

“Be My Plasticity for Me”. Gloopiness in Nicole Eisenman’s Phantom Body

Michelle Ussher

Artist and writer decolonising symbolic representations of the feminine to re-contextualise marginalised creative ways of being. She completed a Masters of Aesthetics and Art Theory, supervised by Catherine Malabou, at CRMEP, Kingston University and teaches at Central Saint Martins, West Dean College and Royal College of Art.

michelleussher@gmail.com

David Stent

Artist, writer, and performer concerned with the role of writing in art practice, particularly in association with artists’ publications and the use of theory and philosophy in contemporary art. He holds a PhD in Fine Art from the University of Reading and is Subject Leader in Fine Art at West Dean College (Edward James Foundation).

david.stent@westdean.ac.uk

In the spirit of Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler’s co-authored essay, *You Be My Body for Me. Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, this speculative and experimental text examines Malabou’s concept of plasticity through the work of American artist Nicole Eisenman. Expanding on Malabou and Butler’s notion of the body as a product and agent of transformation, the paper initiates a dialogue between Eisenman’s artworks and Malabou’s writing on plasticity – particularly regarding the phantom limb. Taking up Malabou’s call to invent plasticity, the authors adapt co-authoring and create a collaborative writing style that merges visual and philosophical analysis. Enacting plasticity’s dynamic exchanges of “substitution”, “delegation”, “passing” and “becoming”, they emphasise the slipperiness in Malabou’s plasticity and the gloopiness in Eisenman’s work. Beginning with a glossary of these terms supports visualising the mirroring of plasticity and gloopiness, demonstrated through the visual analysis of Eisenman’s installation *Maker’s Muck* (2022) as the introduction. The latent ouroboros in this work – of *muck making muck* – mirrors plasticity’s *form forming itself* and introduces the structural ouroboros of this paper, which asks: is Malabou’s plasticity gloopy? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness plastic? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness queer? It concludes with a final question: can we call Malabou’s plasticity queer?

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Glossary

– Gloop

The term gloop used in this paper means viscous materiality that resists fluidity and solidness, often evoking the sticky haptic qualities of touch. [1] Adding the suffix “-iness” (as in gloopiness) denotes embodying these qualities. Although uncommon in academic discourse, gloopiness

[1] *Gloop* as a noun informally describing any messy sticky fluid or substance is sourced from: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/gloop>

effectively describes entangled experiences or phenomena that resist definition – whether affective, intellectual or ethical. In this philosophical context, gloopiness is a metaphor for concepts and experiences that elude precise categorisation.

– Plasticity

Derived from the Greek *plastos* (“moulded”), Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity is dynamic, referring to the capacity for change, adaptation and self-formation, particularly about the brain and identity. Plasticity denotes the ability to shape and be shaped—for instance, the co-presence of active and passive transformations from external and internal forces. Plasticity thus reveals an ontological tension

between what is mouldable and what remains un-moulded – between the potential for transformation and irreversible, sometimes traumatic, modifications of being. As an operation of radical transformation, destructive plasticity takes on a gloopiness quality owing to the rupture of normative clarity and the ambiguity of recovery – a process of reshaping into a new, unfamiliar form that is often non-linear and slippery.

– Slipperiness

Gloopiness symbolises the inherent slipperiness of plasticity’s transformation, a dynamic condition never fully reducible to categorisation. Just as gloopiness represents the materiality of experience that resists categorisation, plasticity’s slipperiness represents subjectivity’s evasiveness of definition: what it means to have an identity amidst a continuous process of becoming. Slipperiness is an apt metaphor for plasticity’s

destabilisation of patriarchal concepts of traditional philosophy like trace and difference (Malabou 2011a). Plasticity and slipperiness relate to queerness, in the way queer embodies a multiplicity as a noun and verb – both an identity and a movement – resisting heteropatriarchal categorisation while embodying the abjection of homoerotic sexuality within such discourse (Foucault 1978).

– Nicole Eisenman

American artist Nicole Eisenman employs inventive bodily substitution and delegation techniques in her oil paintings and sculptures, destabilising traditional heteropatriarchal representation in art and philosophy. By utilising traditional and diverse materials such as expanding foam, motor oil, resin, plaster, and found objects, Eisenman’s work activates the materiality of gloopiness to reinterpret the body in visual and conceptual

ways. Connecting the gloopiness in Eisenman’s work to the slipperiness in Malabou’s plasticity, Eisenman’s work reveals the ambiguous nature of plasticity’s transformation and expands the representation of its dynamic process in artistic and philosophical contexts.

Introduction

Eisenman's 2022 installation *Maker's Muck* [FIG. 1] serves as a foundation for this experimental analysis of Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity, illustrating *form forming itself* through the process of *Muck making Muck*. Considering Malabou once suggested that she would have been a sculptor given the choice, it is fun to imagine her as the artist in Eisenman's installation, engaged in a philosophical method: «everything that counts is related to this process of formation, sculpting» (Malabou 2022a, 319). While Malabou identifies the arts as plasticity's «native land» (2005, 8) Eisenman's potter's touch diverges from Malabou's; Malabou evades touching plasticity's surface, which this paper examines more closely. First, however, we must look at how *Maker's Muck* exemplifies Malabou's plasticity to see what Malabou's touch is missing. *Maker's Muck* depicts an artist as a potter at their wheel with bulbous hands rotating over a perpetually unformed lump. The lump shares the same material qualities as the potter, indicating the exchange embodies the materiality. The surrounding unfinished works also share this materiality, which expands and forms the studio environment. The expansion of materiality across all the forms emphasises the materiality's gloopiness, suggesting that gloopiness makes the materials expansion possible. Significantly, the gloopiness projected as the surface materiality of *Muck* is plural and shared across the potter, objects, and environment, suggesting that the gloopiness is exchanged between them and might make the exchanges possible. By presenting the entities with the same materiality, Eisenman

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[FIG. 1] *Maker's Muck*, 2022 (detail).
Mixed media, 262,3 × 304,8 × 394,3 cm.
Photo: Thomas Barratt
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and Hauser & Wirth



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reveals that the exchanges themselves are gloopy and create the materiality they are making. Operating outside Malabou's philosophy, *Maker's Muck* illuminates the bodily nature of exchanges and the ambiguous nature of materiality transforming and becoming a new form – the artwork. *Maker's Muck* illustrates plasticity's giving and receiving of form as a gloopy materiality exchanged during the potter's hands interpreting and the manifestation of interpretation.

Visually analysing *Maker's Muck* presents how plasticity's surface, which Malabou describes as the «contact point» (2016, 58), can be analysed as the site of transformation. Similarly, in *Maker's Muck*, the contact point between the potter's hands and the sculpted mass is the point of exchange for artistic transformation. While in *The Ontology of the Accident. An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* Malabou determines destructive plasticity's psychic and bodily transformations as never disrupting identity but «fixing it» (2012a, 1), creative plasticity's transformations are less clear. *Maker's Muck* exemplifies the tactility of creative plasticity's psychic and bodily transformations, emphasising the unfixed mode of becoming through the continuous rotation of the wheel that noisily grinds the contact between the bulbous hands and creviced grey mass. The lack of analysis on the tactility and viscosity of plasticity's surface is intriguing, especially given its dynamic, transformative nature. Tracing the term *surface* through Malabou's work reveals it is haptically numb, except during destructive plasticity's explosions and accidents. A perceptive surface is found in both Malabou's *The New Wounded. From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2012b, 43) and Judith Butler's *Melancholy Gender* (1995, 165), which similarly recall Freud's *The Ego and the Id* to emphasise the bodily-ness of the ego as being a «projection of a surface» rather than a «surface entity» (2000, 3960). In the spirit of Freud's bodily ego as a projection of a surface, this paper presents the intersection of Malabou's plasticity and the gloopiness in Eisenman's work through a projected ouroboros. Like plasticity's *form forming itself* and *Maker's Muck making Muck*, the paper creates a circular method to ask: is Malabou's plasticity gloopy? Is Eisenman's gloopiness plastic? Is Eisenman's gloopiness queer? Can we call Malabou's plasticity queer? The terms *projection* and *project*, not exclusive to psychoanalysis, also extend to the visual arts as a process of illuminating images and transforming concepts into artworks. The paper's first projection examines Malabou's concept of plasticity particular to phantom limbs, revealing its inherent slippery surface akin to Eisenman's gloopiness. Secondly, Eisenman's bodily representation of gloopiness is compared to phantom surfaces, revealing her methodology as plastic. Within the context of Eisenman's work being «decidedly queer» (Godfrey 2023, 21), the third projection examines queerness as necessarily gloopy, before connecting Malabou's idea of innate plasticity to the concept of gloopiness and questioning whether Malabou's plasticity can be considered queer.

Is Malabou's Plasticity Gloopy?

— Malabou's missing tactile surface

In *Before Tomorrow, Epigenesis and Rationality*, Malabou urges us to «remain on the surface», not superficially but «between the ground and underground», and we shall (2016, 58). This concept of surface between ground and underground assumes a thickness, but Malabou's multifaceted surface diverges from a haptic haecceity. In Malabou's works, the surface appears like a synaptic constellation. In *Changing Difference. The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* Malabou posits surface as an event that conceals or reveals a trace (2011a, 47). In *The Ontology of the Accident*, this event is the asyndeton, which dents the surface (2012a, 61). In *The Heidegger Change. On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, a surface is clung to after boredom arises, and its descent signals that a transformation has changed the surface (2011b, 258). A visible surface obscures invisible dynamite in *The Ontology of the Accident* (2012a, 1) and *Plasticity. The Promise of Explosion*; the visibility of this surface is obscured by its dynamite, as the surface, which is now epigenesis, is written about only once (2022a, 296). The most references to surface are in *Before Tomorrow*, owing to its proximity to Kant's deduction of transcendence where the «surface structure» is found constituting the «transcendental itself as an object of experience» (2016, 272). This object of experience for Malabou is plasticity's tendency toward transformation as Malabou does not believe in transcendence similarly to how she does not believe in the absence of form.

Tracing the absence of plasticity's surface emphasises its slipperiness as it evades being touched and is grasped by its very absence. Preoccupied with forms that embody transformation without a trace, such as the salamander, trauma sufferers, people living with dementia and Alzheimer's, and epigenesis, Malabou distinguishes them by their characteristic strangeness. [2] Malabou's strange evasion of inscription and tactility is examined through James Martell's analysis, *Malabouian Plasticity Beyond Surfaces*. Martell reductively misreads Malabou's deliberate conflation of «residuality» and «rest», which erases the distinction between a surface inscription and the inscription itself. Martell claims this erasure allows Malabou to ignore any investigation of surfaces that support traces, but Malabou is performing a slippery exchange here that invests in the disinvestment of the trace (Martell 2021, 101). Martell's own translation of Malabou is helpful: «By residuality, we must understand simultaneously *that which remains*—the rest—and that in which *we remain enclosed*» (2021, 101). It orientates towards Malabou's withdrawal into indifference in *The Retreat of the Metaphor* (Malabou 2014), where she explores a form of withdrawal as a contemporary form of retreat into «indifference». Malabou signals an exclusionary trace through an inclusionary desire; «nobody reads our books, nobody listens to us, we will remain in the shade of oblivion» (2014, 41). Malabou argues that our answer to the world's indifference towards us is indifference to ourselves – which she distinguishes as «strange» (2014, 41). Analysing Eisenman's work will explore this strangeness further. Of

[2] *Strange* is referred to significantly in *The Ontology of the Accident*, particularly 2-21 and 50-53. It is also mentioned in *The Retreat of Metaphor*, 36, 38 and 41.

importance here is Malabou’s attempts to invest in erasure through disinvestment of trace, mimicking a phantom limb.

— Phantom limbs

Malabou’s concept of phantom substitution highlights the slippery nature of plasticity’s exchanges. It is precisely why she defines the act of exchange as playing «slippery eels with bodies to pass among them» (2011a, 134-135). Malabou’s analysis of phantom limbs examines what is mouldable as phenomenally present and physically absent, suggesting that transformations can produce sensations beyond normalcy while resisting the clarity that normalcy demands of them. In the essay *Phantom Limbs and Plasticity. Merleau-Ponty and Current Neurobiology*, Malabou explores the phantom limb phenomenon as a neural pathology (2022a, 297-307). Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the phantom limb is a disavowal of a patient’s mutilation (Merleau-Ponty 2012), Malabou determines that the refusal of the deficiency enables the body to «maintain its integrity through negation» (2022a, 299). Continuing to explore the missing part that sustains the wholeness of the body leads Malabou to claim that plasticity is innate and «subjective identity is erasable and replaceable from the start» (2022a, 307). To reach the concept of innate plasticity by appealing to neurologists Shaun Gallagher and V. S. Ramachandran, Malabou conjures a phantom of a phantom (2022a, 306). Malabou achieves this by highlighting the compensatory nature of phantom limbs and questioning «What is compensation for Merleau-Ponty?», which repairs the loss that «always comes after the originary one» (2022a, 302). Malabou refers to Merleau-Ponty’s perception of the phantom limb as a quasi-presence and merely a replacement, substituting the missing original limb to argue that this compensatory plasticity is non-hierarchical, neither superior nor inferior. Malabou elevates the virtuality of phantoms to the contemporaneity of the creative moment by asking, «What if creation and substitution, originary movement and reorganisation were to become synonymous?» (2022a, 304). Malabou refers to neurological findings by Gallagher and Ramachandran to illustrate the brain’s plasticity, particularly of in-utero aplasia (the condition of being born without organs or tissues). Gallagher’s findings on the neural possibility of reshaping in-utero prompts Malabou’s assertion of prenatal plasticity (Ramachandran & Blakeslee 1998, 29-33, qtd. in Malabou 2022a, 305). Malabou proclaims that «phantom limbs are not phantoms of a lost limb, but phantoms of a phantom, phantoms of a compensation» (2022a, 304), which posits plasticity as an innate possibility, albeit a slippery one.

Supposing that plasticity is an innate possibility suggests that the slipperiness that makes in-utero phantom exchange possible would also be innate. Malabou further claims, citing Ramachandran, that «your own body is a phantom, one that your brain has temporarily constructed purely for convenience» (2022a, 305). This notion of convenience implies that bodies – phantom or real – can be purposefully exchanged based on their environment. While Malabou does not directly refer to Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality. The Finding of An Object*, the bodily substitution of phantom replacement in *Phantom Limbs and Plasticity* aligns

with Freud's notion of bodily substitution. When Freud explains that the infant forms a «total idea of the person» to whom the nourishing «object-breast» belongs, he claims it occurs through the loss of the «object-breast», which prompts a bodily substitution of satisfaction from the thumb (2000, 1535). This process of bodily substitution highlights how negation can prompt bodily replacement, similar to how a body maintains its integrity through a phantom limb. Freud's concept of the object-breast as an original body not belonging to the infant's body supports Malabou's idea of an originary body as a phantom (Malabou 2022a). The loss of this original phantom leading to a compensatory substitute supports Malabou's idea of a phantom substituting a phantom. Connecting Malabou's concept of phantom substitution to Freud's *The Finding of an Object* is helpful to our argument as it draws attention to the exchange of nourishment for satisfaction, where Freud believes sexuality is formed (Freud 2000, 2555). An analysis of Eisenman's queer representations will explore this exchange later.

Before we shift to Eisenman's gloopy surface, we should notice that a particularly slippery concept of Malabou's plasticity, relevant to Eisenman's bodily substitution and delegation technique, appears in *Changing Difference*. Malabou describes an «ontic-ontological exchange» (2011a, 36-39) where different modes of «Being and being» exchange with one another, which enacts a passing of identity «inscribed at the heart of gender» (40). Malabou's concept reflects a paradox by blending the ontic (the woman) and the ontological (the feminine). Malabou evades the confessional demand defining gender – as if queer. Strengthening this non-binary position Malabou claims: «The transvestitism of Being as the being and the being as Being takes on an entirely different meaning: they point at one another, show one another to each other, lose their identity even as they gain it in this game of the unfamiliar, the strange, the queer» (2011, 38). To illustrate the potential of Malabou's slippery exchange, Eisenman's work is examined to show how representations of painted and sculpted bodies exchange and pass – at once. The variables of presence and phantasmic absence populating Eisenman's bodily representations reflect the dynamic slipperiness of plasticity in Malabou's concept. Eisenman's work illustrates this slipperiness underlying plasticity's schema as the materiality of subjectivity, identity, becoming, and the mutable locus of desire. Rather than depicting bodies with absent limbs, Eisenman activates a gloopiness like Malabou's slippery plasticity that provides the surface for ontological exchanges – that we might call «reciprocal metamorphosis» (36-39). These exchanges allow for a strange otherness to emerge, which offers nuances to Malabou's withdrawal as indifference (Malabou 2014). This analysis highlights the haptic gloopiness in Eisenman's exchanges, which is missing from Malabou's slippery plasticity.

Is Eisenman's gloopiness plastic?

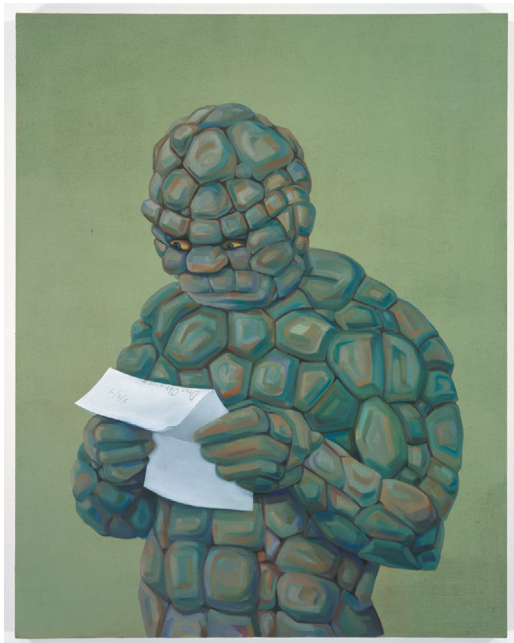
Eisenman's exhibition, *Nicole Eisenman: What Happened* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London (2023-2024), presented the body in different painted and sculpted modalities. All manner of isolated bodily disruptions were represented: sore noses and heat mottle; blood drifting through

flesh or sensation moving a knuckle; skin rubbed raw by straps; stiff muscles and chemical desire; turkey stubble and gooseflesh; smiles straight from the tube. Other bodies appeared, too, as crowds and sheer matter: bodies of water, muck and shit. Across multiple renderings of bodily forms, it was possible to discern a sense of plasticity, ceaseless becoming, and gestures of internal substitution and external delegation, which are countless manifestations of the body not belonging to you anymore. Occurring on different scales – from modulations of flesh to isolated gazes, crowd masses and coagulated interiors – Eisenman's rendering of bodily experience as both belonging to and alien is captured as identifiable and simultaneously at risk (or in the process) of becoming other. The body disrupted and completed by its absence compelled a connection with Malabou's concept of plasticity and the phantom limb. These connections resonate in Eisenman's exhibition titles also, such as *Giant Without a Body* (Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, 2021), presenting a wry overlay of the oversized and the absent, indicating the conceptual importance of the phantasmic body in Eisenman's work. The title's oxymoronic blur highlights her engagement within the representational qualities of bodies concerning visible presence and absence, raising questions as to whether and how the body is there or not, who it belongs to, and how such ambivalence is achieved.

The quality of othering in phantoms is shown to manifest in various identifications embodying unpredictable intensity. The manifestations are activated by an oscillating frequency between what is supposed to be there, what is and what might soon (not) be. These disruptions are performed across singular, plural and collective bodies, either as the physical, viscous accumulation of paint or illusory gloopy surfaces. Eisenman's gloopiness shares the impetus with Malabou's plasticity to become the forms they create, establishing themselves through plastic formation (Malabou 2022a, 315). The plastic sensibilities underpinning Eisenman's gestures include substitution and delegation, as bodily experience is more or less substituted by or delegated to another, representing plastic ruptures within a bodily schema. These bodily substitutions and delegated identifications can evoke the materiality of an entire phantom body, as will be shown. Key to recognising the haptics on offer in Eisenman's work is to distinguish the identity from its identifications. In Eisenman's work, identity does not appear as the actual artist and is instead the condition that remains consistent while it endures multiple identifications (Freud 2000). As in *Maker's Muck*, the entities made of plaster, clay, wood, metal, resin, expanding foam, and found objects are sculpted to appear as objects, figures, and forms, which constitute a distinct gloopy condition.

— Phantom Identity

The sense of being inhabited, surrounded, or even imposed upon by potential bodies that are not one's own is a consistent theme in Eisenman's work. In *From Success to Obscurity* (2004) [FIG. 2], the artist humorously depicts herself as *The Thing* from *The Fantastic Four* comics, illustrating individual disassociation through bodily delegation and identity substitution. The painting's title reflects a transformation prompted by art world trends, while the portrait depicts identity as alien to itself.



[FIG. 2] *From Success to Obscurity*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 129,5 × 101,6 cm.
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

[FIG. 3] *The Drawing Class*, 2011. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 165,1 × 208,2 cm.
Photo: Robert Wedemeyer
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

From Success to Obscurity embodies pathos and humour by substituting one bodily schema for another entirely: thingified as Dr. Jekyll stoically persisting beneath Mr. Hyde. Notably, substituting Eisenman's characteristic gloopy surface, *The Thing* has smoothly painted stone-like skin, redolent of its superpower of endurance. Eisenman's metamorphosis as *The Thing* echoes that in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which echoes Malabou's notion of «identity abandoned» and assuming a «form of flight» (2012a, 11). Malabou claims that when the possibility of fleeing is impossible – where «no transcendence, flight or escape is left» – the only option left is «being other to the self» (10-11). *From Success to Obscurity* humorously captures, through a popular fantasy entertainment figure, how otherness can result from experiencing cycles of othering that require superhuman endurance.

— Phantom Crowds

Eisenman's *The Drawing Class* (2010) [FIG. 3] stages another kind of plural substitution of identity with the gaze. This time, Eisenman's painted partial hands signify her presence and align her gaze with the viewer's. The life model's inchoate body and face exude a powerful gaze back at the viewer, suggesting a powerful exchange. As the hands draw the model, the gaze becomes synonymous with that of the viewer, indicating the two gazes are reciprocated. This sophisticated substitution of gazes places the viewer in a position to shape the model's gaze and identity through *their* gaze. The manoeuvres are intentionally subversive and slippery. Expanding on Eisenman's evocation of substitution and delegation, her series of Biergarten paintings, such as *Brooklyn Biergarten*

(2008) [FIG. 4], stages a plural phantasmagoria through the scene of a crowd. Edvard Munch-like trees are strapped with bulbs; a face is flayed by an iPhone glow; a sea of diverse bodies with George Grosz suits decamped from Wall Street. There is a whiff of a Weimar pandemic, of flash mobs and superhero masks. Bodies and faces intermingle with white outlines of beer glasses floating like phantoms towards distant purple gardens. The scenes reflect gatherings of mutual identification of diverse characters in fantasy celebratory commiserations of the Global Financial Crisis (Godfrey 2023, 19).

Fellow American queer artist Amy Sillman suggests that Eisenman portrays crowds as a paradoxical struggle with Western European painting, a medium of inspiration simultaneously marked by the historic heteropatric exclusion of female and queer artists. [3] Sillman’s description of Eisenman’s crowd scenarios as oscillating between the «simple blur to the stack to the picnic, and on to the riot, the clusterfuck, the cataclysm» (Sillman 2006, 9) emphasises the dynamic paradoxical nature of Eisenman’s references. However, what Sillman calls Eisenman’s «great and terrible workings of crowds and power» also concerns its plastic and ductile nature (9). Implicit in Eisenman’s crowds is the plasticity of individuals who, through material and textural transformations, merge into a collective identity while maintaining individuality. Eisenman’s rendering of a plastic, phantasmic scene of individual othered bodies becoming one crowd is reminiscent of Malabou’s notion of playing «slippery eels with bodies to pass among them» (Malabou 2011a, 134-135). The crowd for Malabou is also a scene of formative plasticity capable of «drastic and enigmatic modification» encompassing the «very possibility of change», whereas solitude or isolation is heavy with the «inability to transform» (Malabou 2022a, 118), illustrating the dynamic potential of collective experience.

[3] Nicole Eisenman identifies as queer with pronouns she, her and they, them.

— Coping as Gloop

Sillman describes the desire in Eisenman’s crowd as something that «oozes from gutters, clings like filth or flows like lava» (Sillman 2006, 9), reflecting its gloopy materiality explicit in *Coping* (2008) [FIG. 5]. Reminiscent of a Balthus-like, post-Bush street scene, the figures trudge through a river of muck, each absorbed in its own world, indifferent to the gaze of others and the shitty situation that connects and surrounds them. *Coping* represents the plasticity of societal issues bleeding into subjectivity. The term coping refers to a persistent condition the body endures of its situation, which Eisenman relates to depression (Sholis 2008). However, the molasses-like sludge separating and connecting bodies in *Coping* also symbolises the tension between stagnant solitude and active sociality. The gloopiness embodies a permeating experience, surrounding and overhanging bodies, ready to descend at any moment. Drawing from the visual analysis of *Maker’s Muck*, aligning the gloopiness with the slippiness of plasticity offers a nuance to Malabou’s concept of indifference as a contemporary form of ontological retreat as «undecided, involuntary, non-chosen» (2014, 41). Eisenman’s gloopy depictions of such dissociation, in turn suggests that plasticity’s slipperiness is also a «form of flight» (Malabou 2012a, 11).



[FIG. 4] *Brooklyn Biergarten II*, 2008.
Oil on canvas, 157,5 × 208,3 cm.
Photo: Jens Ziehe
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth

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[FIG. 5] *Coping*, 2008. Oil on canvas,
165,1 × 208,3 cm.
Photo: Jens Ziehe
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and Hauser & Wirth



The title of Eisenman’s 2014 painting, *Achilles Heel* [FIG. 6], both refers to a person’s weak spot and the eponymous Brooklyn bar whose interior is carved out in a thick, dark palette of paint. A distinctive arched window frames a view of lower Manhattan in the distance. The heavy, gloopy appearance is heightened by scraped impasto figures with neon edges, with pink fingers poking a lump of muck. This is echoed by a motley-brown figure whose acidic yellow-orange hands sink into another greenish-grey lump that their jaundiced eyes inspect. The viscous muck constitutes the same gloopiness as the scene and figures in *Maker’s Muck*. This bar scene depicts figures distinguishable by their gloopiness, similar to how the muck oozing from the beer tap appears marginally gloopier than the vessel it pours. Suspended globular planets evoke the condition of universal gloopiness that permeates the scene. The bar is populated by characters that exemplify this condition: an entwined solace and vulnerability that co-opted in the name of the painting. Amidst the melancholic black bile, humour emerges from a grubby portrait of a pale potato head hanging on the wall.

All these expansive manifestations of gloopiness are Eisenman’s evocations of a bodily schema, which is to say, a surface sensitive to bodily experience. Whether it be the recurrent motif of a blank stare or simple details of fingers becoming stone-like, these bodies are all subject to the phantom quality of otherness. While Malabou relates othering to the appearance of «coolness» and «disaffection» (2012b, 49), Eisenman’s «strange answer to the world’s indifference» embodies humour (2014, 41). This might reflect Eisenman’s solace depicted in *Achilles Heel* and *Brooklyn Biergarten*, whose figures derive from the imagery of friends and art history. While Malabou’s ontological retreat reveals an ache of recognition within philosophy’s heteropatric discourse (Malabou 2014), Eisenman’s crowd paintings acknowledge this paradoxically absurd desire, serving as homages to heteropatric art history and celebratory commiserations of normalcy, inviting a contemplation on queerness.

Is Eisenman’s gloopiness queer?

Thus far, analysing Eisenman’s artwork has shown how an ontological gloopiness is represented in *Maker’s Muck*, *From Success to Obscurity*, *The Drawing Class*, *Brooklyn Biergarten*, *Coping* and *Achilles Heel*, which highlights the slipperiness of Malabou’s ontological plasticity. Representing Malabou’s ontic-ontological exchange, gloopiness manifests in tactile transformations oozing. *The Thing* as a phantom identity of Eisenman has been punctured, revealing how phantoms shelter plural modes of being appearing as identity, subjectivity and desire (Malabou 2022b). Returning to Freud’s claim that sexuality forms from the infant exchange of the object-breast’s nourishment to the auto-erotic’s satisfaction, we can consider sexuality’s form first in the context of Malabou’s concept of a phantom of a phantom and secondly in the context of Eisenman’s work that she calls «decidedly queer» (Godfrey 2023, 21). If we suppose that a phantom is a form of caesura that can rupture and reveal the multiplicity hidden within other phantoms (Malabou 2022a), would that mean that a queer phantom can rupture the heteropatric phantom to uncover

its multiplicities? To consider this question, we will appeal to the queerness in Eisenman's sculptural work.

— A sculpted queer phantom

Where Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception* regarded the excess of presence of phantom limbs as a quasi-presence, he regards the same excess in painting as «complete when it is yet only partial», owing to it being «vision itself» that sees at a distance (1964, 166). Merleau-Ponty considers the voracity of vision that is whole in its partialness to be superior to the original in art owing to the way painting can «open upon a texture of Being» (1964, 166). This will be the lens through which Eisenman's sculpture *Prince of Swords* (2013) [FIG. 7] is analysed. Placed in the Carnegie Museum of Art Neoclassical Hall of Sculpture, *Prince of Swords* opens upon Eisenman's texture of queer being to explore plasticity's slipperiness within Western ideals of bodily appearance. Eisenman remarks on the pleasure of seeing her «big queer bodies» sitting alongside the «standard bearers of the Western form» (Godfrey 2023, 21) – a setting that emphasises queer presence as an excess within the partial view of hetero-patriarchal bodily norms. Written in response to Eisenman's Carnegie International installation, William J. Simmons's article *Notes on Queer Formalism* describes queer formalism as a «paradox» (2013) in that queerness needs bodies and also rejects their «solidified nature» (2013), which Eisenman's Carnegie installation exemplifies. By inserting

[FIG. 6] *Achilles Heel*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 208,3 × 165,1 cm.
Photo: John Berens
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

[FIG. 7] *Prince of Swords*, 2013 (detail).
Plaster, graphite and quartz. Variable size.
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her sculpted «all-inclusive gender» bodies into the collection of Classical casts that have represented Western ideals of bodily beauty for some two thousand years, Eisenman disrupts the smooth, white, idealised bodies, and takes them «down a notch» (Pifer 2013). Eisenman’s sculpted bodies replicate the paradoxical «clunky heroicness» of her painted bodies, appearing as sculptural phantoms of the painted phantoms (Pifer 2013). The sculptures differ in a bodily sense, which Eisenman clarifies as being part of their making: wrapping arms around them to massage them into being, compared to the paintings occurring «above the neckline», in the head «with a stick between you and the material» (Pifer 2013). Eisenman’s further description of the process of sculpting the figures as embodying an «act of rubbing» (Simmons 2013) remains evident in the finger marks on the sculptures and in their presence of rubbing queer bodies against binary bodies in the Carnegie Museum.

Eisenman’s sculptures challenge the Western idealised body by their proximity, rubbing the two bodily forms against each other, one exclusive and idealised and the other inclusive, which she describes as «distant relatives» (Pifer 2013). This rubbing of bodies echoes again Malabou’s concept of bodies playing slippery eels. If, as Malabou claims, bodies are phantoms of phantoms, these relatives might be seen as distant phantom cousins synonymous in their original creation. If, as Freud claims, sexuality arises out of the infant exchange from nourishment to satisfaction, we might imagine different phantoms arising orientated by different desires. Furthermore, Freud’s notion of auto-erotic thumb-sucking resonates in Eisenman’s rubbing, reflected by her self-satisfactory pleasure of disrupting the Western bodily ideals with an all-inclusive alternative that is both publicly and readily available.

– Strange

As distant relatives displayed in the Carnegie Museum, Eisenman’s sculpted bodies may have seemed like strangers to visitors, appearing like an unfamiliar trait following an accident (Malabou 2012a). The term *strange*, etymologically dating to the 14th century, derives from the unfamiliar and not belonging to where something is found. [4] By 1660, *strange* is associated with the terms *queer*, *surprising* and *wonder*. Eisenman’s *Prince of Swords* wonderfully appears in an everyday contemporary pose staring into a smartphone, making them more familiar to visitors than the idealised bodies. Surprisingly, this transforms the idealised bodies into strangers. Seated on a balustrade flanked by two classical figures, the context of *Prince of Swords* evokes comparison. The classical relatives balanced dancing on the balustrade have raised arms draping imaginary cloth that exposes and frames their plump white smooth genitalia. *Prince of Swords* presents a contrast to their cousins in the way sexuality is not advertised and is irrelevant to their all-inclusive gender identity as «clunky heroes» (Pifer 2013). Instead, Eisenman’s *Prince* is posed with a giant crystal through their throat chakra, symbolising the futility of vocal cords amid silent screen interactions. Eisenman describes this posture as «the way we have of being alone in the crowd» (Pifer 2013), which is also reflective of being with a crowd who is not your crowd, especially

[4] Etymology of the term *strange* can be further sourced at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/strange>

when they are relatives. With feet dangling over the balcony, the head drooped toward blackened hands as if burnt out by inaudible communication, the sculpture subverts the exhibited artificiality of idealised bodies and prioritises contemporary identity over superficial aesthetics. Eisenman's all-inclusive sculpture paradoxically employs the same heteropatric exclusion that marginalises queer bodies to portray the Western idealised body as other, making the imposition of such bodies a phantom gesture. Relating to Eisenman's Carnegie installation is Sillman's observation that Eisenman's crowd representations illustrate a «transformation from other to self and back again» (Sillman 2006, 9). Situating *Prince of Swords* among a crowd of idealised bodies, Eisenman evokes an othering embodied by a nuanced indifference reminiscent of Malabou's concept of «cool indifference» that is synonymous with trauma (Malabou 2012b). Eisenman's figures represent a voluntary disidentification from the idealised body as dictated by heteropatric discourse, including that of *The Museum*. This recontextualising of othering as voluntary recontextualises Malabou's notion of «becoming someone else at every moment as a constant existential possibility» (Malabou qtd. in 2008, 9) as a positive transformation. Eisenman's queering of the heteropatric idealised bodies reveals the potential of Malabou's slippery disinvestment in inscription as a form of *creative destructive* plasticity.

In *Notes on Queer Formalism*, Simmons outlines another paradoxical queer quality as an «unsure mixture of singular embodiment and a passionate ownership of one's identity with the refusal of singularity» (2013). This «unsure» quality will be shown as a necessary evasion of the confessional demand on heterogeneous sexuality, which controls what forms of sexuality are standard and, thus, what modes of being are standard (Foucault 1978). When Simmons critiques the terms «androgyny» and «fluid» as advancing a «monolithic vision of queerness» used for the «illusion of progressive scholarship», he also argues that «for some queer people, gender roles are central to their sexual experience» and that «queer formalism is not about scrambled gender roles» (Simmons 2013). Eisenman's artworks comprised of multiple bodies, supports Simmons further claim that queer formalism «insists on specificities even as it acts as an ever-expansive force» (Simmons 2013). The intentionally absurd paradoxes introduced in Simmons' essay insist on absurdity's importance in rendering queerness' unsure quality for evading definition, like Malabou's intentional evasion of inscription within her concept of plasticity.

— Absurd traces of slugs

Some traces are vital forms of communication, and absurdity is no exception. The powerful use of absurdity within queer discourse is discussed in Matthew Mason's online article *The Slug Gaze. Discourse, Discipline, and the Live Slug Reaction Meme* (Mason 2022). The term "slug gaze", coined in 2022, symbolises the recognition of queer moments in heteronormative discourse (Mason 2022). Its origins can be traced to the 2019 film *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, in which the character, Klaud, an alien slug with a unique gloopy body resembling one of Eisenman's figures, appears immediately after a scene featuring two same-sex characters kissing. Mason discusses how Klaud, as the Live Slug Reaction Meme,

signals queerness on X (formerly Twitter) within heteronormative spaces. The slug’s subversive actions parallel Eisenman’s critique of idealized bodies in the Carnegie Museum. The slug’s ability to appear in multiple contexts while leaving a significant discursive trace of slug appearances reflects the synaptic constellation of Malabou’s surface. Klaud’s absurd expression, both complex to define and distinctly recognisable, prompts Mason’s appeal to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, to explain how the slug gaze substitutes what Foucault names «whatever is most difficult to tell» (1978, 59). The humour and its «unsure» quality are tools for navigating the confessional risks that heterogeneous sexuality demands (1978, 61).

Additionally, the *Live Slug Reaction Meme* gained notoriety for encapsulating an absurd multitude of disciplinary queer constraints, left behind as an online trail of slug appearances. One such constraint is the paradoxical signalling of the homoerotic act and the repressive counterparts that still render it taboo and transgressive of heterogeneous sexuality. For Mason, the slug gaze exemplifies how queer identities are regulated within the community, fostering both discourse and self-policing expressions (Mason 2022), which offers insight into why Malabou might go to such an absurd effort to leave a trace of erasures. Consequently, each slug’s appearance as self-expression risks exclusion from the queer community. As an alien in Disney’s heteronormative discourse, we might call Klaud a phantom within a phantasmagorical environment. Thus, Klaud’s trace as the Live Slug Reaction Meme manifests a phantom in the most phantasmagorical environment – the internet. Underscoring Klaud’s absurd, plural phantomising is the bodily reveal of Eisenman’s *Prince of Swords*, which exposes the phantoms invested in heteropatric metaphors. In addition to its behavioural trace that attracts other like-minded slugs, the slug, as a hermaphrodite species housing both male and female sexual organs, has understandably become a queer icon for the plurality of non-binary sexuality. The leopard slug’s unique mating behaviours, further attest to their behavioural queerness. [5] The leopard slug mates whilst suspended, entwined with its partner on a thread of self-made mucus, symbolising queer sexual desire. This gloopy, mucoid procreation conceptually resembles Eisenman’s discarded paint tubes in *Makers Muck*, signalling productivities *remains*. When Simmons describes queer as being simultaneously «messy» and «wonderful» in the way it exposes the «abjection inherent in both the paintbrush and the body» (2013), we can recognise the materiality from which Eisenman’s gloopy multiple phantom bodies are produced, and which also forms their shamelessly absurd existence.

[5] Leopard slug mating video. BBC David Attenborough. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C-6_GNgjkU

Can we call Malabou’s plasticity queer?

Key to Judith Butler’s argument in *Melancholy Gender* for a same-sex ego as projected surface, is how the «unfinished process» of grieving the lost object of same-sex desire is the mode in which identifications are preserved in and as the ego (Butler 1995, 166). Similarly, *Maker’s Muck* illustrates an unfinished process between the artist, their work, and their environment. As previously described, Eisenman’s potter is depicted with hands in perpetual motion. The movement of the potter’s wheel

simultaneously moves the potter's fingers, making the touch between the potter and gloop reciprocal, highlighting an endless co-presence of interpretation and manifestation in the gloop, which everything in the installation – and Eisenman's work analysed in this paper – is made. *Maker's Muck* presents the ongoing exchange of interpretation and manifestation of gloop that remains indefinitely unfinished. Another unfinished exchange in *Maker's Muck* is that of identity. Eisenman creates and depicts an artist at work, producing a loop between Eisenman-the-artist and a substituted identity made by Eisenman. Not without humour, the sculpted discarded paint tubes labelled *Maker's Muck* lying amongst unfinished artworks resemble the grey-green residue at the bottom of a painter's turpentine jar, symbolising the essential remains of a painting. Butler's bodily sedimentation as a surface projection resonates in these remains (Butler 1995, 167). [6]

These remains recall Malabou's withdrawal into the trace of erasure that illustrates a nuanced relationship between surface inscriptions and transformation, countering Martell's interpretation. Rather than merely ignoring these inscriptions, Malabou's approach, akin to Eisenman's, allows for reconfiguring exclusion from heteropatric discourses as a form of othering into agency and inclusion. The image of «burning, plastic remains» in *Changing Difference*, which results from «woman's overexposure to dual exploitation» (2011a 93), highlights violence against women and against bodies threatening traditional idealised heteropatric categories. Despite declaring that it is a plasticity that «we must explore» (93), Malabou's burning remains that offer transformation akin to the pace of Eisenman's gloopiness have not reappeared and remain as a *remain*. [7] It seems apt that *Changing Difference* is where Malabou's surface conceals a trace as, in every chapter, Malabou's rigorous, clear articulation of woman's impossibility as a woman philosopher leads to their inclusion in Women's Studies, a discipline that developed in the late twentieth century (5). What is this place called Women's Studies? Who created it? The presence of Women's Studies alludes to the absence of women philosophers on library shelves under Philosophy, in the syllabuses of philosophical education programmes, and academic citations. Malabou's argument that «the term woman has a meaning outside the heterosexual matrix» suggests a connection with queerness (135) that might prompt calling plasticity queer.

Conclusion

Plasticity, like Eisenman's gloopiness, can «reveal the metaphors with which things are ontologically invested» (Malabou 2011a, 135) and exchange them for phantoms. In bringing Nicole Eisenman's gloopiness and Catherine Malabou's plasticity into contact, this paper highlights how Eisenman's gloopy, haptic, queer surface enhances the slipperiness of Malabou's plasticity while simultaneously offering plasticity a gloopy inclusiveness, subversiveness, and absurdity. Eisenman's gloopiness does not merely reflect Malabou's slippery plasticity; it extends it by offering plasticity new metaphorical investments. By defining gloopiness as an ontological surface,

[6] In *Melancholy Gender*, Butler's bodily ego as a projected surface appears as sedimentary and as an «archaeological remainder» of same-sex desired «objects loved and lost» under prevalent conditions of compulsory heterosexuality.

[7] The *remains* refer to Derrida's «remains» in *Glas* that are not a residue but a «kernel of strength of a new beginning».

this paper attempts to think of Eisenman's queer aesthetic as a horizon of knowledge embodied by a materiality capable of sculpting our immediate and contemporary condition. Eisenman's acts of everyday queer sculpting that transform traditional heteropatriarchal forms suggest that plasticity's slipperiness embodies further possibilities for equally radical transformation that will not appear as explosions or accidents.

It is no accident that Malabou likens the clitoris to «grit lodged deep on the shoe of fantasy» in *Pleasure Erased* (2022b, 1). When Malabou considers touching this *gritty clit*, she aligns it with experiencing a caesura that can rupture the «paradoxical identity of difference while revealing the multiplicity it shelters» (7). As a clitoral caesura, this opening concerns visibility in its fullness, like Merleau-Ponty believes painting as a caesura makes possible. Malabou's metaphor of a clitoris is a determined deformation of traditional philosophy that asserts a discourse inhabited by a desire beyond penetration which, owing to its feminine associations, consistently suffers multiple erasures despite it not exclusively belonging to women (Malabou 2022b). This is why Malabou appeals to Paul B. Preciado in *Pleasure Erased* as she does in *Changing Difference*, to propose the clitoris as «an organ for thought» (Malabou 2022b, 13; 2011a, 94). Citing an organ that responds positively to rubbing might suggest an insistence on haptic thinking, however, Malabou, despite likening herself to a sculptor does not share Eisenman's slug-like, bodily embrace, self-lubricating to bring a gloopy manifestation into being. What Eisenman does freely, Malabou seems reluctant to commit to – a total abandonment of an identity inscribed by the heteropatriarchy.

Methodological note

The collaborative writing process bringing together Eisenman's gloopiness and Malabou's plasticity has been challenging, reflecting plastic and gloopy characteristics along the way. Various formations and deformations of structure, intensity, and meaning have emerged, with images and concepts informing and leading to others. This indicates that the method has an expansive force of gloopiness capable of subverting metaphorical investments by substituting individual specificities. This multi-voiced approach required embracing plasticity's destructive and creative qualities and involved the authors frequently exchanging texts, enhancing malleability whilst navigating academic expectations. This served to reaffirm the risks of the approach and its vibrant potential. Ultimately, the paper self-consciously situates itself within the heteropatric context of academic philosophy, challenging the boundaries of traditional conventions of knowledge production, as plasticity and gloopiness do.

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