

The Violence of Merging: Unica Zürn's Writing (on) the Body

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In *The Man of Jasmine: Impressions from a Mental Illness* (1970), written by the German Surrealist Unica Zürn (1916-70), the nameless third-person protagonist “cuts a six on the palm of her left hand with the sharp tip of a nail-file” (MJ 40). In this disturbing text about madness, language is made “real” by being re-inscribed into the body of the writer. In its reversal, the number nine, the figure of “a person standing erect, his gaze turned to the left” (MJ 28) ceases to be a floating signifier but becomes an embodied one. The “person” becomes, literally, a subject of writing, the seemingly logical conclusion to the attempt of turning oneself into a text.

Zürn’s writing, as will become apparent over the course of this essay, radically deconstructs the boundaries by which we commonly define subjectivity (fact/fiction, truth/fantasy, etc.), and in the end, leaves us questioning just what *is* the difference between a body and a text. Confronting us with a discontinuity of identity, the gesture of self-mutilation seems to be only the most extreme form of a desire to merge sign and body—to mend, as it appears, the enormous rift between the two. Madness is constructed along the lines of Foucault’s paradigm that “*where there is a work of art, there is no madness; and yet madness is contemporary with the work of art, since it inaugurates the time of its truth*” (288). Zürn’s text grammatically conveys the effect of a split consciousness by being written in the third person present tense,

suggesting a difference between narrator and protagonist and, at the same time, familiarity, since the narrator seems to be recording the events experienced by the protagonist simultaneously as they occur. The reader may be tempted, as Sigrid Weigel puts it, to read the “she” as an “I,” yet this is not an autobiography but rather the author’s attempt to draw the reader into madness: it becomes impossible to distinguish where to draw the line between the author and the text, and between imagination and reality.¹

Let me begin with a brief introduction of Zürn’s life: born and raised in Berlin, her first job after completing secretarial school at 17 was to work for the UFA (Universal-Film-AG), the German film industry that became the propaganda instrument for the Nazis.² According to Sabine Scholl, there is no evidence that Zürn questioned the ideology of the National Socialists, except that—unlike her father and brother—she did not join the party. In any case, she was promoted to “Werbefilmdramaturgin” (dramaturg for commercials) in 1936, a job in which she worked on, for example, shoe commercials.³ In 1942, she married a wealthy businessman and had two children. Divorced in 1949, she lost custody to the father, who claimed that Zürn was unable to support the children financially. Changing her first name from Ruth to Unica, she revived her contacts with her artist friends and managed to eke out a living by publishing short stories in Berlin newspapers, as well as radio plays and a children’s book.⁴ As part of the Berlin Surrealists around “Zone 5” (an exhibit whose title referred to the four occupied zones), and *Die Badewanne*, a cabaret and jazz club modeled after the Paris existentialist bars, she met the artist Hans Bellmer (1902-75) at an art opening in 1953, and followed him to Paris only two months later. Bellmer, who had left Germany in 1938 for political reasons, was known for his doll sculptures, depicting fragmented female nudes in grotesquely contorted positions.⁵ He became a major influence in Zürn’s life. As Renée Riese Hubert points out, “the seventeen years spent as Bellmer’s companion coincide almost exactly with the most productive period of her life” (141). Bellmer encouraged her to draw and introduced her to the technique of composing anagrams which he compared with the body: “The sentence too resembles a

body which seems to invite us to decompose it, so that an infinite chain of anagrams may re-compose the truth it contains" (HT 85). Zürn's mental illness began in 1957, when she met Henri Michaux, whose writings on madness she admired and whom she believed to be the real-life version of her imaginary "Man of Jasmine." Apparently this meeting, along with difficulties in her relationship with Bellmer, precipitated her first mental crisis.⁶ She was committed to the mental institution in Berlin-Wittenau while on a visit from Paris and then to the St. Anne hospital in Paris, where she remained for three years. After further hospitalizations for mental illness in 1964 and 1966, Zürn completed *The Man of Jasmine* in 1967, as well as another prescient book, *Dark Spring*, about a little girl who jumps out of the window because of an unrequited love.⁷ In 1969, Bellmer became paralyzed from a stroke and felt unable to take care of her. He had her committed again and when she came to visit him, on October 17, 1970, he ended their relationship of over 16 years. That night, Zürn jumped off the balcony of Bellmer's sixth-floor apartment to her death. Her gravestone in Père Lachaise reads: "My love will follow you into eternity. Hans to Unica."⁸

By all accounts, Zürn and Bellmer had lived in a *folie à deux* which is, perhaps, best summed up by Bellmer's photograph of Zürn holding a life-sized doll in her arms with himself towering from behind over both of them. The doll's face resembles that of Zürn and it has been suggested that Bellmer was like a puppeteer for her.⁹ Zürn too, in *The Man of Jasmine*, describes their first meeting in terms of an over-identification, a relationship of resemblance mediated by an image:

Why did she move to France? 1953, in Berlin, she sees the same French film three times in order to get drunk on the sight of a particular face. . . . She identifies so strongly with this masculine face that suddenly she is told "you resemble him." A few days later she meets a man and recognizes his face as the one in the film which she herself has come to resemble. Highly surprised, she hears someone say: "That man resembles X in the film." This confirmation, as well as his request that she should accompany him to Paris, spurs her decision to leave Berlin. (MJ 31)

Apparently, Zürn had gone to see *Les Enfants du Paradis* and was fascinated by the resemblance between Bellmer and Jean-Louis Barrault.¹⁰ Suggesting the cliché of the movie star descending from the screen (literally: the man of one's dreams), this passage already prefigures the hallucinations she later describes in *The Man of Jasmine*. In its German original, the word "face"—"Gesicht"—is repeated five times, emphasizing not only the intoxication of the spectator with the image but also the etymological connection to the German expression for having hallucinations: to "have faces"—"Gesichte haben."

In fact, there is a resemblance between this passage and the scene that describes the protagonist's first crisis of madness, as the Man of Jasmine appears in a movie theater:

The first crisis starts in a cinema. She sees him enter as the lights dim. He takes a seat several rows away from her at the same time sitting directly behind her. An advertising spot for a certain oil begins. Bottles filled with oil keep appearing one after another until their sight becomes unbearable to her. The bottles turn into the symbol of the male member—the sight gives her such a feeling of nausea that she fears she must vomit. (MJ 30)

Familiar with the medium of film through her work at UFA, Zürn describes the way that moving pictures may physically affect the spectator. However, "she" is not disturbed directly by an image of "the male member" but rather by its "symbol," whose appearance involves a process of repetition over a length of time. The actual image—the oil bottle—is gradually transformed into a phallus symbol by way of mechanical reproduction, just as "she" gradually discovers a resemblance between different "faces." They involve an act of interpretation on the spectator's part; they are also the result of optical illusions: the Man of Jasmine who himself duplicates his appearance by seating himself both in front of and behind the protagonist, plays a trick on the protagonist. He manipulates her to see what he wishes her to see and this manipulation, in turn, has real physical consequences.

Zürn establishes the power of visual technology in terms of the ability to do real physical harm. "She" is manipulated by images and thus loses the ability to distinguish between representa-

tion and reality. Her universe becomes paranoid, with everything being connected to everything else, and she loses her sense of boundaries, of distinguishing between self and other, between private and public spaces: "she thinks she can decipher messages to her in almost every advert, in almost every title of the plays and films" (MJ 93). She believes that these messages are sent to her telepathically, by the Man of Jasmine.

"He" is the master of fantasy, who controls her life and drives her deeper and deeper into madness and "she" becomes obsessed with his initials, H.M. (Henri Michaux), which are also the initials of Herman Melville, her favorite writer. Perhaps this is why she invents a synonym for the Man of Jasmine when he turns against her: she calls him "the white man" (reminiscent of the white whale in *Moby Dick*). And the "white man," in French "L'Homme Blanc," has, as Scholl points out, the same initials as Hans Bellmer (89).

Thus, even when Bellmer is clearly distinguished from the Man of Jasmine in Zürn's text, there are a number of hidden connections between them. The reader remains confused as to what is fiction and what is autobiographical. On the one hand, Zürn deals with fantasy, on the other her writing opens towards the extra-textual. While *The Man of Jasmine* may seem autobiographical, it is also a product of fantasy and its aim seems to confuse the reader into a madness resembling that of the protagonist. What is and is not "real"?—Like a film, the text tricks us into believing that what we perceive is "real." Consider this passage: "She is unaware that she is suffering from hallucinations. In her present state, the most incredible, hitherto unseen things become reality, so that when these images appear to her in the night sky, they are *really* there" (MJ 33). We get constant slippage from the voice of an omniscient narrator, who distances herself from the protagonist's madness, to the perspective of the protagonist, whose sense of reality is entirely subjective. By insisting that the images are "*really* there," the narrator sets up a frame that allows us to suspend our disbelief: we must take the narrator by her word and are thus subject to a language that creates its own reality.

The juxtaposition of a realistic frame narrative with sequences in which “she” hallucinates corresponds to André Breton’s definition of Surrealism as “the future resolution of two states that seem to be contradicting one another, namely dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality.”¹¹ In keeping with Surrealist principles, Zürn’s representation of madness is a deliberately conceived work of art. As I noted in the beginning, her voice gives the impression of a split consciousness by way of simultaneously representing two perspectives: the narrator, who observes and comments, and the protagonist, who acts and experiences. This effect is achieved through the use of the present tense in the third person, a recording of events that seem to take place simultaneously while they are being narrated. Diagnosing herself as schizophrenic, “she” appears to be alienated from herself, to see herself from the point of view of another.¹² However, this effect is clearly calculated, since it would be impossible to write, as she does, if she were truly *in* the condition she describes.

We must at least entertain the thought that “she” is not Zürn. It is unfortunate that the initial publication of *The Man of Jasmine* in Germany by Ullstein Verlag made it seem as if Zürn were not an artist but a mental patient.¹³ Compared to “a Nadja who has learned to speak” by German radio moderator Lothar Baier in reference to Breton’s *Nadja* (1928)—which describes the author’s fascination with a madwoman he follows through the streets of Paris until she is locked up in an asylum—Zürn was seen as the authentic voice of madness.¹⁴ However, she also followed a literary tradition of asylum texts, such as Leonora Carrington’s *En Bas* (1946) and Antonin Artaud’s *Lettres de Rodez* (1942), to whom she frequently referred. Compared to real psychiatric case histories, for example Marguerite Sechehayé’s *Renée: Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (1950), these texts are concerned with the relationship between madness and art and they portray mental illness as a poetic state of mind, pathologized by a society which does not understand artists. Thus Zürn’s “automatic writing” appears to be the spontaneous expression of a disturbed mind, but it also participates in an avant-garde tradition that valued madness as an element of creativity.¹⁵

The assumption that madness is, at least in part, performative was taken to the other extreme by Bellmer who—referring to Carrington and Artaud—complained to his psychiatrist, Gaston Ferdière (who had been Artaud’s psychiatrist and treated Bellmer for alcoholism) that Zürn was, somehow, writing herself into madness. Depriving her of agency, he was apparently fooled by the image she herself wished to present, namely that it was she who was in control. In *The Man of Jasmine*, Zürn’s “she” describes her writing as a resistance against Bellmer’s authority:

Unfortunately . . . she gets it into her head to write down the story of her illness. Her friend [Bellmer] warns her of the possible dangers of dwelling on this subject, but to no avail. She turns a deaf ear to all his entreaties to desist from writing the manuscript. It would be much better and relax her mind if she devoted herself once more to her drawings. No! She remains seated at her table in the hot sun and writes for hours on end. (MJ 92)¹⁶

Significant about this passage is its auto-referentiality, as the reader comes to realize that the manuscript “she” produces *is*, in fact, *The Man of Jasmine*. “She,” who seems to appear in a book as a character who writes, is suddenly identified as the author of this very book, so that what we are reading is no longer a book about something (a story) but rather a book which describes the conditions of its own making. It is, in fact, a book about the process of writing a book about the process of writing a book. This *mise-en-abyme* not only questions the identity of “she,” but also the nature of “reality” itself, since there does not seem to be any world beyond the text. The presumption of an extra-textual reality that accompanies the activity of reading (where the reader is led to imagine that there is something outside the text itself, to which the text refers) is elided in favor of a claustrophobic experience, where there seems to be nothing *but* the text.

Zürn uses a similar conceit—which is also characteristic of Surrealism’s general preoccupation with the origin of the work of art—in an early precursor to *The Man of Jasmine*, her posthumously published novella *Katrin: The Story of a Little Writer*, written in 1953, around the time she met Bellmer. Named after Zürn’s daughter, it tells “the story of a little girl who wanted to become a

writer and really became one." Ending happily, with Katrin sitting down to write, it refers back to its own beginning by turning the little girl into an author whose writing tells "the story of a little girl who wanted to become a writer and really became one." In what seems to be an endless loop, there is no subject apart from its text and we are forced to acknowledge that "Katrin" is nothing but her writing. Although *Katrin*, which is not about madness, could be construed as a joyful affirmation of authorship, it also reduces the author's identity to the *modus operandi* of a text: writing becomes essential to the construction of identity and, at the same time, forecloses the possibility of the author's having any identity other than that which is constructed by the text. In other words, writing appears not only a way of re-defining one's own identity but also as a dangerous mechanism whose power lies in its ability to, ultimately, absorb the person of the author.

This condition applies to the way in which Zürn represented her own subjectivity, namely as a textual construct; the life "she" records becomes a blueprint ("script") for living and language functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Reading Zürn, it seems as if representation truly mediates our sense of identity, including the confusion over what is real and what is imaginary. It tricks us into thinking that fictions are real and, at the same time, makes it seem as if this virtual reality would have no real physical impact.

Still, "the body" does not disappear from Zürn's text. Its materiality suggests the possibility of invoking real pain and it becomes the necessary counterpart to an imaginary that threatens to take over. *The Man of Jasmine* is, after all, a tale of disembodiment, whose most desperate moment consists in the protagonist's attempt to physically unite herself with the signs by which she sees herself determined, as in the self-mutilation scene I quoted in the beginning. In fact, there is a connection between language and vision in Zürn that seems to be mediated through the body. According to none other than Michaux (the real-life "Man of Jasmine"), disembodiment and the feeling of being manipulated by greater forces, is an essential element of madness, which is experienced both mentally and physically: "The lunatic . . . says he is beside his body. That his body is elsewhere .

. . . that he has been changed into a doll . . . that he is artificial, that he is fake, that another occupies his body” (134). Clearly, this corresponds to the hallucinations in *The Man of Jasmine*, in which “she” sees herself as another, dancing and performing acrobatics while remaining seated on the bed of her hotel room, and which I will discuss in more detail below. More importantly, it applies to the figure of the Man of Jasmine himself, who is both cause and symptom of the protagonist’s madness: “she” feels physically possessed by him *as if* he were real (for example, she hears his voice and perceives it as having invaded her body), yet he is also a mere “figment of her imagination,” an image invented by herself alone.

Since everything in *The Man of Jasmine* hinges on this omnipotent and godlike alter ego, let me refer back to the beginning of the book, the point at which he comes into being. It begins with a flashback to childhood: “she” is six years old and has a dream in which—like Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*—she steps through the mirror into another world. Said to be “led” by the dream (in German: “es führt sie ein Traum”), the child occupies the position of the dreamer as someone who does not lead but follow or as Lacan puts it: “our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows” (75). Already, this opening prefigures the renunciation of control to the Man of Jasmine, about whom the narrator later says: “It is not she who is responsible for the actions which finally brought her into prison and the mental hospital, but he” (MJ 66). Significantly, the continuation of this initial dream is about the absence of language: “as she picks up the card to read the name on it, she awakens.” It seems as if, on the border between dream and reality, identity exists but is illegible. After awakening, the child is thrust into a nightmarish reality from which she escapes into the arms of her demon:

The impression of this dream is so strong that she gets up in order to push the mirror to one side. She finds the wall and no door. Filled this morning with an inexplicable loneliness, she enters her mother’s room in order to get into her bed and return, if possible, to whence [sic] she came so as to see nothing more. The mountain of tepid flesh which encloses this woman’s impure spirit rolls over on to the horrified child, and she flees for ever from the

mother, the woman, the spider! She is deeply grieved. Then her vision appears to her for the first time: The Man of Jasmine! Boundless consolation! Sighing with relief, she sits down opposite him and studies him. He is paralysed! What good fortune. He will never leave his seat in the garden where the jasmine even blossoms in winter. This man becomes the image of her love. (MJ 25)

Whereas the mother disappears from the book entirely thereafter, the Man of Jasmine comes to the rescue against the violent impact of the body in its most elementary form, a “mountain” of flesh. Sculpture-like, he sits immobile in the supernatural garden of her imagination, and thus promises to protect the little girl from the onslaught of any further physical contact. At this point, he is not dangerous. However, only a few pages later, when she meets him “in the flesh,” he begins to turn into her enemy, the white man. This “real-life” meeting, which takes place in a hotel room in Paris (and is, apparently, modeled after Zürn’s real-life meeting with Michaux) reverses the fantasy into yet another reality and, at the same time, makes her part of the imaginary space, a space by which “she” is absorbed from then on: “The shock of this encounter is so great that she is unable to get over it. From this day on she begins, very very slowly, to lose her reason” (MJ 27). Like the reversal of the lucky number I mentioned in the beginning, the world of *The Man of Jasmine* is such that everything is turned into its opposite. In this destabilized universe, disembodiment seems but a reaction, a way of escaping into the utopian space of hallucinations so as to envision a more happy self. In her first actual hallucination, “she” is carted off into space by her imaginary childhood lover—a scene that is, once again, related to the movies:

Suddenly a curious white aerodrome appears in the night sky before her opened window like a giant photograph. But no! The scene is in motion. It’s like a film projected on the sky. People are crossing the aerodrome and boarding the plane. And suddenly she sees *him* in the foreground, just as she had seen him the first time as a child—but standing erect and embracing her own self, aged six, ‘like when she married him.’ Completely astonished, she observes the two of them as they board the plane, then watches as it ascends into the air and disappears into the sky. (MJ 33)

With the sky swallowing her like an abyss, “he” transports her into the heavenly past of her childhood as if they were in a Hollywood movie. Zürn works with such images but she also shows them to be illusory by way of questioning the medium itself: when Christian Metz compares the medium of film to a mirror, he observes that it “differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although . . . everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body” (45). The experience of this imaginary “body,” which appears to be a reflection of herself, is what attracts her to the hallucinations. Like a drug, the Man of Jasmine enables the protagonist to divide herself into performer and spectator: like the child who has stepped through the looking glass while asleep in bed, “she” performs while sitting, in reality, on the bed—the only difference is that, this time, she is wide awake.

Tragically, while she takes on this imaginary “body,” her real physical self is systematically destroyed. As her body moves in and between the streets, hotels, airports, and mental institutions of Berlin and Paris, her inner life takes place in the virtual space of the hallucinations; the people she encounters—friends, strangers, doctors—remain sketchy in relation to the only figure that counts in her life, the Man of Jasmine. When she is in a straight-jacket and on medication, he withdraws and her body is reduced to a “mound of dead, ugly, foul-smelling flesh during the worst moments of her mental stupefaction—in her total depression” (MJ 119). Like her mother’s body, it is abject, an “other” from what she perceives to be her real self, the flexible, weightless body of her hallucinations. Her real body, on the other hand, turns against her when she is medicated to the point of losing control and, worse, the ability to work:

She is rolled across the tarmac in a wheel chair to the plane for Paris. . . . A long time, filled with injections and medicines, passes until she can walk again, and then her gait is stiff and clumsy—she resembles a robot walking along. When she tries to read she sees the lines converge at an angle and tangle together. The doctor has her draw a simple square. Impossible for her, the four lines do not meet. When she moves her hand she is startled by the motion, as if it were not her own hand and did not belong to her body. (MJ 91)

Paralyzed like the Man of Jasmine at the beginning (as well as Bellmer in real life!), “she” is handicapped by an illness whose narrative is also like a straightjacket, as it consists of a series of reversals and repetitions. The narrator describes the “the law of this illness” by referring to an ongoing pattern of high and low: “hallucinations . . . and afterwards the fall, reality, the realization that it all had been an illusion” (MJ 113), a description that, once again, ominously pre-figures the author’s suicide by “falling.” In this vicious, downwards-spiraling circle, the hallucinations function like an antidote against physical pain, like the Man of Jasmine himself who had rescued her from the pain of separation from the body of her mother. In the moments during which she is able to escape into an imaginary space, her body is capable of performing beauty, as in the scene where she sees herself on an imaginary stage: “she begins watching her own self . . . She feels she has been invited to fulfil the old, hopeless wish of her childhood: to be a dancer. . . She knows: *he* is somewhere in the darkness and will direct her like a dance master directing his pupil” (MJ 95). Willingly, she allows herself to follow his command, as he provides her with outer-body experiences but also introduces her to the interior of her own body:

What she is now “being ordered” to do is not a dance but the relatively short action which constitutes suicide: she is the scorpion which kills itself . . . her feet and legs grow together to form a dangerously long sting like a sharp pointed dagger, then curl slowly upwards in an elegant curve until its point hangs just above the center of her solar plexus. She lowers her eyes to this, her most precious possession, which reveals itself beneath her now transparent skin with all the beauty of its tiny and minuscule branchings which start to glisten like silver under her breath, and which resembles a paradisaical, illuminated landscape which looses itself in its twisting paths, constantly awakening the desire to wander about within it and make completely new discoveries . . . [sic] What cruelty, what devilry to compel her to stab this glory with her own sting. (MJ 98)

In this sado-masochistic scene, “she” seems to return to the paradise from which she had been expelled in the beginning, when she awoke from the dream and found a return to her mother’s womb impossible. However, her own womb—which she

must enter by way of self-destruction—is not dark but “glistening,” a whole new world that opens up in front of her and is ready to be explored. Earlier in the narrative, the narrator had described the solar plexus as “the one part of her body which reacted when she encountered those things that were of importance to her . . . music . . . books . . . art objects, indeed all those things which were necessary for establishing her inner kingdom” (MJ 78). Interestingly, the destruction of what appears to be the seat of art within herself takes place as the joining of two parts of herself. It has the resemblance of sexual intercourse (the “dagger” entering the solar plexus) and thus reflects the duality/reversal that takes place throughout the narrative. A merging between the subject and the visual field, this imaginary intimacy with her own physical self leads to death (including darkness—the absence of representation) so that vision turns, once again, against the subject. The scene’s utopian content, in turn, is neutralized and even mocked by the frame narrative, which tells us that her “death” has been merely imaginary: the morning after, “she” wakes up to celebrate her madness by shouting out of the window: “someone has gone mad with joy at the superhuman abilities she has discovered this night!” (MJ 100).

In any case, the euphoria induced by the hallucinations is dampened by the understanding that they are not real. Given that the delusional visions of the virtual body reduce the protagonist to a passive consumer (like an addict), her sense of self seems heightened by her ability to work: “she” produces anagrams. Quoted throughout the narrative (and published by Zürn under separate cover), the anagrams are defined as “words and sentences which are created by re-arranging the letters in a word or sentence. One may only use the letters which are available, and not draw on any others” (MJ 35). A form of automatic writing, in which the composer acts like a medium, they take on an oracular function in relation to the protagonist’s personal history. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, anagrams reveal “a language underneath language,” a seemingly deeper truth that appears when translating hitherto secret connections into a new surface. Combining prohibition with chance, the activity of composing ana-

grams is like an alchemy of words, a way of uncovering a mystical meaning that seems, paradoxically, tailored exactly to the composing subject. It demands a great deal of mental discipline and concentration because one has to be focused on the limited possibilities of combining the letters at the same time that one must remain susceptible to inspiration regarding the possibilities to choose from—an initial line consisting of only 16 letters allows for 871,781,312,000 possible permutations in a computer calculation.¹⁷

The activity of composing anagrams is described by the narrator as a “dangerous fever” (MJ 118) from which the protagonist begins to physically suffer. More than the hallucinations, it is the real source of her illness. While both the anagrams and the hallucinations are considered to be symptoms of her madness, the anagrams do not divide the subject into spectator and performer but rather turn her into an “author,” a position that seems self-affirming but is self-destructive in the context of *The Man of Jasmine*, as I have shown above. The anagrams—more than the writing of prose—undermine “authority” by reducing the possibilities of constructing meaning.¹⁸

The initial loss of reason (triggered by the shock of meeting the Man of Jasmine in the flesh) is marked by the obsession with numbers I alluded to in the beginning. This obsession alters the protagonist’s literary production: “She engrosses herself suddenly in a manuscript ‘in honor of the number nine’ with the aim of . . . forgetting reality” (MJ 27). Numbers are abstract and stable signifiers—they mean what they say—but “she” turns them into visual images, for example by reading the number nine as the figure of “a person standing erect, his gaze turned to the left.”

While “she” becomes obsessed with numbers, she produces a manuscript, *The House of Illnesses* (Zürn was to publish a manuscript by this title separately), in which the body is fragmented into parts that make up the rooms of a hospital; the cabinet of the solar plexuses; the room of eyes; the hall of bellies; the bosom room; the chambers of hands; the vaults of the head; and the suite of the hearts. Accompanied by drawings that illustrate these rooms, this earlier text features scenes about the fragmentation and multiplication of the body along with the destruction of the

gaze (eyes). Prefiguring the hallucinations, it describes the desire to escape into an imaginary field of vision:

“Look me in the eye,” Doctor Mortimer said. But my eyes wandered sideways to the left and farther to the left, until they froze. As if pulled by strings, my sight took off into the distance, into the left distance and above the little tree across the horizon and a little farther and beyond, as far as into the white sky where my sight came to a halt. “You should try to look me in the eye,” Doctor Mortimer said. Only with effort was I able to retrieve my distant sight—it moved so slowly—until I arrived again before Doctor Mortimer’s eyes. But there, my eyes closed from exhaustion. Doctor Mortimer lifted my eyelids, first one, then the other. “Bull’s eye,” he said sadly but with admiration, ‘the two hearts in your eyes have blown right through your chest. Bull’s eye.’¹⁹

Defying the authority of the doctor, the perceiving subject (*I/eye*) transgresses into the seductive space of unreality at the expense of her physical integrity. Wandering, the eyes come to inhabit the landscape by which they have been attracted, as in the above scorpion-hallucination, where body and vision meet similarly, in conjunction with death (the narrative here continues with the doctor’s advice to find the shooter and recover the eye-hearts).

What is significant about this text is that it describes disembodiment in terms of bodily fragmentation: rather than seeing herself as a complete other, the subject is in danger of losing part of her body. This body part, in turn, has to be “re-inscribed” into the text. Since the production of this manuscript is specifically related to the obsession with numbers, there appears to be a link between the obsession with words—the anagrams—and the field of vision, whose perception depends on a fragmented physical state. There appears to be a resemblance between the act of seeing/perceiving and the act of interpretation/reading. This connection is already apparent from the first crisis in the cinema, where a vision turns into a (phallus) symbol and then into a weapon; as well as from the way in which the visual signifier of the number nine, (the “ person standing erect, his gaze turned to the left”) is reversed and, thereby, deprived of its imaginary content.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first anagram that appears in *The Man of Jasmine* suggest the violence of self-blinding:

YE WOULD HAVE PLUCKED OUT YOUR OWN EYES
 The dictum of your day: hard.
 Of your eyes: being.
 Your skin is song—your advice: understand.
 Your house is masked. Your victories close.
 Your deed: a resting place united with a coffin.²⁰

Taken from a line in the Bible (Galatians 4, verse 15), this anagram pays homage to another powerful spiritual text, which it evokes by way of anaphora and mode of address. Eyes are equated with “being” and the final reference to death marks the complete absence of representation (i.e., “blindness”). At its center, however, the anagram also contains a reference to the connection between “skin” and poetic language (“song”) so that it is, perhaps, here where the relationship between writing and the body becomes apparent. While this may seem far-fetched, the only way of interpreting the anagrams is by reading them literally, since they will always reflect only that which is already present.

If one considers Bellmer’s definition of anagrams (“the sentence too resembles a body which seems to invite us to decompose it, so that an infinite chain of anagrams may re-compose the truth it contains”) one is struck by the limitations of this enterprise: letters are recycled to depict nothing new, but rather a mere contortion of a “truth” already present. The meaning of the anagrams resides, in fact, in their mode of production. Like the *mise-en-abyme* of *Katrin*, the text refers back to itself *ad infinitum* so that no image can be contained. And, like the drawing the protagonist is said to produce in one of the mental hospitals, entitled “Rencontre avec Monsieur M (Ma Mort),” the text always points beyond its surface, describing its “content” only in terms of its process. Asked by a psychiatrist why she covered “the entire surface of the paper right to the edges? On the others you’ve left the space around the motif white,” the protagonist responds: “simply because I couldn’t stop working on this drawing, or didn’t want to, for I experienced endless pleasure while working on it. I wanted the drawing to continue beyond the edge of the paper—

on to infinity" (MJ 103). Naturally, we cannot even begin to guess what this drawing may actually depict.

If identity can be constructed through language, as much of current discourse seems to suggest, Zürn's writing on the body dramatizes the implications of such a proposition. Like the scorpion's dagger, the nail file is lowered into the surface of the body as if to arrest the flow of signification and fulfil the desire to merge with the symbol. As a result, there is no room left for further interpretations. Everything seems reduced to a single digit. What remains is a gothic tale of the body's irreality: "the six is marked in blood on her hand. She had felt no pain." Language turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as when an anagram ends with the question: "is it a madwoman?" and the narrator comments that "obviously she had related it to herself" (MJ 36). In Zürn, it seems as if writing is, somehow, always prior. Looking at her drawings, many of which depict fantastic creatures tattooed from head to toe with lines of abstract geometric patterns, it seems that the "body" of this text *is* the technology of writing—that writing is, somehow, really all that is left.²¹

Notes

1 See Weigel, 211. Following Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography, Zürn's writing is not autobiographical because author, narrator, and protagonist are not identical.

2 All biographical information on Zürn is contained in the extensive annotations of Brinkmann & Bose's eight-volume edition of Zürn's collected works (see *Gesamtausgabe*).

3 For information on Zürn's work for the UFA, see *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 4.3, 396-98. Zürn herself claimed that part of her madness was due to the shock of having learned about the Holocaust after the war. In texts such as "Der Aufenthalt im Maison Blanche," *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 5, written shortly before her suicide, she compares her experiences in the asylum with those of the victims of concentration camps. Margret Eifler notes that such passages can hardly be read as being based on serious political reflection on the part of Zürn, who was

basically silent about her life during the 1930s and '40s. Rather than representing collective feelings of guilt, Eifler suggests, these passages are to be read as mere personal visions of anxiety.

4 Unika was the name of Ruth Zürn's aunt.

5 Bellmer's disturbingly misogynist dolls have been interpreted as a critique of fascism, for example by Therese Lichtenstein, who argues that they should be understood in opposition to the National Socialist vision of the "healthy" Aryan body. Feminists like Sue Taylor, on the other hand, have drawn attention to the fact that "it is difficult . . . to accept the pitiful dolls . . . as anything *but* embodiments of female passivity and victimization" (5). Or, as Susan Suleiman has asked: 'How are we to distinguish Bellmer's sadism from Nazi sadism, both of them directed against the 'feminine'?' (135).

6 Scholl lists Bellmer's notoriously "difficult" character among possible reasons for Zürn's breakdowns, including: the war and guilt over the Holocaust; three botched abortions and guilt over the loss of custody for her children; the financial dependence on Bellmer; the impossibility of a positive relationship to her mother (60).

7 For a discussion of the uncanny connection between *Dark Spring* and Zürn's actual suicide, see my translator's introduction.

8 See the photograph in *Gesamtausgabe*, 5:270.

9 See Chevrier, 91. Bellmer's doll was inspired by Olympia, the female automaton in Jaques Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Bellmer also produced illustrations for Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay "On Marionette Theater."

10 This film also deals with the confusion between life and art: Barrault, himself a mime in real life, acts the part of a mime whose stage character spills over into his real life.

11 Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (my translation; 23-24).

12 See page 59: "But I *am* mad. . . . I think I'm schizophrenic." Initially, Zürn was diagnosed as schizophrenic but this was later retracted as a misdiagnosis. Most likely, she suffered from manic depression. For information about her mental condition, see the hospital files from Wittenau and Neuilly contained in vol. 4.3 of *Gesamtausgabe*, as well as the afterword to *Der Mann im Jasmin* by Zürn's psychiatrist, Jean-François Rabain.

13 Ullstein decided to forego the common courtesy of correcting minor spelling mistakes in the manuscript. Instead, it drew attention to Zürn's supposedly disturbed state of mind at the time she was writing by marking her mistakes with asterisks. As part of the cheap paperback series "Neue Frau" (New Woman), the book was edited and marketed as the unfortunate case history of a victimized mental patient, not as the Surrealist work of art as which it had been received in France, where it was originally published. As a result, Zürn's text was read in Germany as a symptom, not a deliberate impersonation, of mental illness.

14 See Franziska Schneider's M.A. Thesis. Another version of this paradigm is Katherine Conley's observation that "Zürn idealizes her Jasmine Man the way Najda idealized Breton" (108). Weigel, on the other hand, argues that Zürn reverses the gender relations between the poet and his muse, e.g. Petrarch/Laura.

15 The connection between madness and art goes back to Romanticism and Expressionism, and continues into the 1970s. Silvia Volckmann cites the case of Vienna Action performance artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, who performed a series of self-mutilations on stage, then killed himself in 1969 in the name of art (262). Also see the article by Philip Ursprung.

16 Bellmer is generally called "her friend" but his name does appear as indicated in Zürn's original manuscript.

17 This information is provided by Scholl (261).

18 For a discussion of the relationship between Zürn's madness and the production of anagrams, see the essay by Carola Hilmes, which suggests that the composition of anagrams may have contributed to Zürn's paranoia.

19 From *Das Haus der Krankheiten* (my translation, 152).

20 My translation. Orig.: IHR HAETTET EURE AUGEN AUSGERISSEN: Euer Tag heisst: hart. / Eure Augen: sein. / Eure Haut ist Gesang—euer Rat: seh' ein. / Euer Haus ist getarnt. Eure Siege nah. / Eure Tat: ein sarg-geeintes Ruhehaus.

21 See the catalogue to the 1998/1999 exhibition in Berlin, Bochum, and Bremen, depicting over 200 of Zürn's drawings.

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