and images. This explains why people afflicted with MS – even those who are not artists working with fabrics – often have sensations that they describe in terms of textiles – for instance, that of walking on cotton or wearing tight clothes. Clothing obviously constitutes a fundamental experience of touch. The search for a graphic equivalent of lived experience raises complex questions. When I draw this illusion, caused by a disorder of the nerves, is it a comparison, a metaphor or an exact recording of the sensation, even if the sock does not exist? What in fact is meant by an exact recording? Can I draw abstract quasi-seismographic structures that correspond to a specific sensation?



Figure 19. Barbara Graf, *Drawings No. 189, 203, 215, 194, 208, 214, 2017-19*, pencil on paper, each 29.7 × 42 cm.

In some of these drawings (Figures 18 and 19) I illustrate these sensations without any body contours, focusing exclusively on what I experienced. In other representations, I focus on the sensations of paraesthesia as an isolated structure, as if I was looking through a 'phenomenological microscope.' Drawing unpleasant lived experiences facilitates my understanding of my own body and acceptance of the resulting sense of alienation. This is supported by the transfer of the representation of my perceptions to external loci. As subjective experiences are invisible and not really representable, I refrain from calling them such. Still, it is possible to produce resonant images of corporeal sensations. This undertaking ultimately creates a meaningful space to which outsiders may gain empathic access.



Figure 20. Barbara Graf, *Touching the Sole of the Foot*, 2017, photograph, 18 x 24 cm.

The question of the (non-)representability of bodily perception is an important field of investigation in my PhD thesis, where I explore the similarities and differences between my earlier and current work and the degree of their interwovenness. The title of my project, "Stitches and Sutures,"⁷ refers not only to my work with textiles, but also to the method of investigation. It describes the movement of penetrating layers with needle and thread, stitching and backstitching to create seams, displacing threads, disentangling woven fabric, creating blank spaces, stretching new lengths of thread and establishing links. In order to establish a connection between present and past, I borrow the notion of the *point de capiton* from Jacques Lacan.⁸ This signifies a process whereby the past is studded retroactively with stitches, as if made by needle and thread, at greater and smaller intervals. From this linkage, *quilting points* emerge; many of them constitute a *suture*. The linkage they form is more or less stable, thereby signifying the diachronic production of meaning. Thus, the footmarks of the past acquire meaning through events in the present.



Figure 21. Barbara Graf, "Corporeal Explorations" exhibition, 2019. Held at the DSA Gallery, Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand.

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Barbara Graf was born in Switzerland and lives in Vienna, Austria. She is an artist and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. In her work she investigates body representations and develops flexible sculptures as a second skin. Her main media are drawing, sculpture, photography and film. Since 2004 she has been working in various art research projects dealing with medical issues. She is currently developing her doctoral thesis on the visualisation of body perception.

All photographs are by Barbara Graf.

- 1 Christina Lammer is a research sociologist, author and filmmaker based in Vienna and the leader of several projects exploring corporealities and gestures in the medical context: *CORPOrealities* (2004-09) and *Surgical Wrappings* (2009-13), supported by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF); *Performing Surgery* (2015-18) and *Visceral Operations/Assemblage* (2019-23), supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). See <http://www.corporealities.org/> (accessed 2 July 2020).
- 2 Cathrin Pichler, "Thing and Life – Barbara Graf's Art Bodies," *Contemporary Practices: Art Journal*, 9 (2011), 172-7, at 172, <http://contemporarypractices.net/essays/VolumeIX/THING%20AND%20LIFE.pdf>. First published in German in *CORPOrealities*, ed. Christina Lammer (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2010).
- 3 *Surgical Wrappings* (2009-2014), supported by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF), in collaboration with Christina Lammer.
- 4 *Performing Surgery* (2015-18) and *Visceral Operations/Assemblage* (2019-2023), supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), in collaboration with Christina Lammer.
- 5 Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) led the Master Class for Experimental Visual Art between 1980 and 1989 at the Universität of Applied Arts Vienna, and was my professor. She is internationally considered as the pioneer of Body Awareness painting and drawing. From the mid-1940s she devoted herself to researching the representation of body sensations in art.
- 6 Michel Foucault, "Utopian Body," in *Sensorium – Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, trans. Lucia Allais, ed. Caroline A Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 229-34, at 233. First broadcast by Foucault as one of two radio talks, "Les hétérotopies – Le corps utopique," Radio France, 1966.
- 7 Barbara Graf, "Stitches and Sutures," art research PhD in progress since 2018 at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Supervisor: Barbara Putz-Plecko.
- 8 Jacques Lacan's *point de capiton* has been variously translated in English as "quilting point," "anchoring point" and "upholstery button." Lacan borrows the image of the stitch from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (where the puncture connects the signified and the signifier) and connects it with the system of *afterwardsness* (*Nachträglichkeit*) formulated by Sigmund Freud. Originally, the *point de capiton* was a textile stitch derived from the craft of the mattress-maker. A double-pointed upholstery needle is used to stitch through layers of unshaped fibres, to hold them together and to shape the fibrous material.