

To Return (Home) is to Become (Unhomely): Reflections on Katharine Fry's *Please Call Me Home*

Maria Walsh

Uncanny tropes proliferate in Katharine Fry's video installations. To name but a few: the self as double; the play with states of liveness; part-objects – mouths and severed limbs – that border on the inanimate; domestic interiors as female body-objects; and distorted spaces that both awkwardly conjoin with and delineate these female figures.¹ This is one side of the uncanny, the side that can be identified, illustrated even, in visual culture. This uncanny and its psychoanalytic partner in crime, the abject, in which anxiety around bodily boundaries revolves around fluids rather than relations to past and/or part objects, has somewhat lost the sense of disturbance that characterises Freud's concept of the familiar unfamiliar. As opposed to the Enlightenment period in which the uncanny emerged as the spectral underbelly that haunted the quest for empirical mechanical knowledge, in a neuroscientific digital era the uncanny has become all too familiar.

However, the other side of the uncanny, the side that derives from the psychic phenomenon psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche identifies as a sense of being inhabited by 'an alien internal entity,' still persists.² This intimate and perturbing non-coincidence between the self as mistress of itself and the self as haunted, even constituted, by an inner foreign body is one of the parameters around which Fry's investigation of the uncanny occurs. Key to this parameter is the reversal, itself uncanny, that Freud enacts at the beginning of his eponymous essay in relation to the German word for 'homely', a reversal that shows that the safe space of the home is unsafe or unhomely. Readers of Freud's essay might recall how he begins by delineating the semantic proximity of *heimlich* (homely) and its antonym *unheimlich* (unhomely). He determines how what is familiar, cosy, and intimate, 'arousing a pleasant feeling of [...] comfortable repose and secure protection, like the enclosed, comfortable house,' transmogrifies into that which is unfamiliar.³ In being securely tucked away, concealed from the outside and 'removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret,' *heimlich* becomes that which is threatening and fearful, in other words, *unheimlich*.⁴ In fact, the reversal of one thing into its opposite could be said to characterise the entirety of Freud's psychoanalytic enterprise. Many of his key concepts – narcissism, masochism and the death drive being the ones that are relevant here – involve a transfer of psychic energy from primal states of an inchoate nature towards more stable external relations with objects, an action that is always in danger of reverting back into its opposite, i.e. back into primary diffused states of being. In this psychoanalytic narrative, the ego is constituted as oscillating between two poles: liveliness (the search for an external object) and inertia (the

¹ This list is in part derived from the Freudian concept of the uncanny which has been common parlance in contemporary art at least since the 1990s.

² Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. & intro. Jeffrey Mehlmann, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 105.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, intro. Hugh Haughton, London: Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

desire to return to primordial chaos), pleasure being derived from either and/or both sides of the equation.⁵

Fry could be said to re-enact this oscillation between diffusion and stability in performative actions that gesture towards immobility yet are imbued with an inner fervour. In both *Did I get rid of it or are we just pretending not to notice?* (2015) and *I would tell you everything but there's no room* (2016), the upper torso of a semi-static female figure, the artist herself, is confined in and by domestic spaces, her oral micro-movements intimating an uncanny threshold between inner and outer experience. In the former video, uncomfortably squeezed between a shelf and some piping, she gazes seductively towards the camera, perfectly still, apart from sporadically blowing a fake pearl out of her mouth with just enough force for it to roll along the shelf towards an implied viewer. In the latter work, chin propped on a mirrored table, she rolls her head from side to side on a mass of gravel pebbles that seems to both emit from and be ingested by her open mouth, the on-screen sound evoking a sense of being choked. Overlaying this hypnotic motion, Fry's voiceover intermittently sings odd lines from half-remembered, vaguely familiar songs. Repeated like incantations to ward off danger or perhaps invite it in, their talismanic quality is gradually accompanied by an eerily intense humming noise whose location cannot be determined.

The sporadic singing of odd lines from remembered songs is a particular feature of Fry's oeuvre. In this, and in other videos, the fragmented, repetitive lyrics are suggestive of primal scenes relating to the parental imagos that are first encountered in the home and to which all later loves are related. If the rolling pearls in *Did I get rid of it or are we just pretending not to notice?* suggest a kind of abject seduction in which a gift is being spewed out, a sign of desired, yet lost love, the intermittent lyrics of *I would tell you everything but there's no room* hint at a scene of ambivalent paternal seduction. While in the former, the pearls are both expelled and devoured, in the latter, the refrain infers a more uncanny sense of loss. The lyrics turn on a child's fear of water in relation to a first swimming lesson. Voiced as a temporal displacement from a 'he said, 'cos you're all grown up now' to a 'you see, I'm all grown up now,' this inferred Oedipal separation, at odds with the perversity of Fry's oral gesture, recalls to my mind what Laplanche classifies as the 'essentially traumatic nature of human sexuality' as a seduction from the outside.⁶

For Laplanche, the implantation of sexuality always comes too early or too late. Too early in that, in Laplanche's theory of seduction, which is not a theory of sexual abuse, the neonate encounters the unconscious of the adult and their desire before it can understand its meaning. In psychoanalysis, the first adult is usually the mother, though it can be another carer. For Laplanche, the 'first gestures of a mother towards her child are necessarily impregnated with sexuality,' not because the mother desires the infant but because she desires the father, or an adult other.⁷ The infant's developing psyche is propped on its bodily reception of the mother's or first other's enigmatic messages via tactile caregiving. 'Such care, in focusing on certain bodily regions, contributes to *defining* them as erotogenic zones, zones of exchange which demand and provoke excitation in order subsequently to reproduce it autonomously, through internal stimulation.'⁸ The mouth is one such

⁵ Laplanche, p. 88.

⁶ Laplanche, p. 105.

⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

erotogenic zone. This initiation into something that exceeds the infant's capacity to decode it opens up the dimension of what Laplanche calls the enigmatic signifier of unconscious desire. Later scenes of seduction, especially around puberty, retrospectively attempt to work through this initial riddle of sexuality, the enigma of which generates the uncanny effects of displacement and proximity, familiarity and strangeness.

That the scenes of seduction Fry performs in her work could be said to oscillate between a maternal and a paternal outside is underscored by *d.a.n.c.e. f.o.r. y.o.u.r. d.a.d.d.y.* (2018) in which Fry uses her body in fast motion to repeatedly delineate the triangular architectural coordinates of a loft space while, on the soundtrack, sporadically whispering the lines 'he's coming home...he's on his way.'⁹ The refrain borrows the words of another to both articulate a potential threat to domestic space and to protect against its claustrophobia, the ambiguity of the concluding song-line 'I only have eyes for you' retaining the scene's enigmatic register of desire. Now let me be clear, I am not saying that these parental seductions are real but that they are sites of fantasy which Fry acts out in her videos by splitting herself into her own object and subject. Hence the self-encapsulated micro-movements she performs have the peculiar agency that crosses the one who desires with the one who is desired. This reversal of desire back onto the self, akin to the reversal of *heimlich* into *unheimlich*, often results in states of semi-paralysis. But at other times, for example, *You could have been anyone to me* (2020), this state engenders a repetitive frenzy at the point of contact between a bodily orifice, the mouth, and an unresponsive object. Set in a 1970s domestic interior, Fry's severed upper torso is doubled to rapaciously suck the two front legs of a table, one for each mouth, her voiceover singing sexually suggestive odd lines from pop and folk songs – I recognise Neil Young's *A Man Needs a Maid*.

In a masculinist imaginary, the female body or body-part acts as a fetish object that pacifies male desire yet generates more anxiety as her bodily unknowability stands in for the ultimate unknown, i.e. death. In *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), a study of the Western masculinist literary imagination over the centuries, Elisabeth Bronfen shows both its attempt to probe the dark continent of the female body for insight, but at the same time, much like Freud's *heimlich/unheimlich*, this interiority is also feared for its abject fluidity and threat of engulfment. Fry, while not being immune to this masculinist imaginary, by contrast performs her own investigation of abject interiority as a modality of potential transformation. In thusly feminising Freud's masculinised uncanny, she substitutes fear with perverse pleasure. For example, in *After the transformation I was just the same* (2019), she applies a predominantly lilac-coloured plasticine to her face, becoming comically monstrous in the process. Her act might seem somewhat innocent were it not for the sounds of choked breath that evoke drowning or being buried alive, an evocation underscored by the murky rainbow-hued liquids that spasmodically spurt like a fountain from her mouth. When her mask eventually falls to pieces, from the point-of-view of the gaze it is as if nothing has changed. But from the point-of-view of a fantasised interiority, perhaps another relation to the unbound energy of desire has been generated, one that finds its pleasure in being convulsed within the liquidity of the image?

Slavoj Žižek refers to Dorothy, David Lynch's main female protagonist in *Blue Velvet* (1986) as a convulsed body whose inertial depression necessitates electric shock treatment to jolt

⁹ This video is not included in the exhibition *Please Call Me Home*.

her into action. This is from the point-of-view of the gaze. However, rather than seeing this as a repetition of the 19th century misogynistic tradition that categorises woman as a lethargic being only aroused from her numbness by a man's call, Žižek reverses this literary and philosophical trope. He claims instead that the inertia of feminine depression, in suspending causal links between acts and stimuli, is a space of freedom. For Žižek, this withdrawal into the self is a primordial act of retreat that has a proximity to the zero, or Nirvana, principle of the death drive.¹⁰ This is the force of the death drive, not merely as an element in a conflict with life, 'but as *conflict itself* substantialised, an internal principle of strife and disunion.'¹¹ However, if art is an attempt to bind, while replicating, this internal conflict, Fry's probing of this interstitial space between arousal and withdrawal is less a zero degree of freedom, but a performative play with its oscillatory reversals of energy.

In *Creepers* (2019), again set in a 1970s domestic living-room, Fry's prone body, head cropped, performs hysterical paroxysms as if manifesting the 'alien internal' other that disrupts self-mastery. Another body double is reflected passing by in the mirror over the fireplace, her disappearance out-of-the-frame triggering the appearance of further replications of Fry, one in each of the three cameo-like mirrors that surround her shaking figure on the floor.¹² The replicants appear static, only perking up sporadically to mime the soundtrack's tweeting birds and howling creatures. Caught between a fantasy of returning to an inanimate state and the repetition of the traumatic implantation of sexuality, she is, on the one hand, 'a quasi-automaton barely alive, rarely displaying emotion or fatigue, her vitality registered only through the limited gestures she performs.'¹³ But on the other hand, the conflict between arrested and frenetic movement paradoxically multiplies her self-relations, generating serial reversals of energy between active and passive, female and animal, as orchestrated by a subject who is her own reflexive object. As an aesthetic modality, the death drive, as well as fracturing the imaginary wholeness of an ordinary home, also prevents the sclerosis of being stuck in its confines.¹⁴ The latter becomes unhomely, but the unhomely becomes a habitat that is full of potential, in both senses of the term as power and possibility. In this in-between state, she returns to life on her own terms.

Maria Walsh is Reader in Artists' Moving Image at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London. Her research on artists' moving image and critical theory has been published in *Rhizomes*, *Angelaki*, *Screen*, *Refractory*, *film-philosophy*, *NECSUS* and *MIRAJ*. She is Reviews Editor of *MIRAJ (Moving Image Review & Art Journal)* and her art criticism appears regularly in *Art Monthly*. She has previously published *Art and Psychoanalysis* (2013) and her latest book *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2020.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹² Maya Deren's replication of herself in *At Land* (1944) comes to mind.

¹³ Fry's exhibition notes.

¹⁴ For a development of this idea, see Margaret Whitford, 'Irigaray, Utopia, and the Death Drive', in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, (eds.) C. Burke, N. Schor and M. Whitford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 379-400.