
Aestheticising Transnationalised Hair: Envisaging Difference in the Sculptures of Helen Pynor

In some lights and from certain angles the hairs that hang my work become visible¹

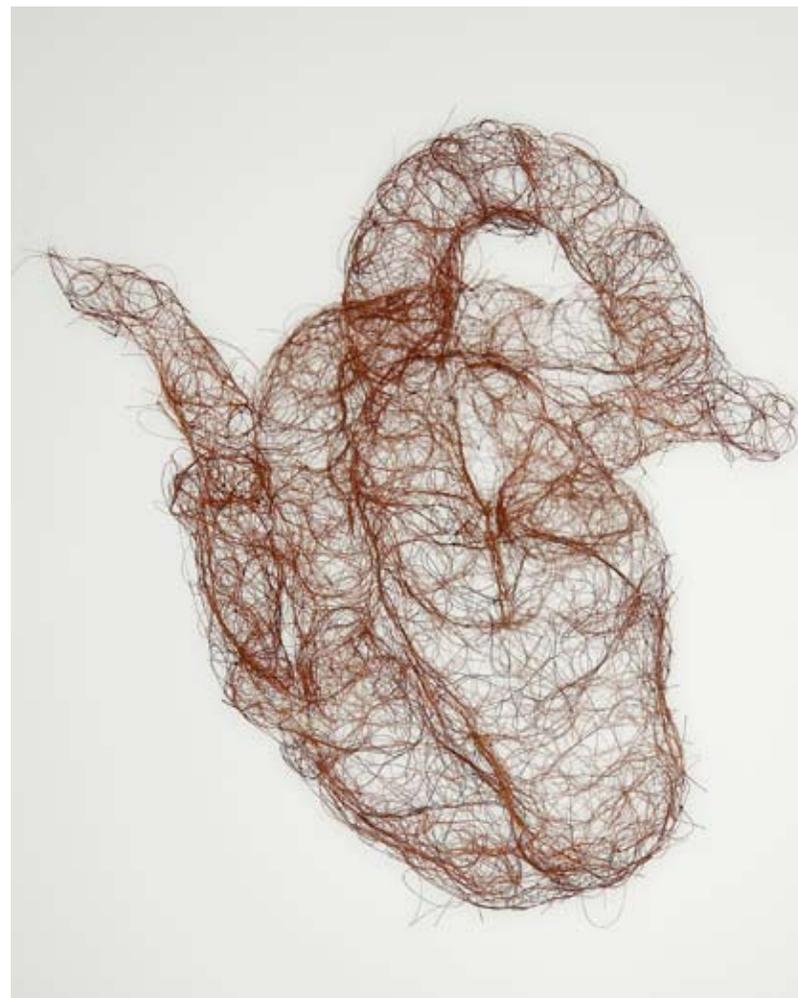
Four years ago, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. The medical treatment she received resulted in the loss of her thick auburn hair, a dispossession that violently affected how she perceived her 'new' body. When my mother first exposed herself to me without her wig on, she looked ashamed; she clearly resented her altered appearance. Her wig, woven from human hair (most likely from the 'Third World'), made it easier for her to feel 'complete'. At the same time, however, she felt angry at having to hide beneath its synthetic, sweaty netting in order to appear whole to a world engrossed in the fantasy of coherent personhood.

My mother's wig became a being unto itself as it moved from the bureau drawer to her head, from her bald self-reproach to her bewigged shame. During a recent visit home, I re-examined it. Pulling the wig from the guts of the closet, I ran its soft strands through my fingers and noticed its split ends. Although a commodity, it still seemed to be very much a part of the body, particularly of the 'donor' bodies vital to its production. Exploring hair-turned-raw-product is itself vital to revealing the tenuous boundaries between consumer and producer. Indeed, it makes an important contribution to debates focused on Western understandings of beauty and femininity. In other words, how might the West's investment in popular aesthetics facili-

tate the camouflaging of foreign bodies, namely, transnationalised hair, and how might this process of concealment be resisted?

While I am troubled by hair as part of a global trade, I am intrigued by it as a formal aesthetic object, for example, as material in the 'knitted sculptures' of prolific Australian artist Helen Pynor. What is it that provokes my unease at hair used for commercial purposes but not so at its inclusion in art? What, if anything, changes the ethics of consuming transnationalised hair?

In her April 2006 exhibition, *Breathing Shadows*, Pynor articulated hair's ambiguity by using strands to create bodied shapes and garments—a pair of hands, a man's shirt, two long-coated silhouettes—simultaneously object and subject, constructed and natural, calcified and fluid. One piece in this series of works, entitled *Exhale* (2005), renders hair's composite qualities unmistakable as the sculpture's two forms, hung from wire coat hangers, as insubstantial as the 'bodies' to which they are fastened, seem to be at once present and absent, embodied and disembodied. Spectre-like, the coats appear to vaporise before the viewer. They are knitted from black and auburn tresses that become a lush silvery grey at the base of their silhouettes, thus resembling what one Sydney-based gallery describes as 'the momentary out-breath of a life no longer here'. The



Helen Pynor, *Untitled (heart lungs)* (detail) 2007, knitted human hair, detail 100 x 95 x 50mm.
Courtesy private collection, Sydney. Copyright the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery. Photo: Danny Kildare

ghostly qualities of the work echo hair's own ambiguous materiality: a series of dead, keratinised cells, hair grows from beneath the scalp's surface, which teems with blood vessels and bacterial life. Its inert biology is always already animated as it splits and sheds. At once in and of the skin, extending and striating bodily space by drawing the subject beyond the dermis while rooting her within it, hair is the flesh's last claim to life as it eclipses death and decay.

Ironically, despite its living-dead status, hair is valorised for its alleged vitality: in medical discussions it is the gauge of a healthy body; in commodity culture, it is informed by Western ideologies of mainstream beauty—it is a voluminous display of fecund 'femininity'. And yet, hair's material lifelessness also confers upon it what, in their 2006 book *Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism*, Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell call 'ontological neutrality'. Framed as waste, hair, for many, remains ontologically un-loaded, dislocated and dislocateable. It does not beat, bruise or bleed and so seems un-vital and, therefore, to possess a dominant objecthood; this makes the prospect of its commodification more easily justified. Unlike a heart donated for transplantation or oocytes for insemination, a hair 'transplanted' (cultured either at the root via *follicular neogenesis*—a process that takes hair cells from the scalp to be multiplied in a laboratory for the prospect of transplantation—or, as extensions, bonded to existing strands) does not provoke moral controversy: it is a stranger's detritus, an

inoffensive bodily material with which to adorn the self.

Hair has become the object/subject of a prosperous trade. The unmanufactured good is amassed from the scalps of primarily 'Third World' producers and turned into wigs and hair extensions for a largely First World clientele. For the most part, the trade's tresses are culled from China and India. The most prized locks, however, come from Russia. Although Chinese hair represents the most abundantly traded strands in the global free market, it is the least valued due to its 'thick, rigid' texture and shape. Russian hair is the trade's most valued product because it comes from 'European' bodies, thus, according to trade rhetoric, it is more easily adopted into the anatomy of a primarily 'European' clientele, which is generally assumed to be homogenously Caucasian.

The sale of hair gives it a second chance at life as, reanimated, it circulates in the global marketplace as a commodity that breathes strength and 'body' into the heads of its Western consumers. Continuity and coherence have become the catch cries of the hair trade's principal players. One California-based extensions company promises to provide its customers with hair additions that 'look so real you'll think they grow out of your own head!' Another multinational assures its patrons a seamless look via claims to ethnic assimilation and biological likeness. The Indian hair it uses for its extensions is deemed most genetically 'Caucasian-like' and is, therefore, presented as inconspicuous matter

to consume, as in between what we can and cannot see, at once culturally perceptible and not culturally perceptible enough. Likely as an effect of this kind of marketing, the trade's patrons remain greatly ignorant of socio-economic differences between themselves and the trade's providers—even if they do not consciously deny that their bought hair is not their own.

The hair that Pynor uses to create her sculptures is also trade-derived; it comes predominantly from Spain. She is comfortable both buying and working with transnationalised hair as long as it is processed along the lines of a fair trade (although she also knows that the notion of a 'fair trade' is one imbued with geopolitical inequalities). One of her artworks, *Untitled (brain heart gut)* (2007), is knitted from foreign hair. It is a life-size representation of a brain, heart and alimentary canal, made from a fusing of blonde and red coils. The artwork casts a strong and clear shadow of its innards on the white wall behind it. Up close, rogue hairs spiral away from the structure; they are unrestrainable and make plain, even if in sporadic wisps, the follicular medium of the work. Although crafted from hair's brittle translucence, the sculpture's guts appear to be replete, to be digesting. The knitted organs seem to float freely, to sustain themselves as they turn both limbs and skeleton defunct. And yet, as the artist explains, in certain conditions, illuminated, the hairs that suspend the piece become distinguishable. As such, the strands constituting and carrying the artwork both

corroborate and complicate structures of First World consumer/Third World producer dependence. At times their supportive role is indiscernible, easily camouflaged, at other times it cannot be concealed—it symbolically resists being camouflaged, it refuses being turned moot. The uncertain visibility of the threads might also reflect the precarious relationship between the West and the rest, from particular feminist politics to the politics of hair.

Not only do Pynor's creations manifest the explicit abjectness of hair—its repulsive beauty, its living-dead undecideability—but they can also be read as re-possessing a necessary spectrality. Like hair talismans—objects comprising severed locks, which invoke the lost bodies from which they are taken—the hairs that, at times, visibly hang Pynor's sculptures, tell of cultural memorialising. They gesture to the recollecting of an abidingly traceable flesh, which, like hair's own strands of DNA, surrenders secrets. The tresses that escape their knitted bodies also invoke a sense of being drawn, or perhaps of drawing themselves away, into a kind of otherness. As with (in)sight into the splitting ends of my mother's wig, it is in the recognition of a relationship to absent bodies, however distant, however different, in which I would argue the ethics of consumption shift.

Even though Pynor uses hair to represent various bodily forms, and to create new ones, the trade's supposedly forgotten bodies are not wholly renounced. For instance, the shadows



that Pynor's knitted sculptures cast should not necessarily be thought of as by-products of the works, but as a significant part of their meaning. Like the shadow, albeit ephemeral and changing, hair always reprises (absent) presence. Put differently, *Exhale* and *Untitled (brain heart gut)* do not offer up aesthetic flawlessness, in contrast to the hair trade's false promise of bodily coherence and its ethos of self-love: the otherness of foreign hair admirable for its coalescence within the drapery of one's own cut and colour. Investing in camouflaging foreign bodies conceals complicity at engaging with an arguably unethical business in bought hair—the putatively prettier side of a more sinister trade in human organs, from kidneys to keratin. In contrast, Pynor's supportive strands can be interpreted as implicitly turning invisible donor bodies (and their labour) visible, not flattening away but teasing out the ethics of recognising difference.

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- 1 Helen Pynor paraphrased in Esther R. Berry and Helen Pynor (2007) '(Mis)Translations', an unpublished dialogue.