DOROTHEA TANNING'S *PINCUSHION TO SERVE AS FETISH* AND THE EXPLOITATION OF SURREALISM

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DOROTHEA TANNING'S *PINCUSHION TO SERVE AS FETISH* AND THE EXPLOITATION OF SURREALISM

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Introduction

> My work is about the enigmatic; it's about leaving the door open to imagination. You see, enigma is a very healthy thing, because it encourages the viewer to look beyond the obvious and commonplace. I have always liked to create images wherein the viewer sees something else every time he looks at them. That's what I'm asking from the viewer.
>
> --Dorothea Tanning

Generally produced within a five-year period in the early 1970s, Dorothea Tanning's soft sculptures evoke a sensual, emotive, and sometimes humorous character. Inspired by the female body, many of her soft sculptures derive from figures and formations worked out in her *Insomnia* series of paintings in the mid-1950s to 1960s. In this paper, I examine Dorothea Tanning's *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish*, 1979 (Fig. 1), in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. Hereafter, I will refer to her sculpture as *Pincushion*. This version of her original *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* from 1965 (in the collection of the Tate Museum) raises questions about Tanning's relationship with Surrealist art practices and the enigmatic quality surrounding the sculpture and its production. Likewise, her use of nontraditional material—fabric—evokes associations with the feminist revival of craft and creates a dialogue about women's roles. Despite its title, *Pincushion* is less identifiable than most of Tanning's sculptures, making it even more open to interpretation.

Pincushion is intentionally enigmatic. Is it a human organ? Beached whale? Alien, galactic form? Shamanistic object? Pincushion? Tanning wants the viewer to "look beyond the

obvious and commonplace"[1] and delve deeper into the piece. More than her other sculptures, *Pincushion* encourages the viewer's mind to wander imaginatively in search of meaning. As my discussion of her exploration of three-dimensional forms will reveal, most of Tanning's other soft sculptures resemble something real or at least recognizable in some way. *Pincushion*, however, is abstract, biomorphic, and bodily all at once. Nonetheless, its title incites something specific.

How does one begin to describe this rotund, unearthly, black form? Every angle of the globular sculpture presents a new and unusual composition, all with pearlescent pins puncturing its surface. Projecting elements dominate, as undulating lines characterize the contours of the sculpture. Similar to the undulating lines of the silhouette, white chalky lines actually mark curves on the surface of the structure. These chalky white lines and occasional modeling suggest folds of thick skin. Bulbous forms protrude from the top while a smaller projection juts from the bottom, almost foot-like. One extremity of the creature evolves into a wide concave tunnel inlaid with copper. The opposite side of the sculpture tapers into a thin orifice, the inside again covered in a golden material. In contrast to these two cavities, an inverted cylindrical cone juts from the top middle of the *Pincushion.*

An unconventional combination of materials composes *Pincushion*: black velvet, wood, metal, paint, and copper. The artist leaves traces of the construction of this tightly stuffed sculpture. Sewn and assembled from a variety of materials, the stitches remain visible. The fabric bunches at ends. Loose strings leave evidence of the artist's process. The sculpture's surface shows the signs of patchwork and seams of sewing.

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[1] Dorothea Tanning in interview with John Gruen, *The Artist Observed* (Pennington, Georgia: A Cappella Books, 1991), 189.

The *Pincushion*'s exterior shifts from dark velvet to the golden reflection of copper, juxtapositioning the soft and the hard. The blackness of the velvet material functions expressively by evoking a mysterious and sinister mood and correlates to the "primitive" fetish and practices of sadomasochism. This sense is reinforced by the sharp pins piercing the sculpture. The contrast between the softness of material and the sharp projection of pins produces a contradiction. While the furriness of the sculpture invites the luxury of touching, the pins pose the ominous threat of getting one's hands pricked or punctured, a prescription for both pleasure and pain.

A pincushion connotes a world of sewing and needlework, crafts typically associated with the domestic chores of "women's work." In addition, Tanning constructs *Pincushion* from pieces of fabric, a material atypical within the world of "serious" art. Her use of fabric and the process of sewing relate to the discourse of the feminist art movement and its interest in addressing issues of domesticity and femininity. Tanning, however, remains adamant in her aversion to any feminist associations in her work. Is Tanning nevertheless making a feminist statement in *Pincushion*? Or is she directing feminist practices to a more ironic end? I will discuss these issues later in the essay.

Another quizzical factor in Tanning's *Pincushion* is the moment of its production. Her sculptural production was short-lived, lasting only five years, from about 1969-1973. The Dallas Museum of Art's sculpture dates from 1979. She modeled this piece after the original sculpture now housed in the Tate, which she produced in 1965. Both pieces deviate from the five-year period when Tanning primarily worked in soft sculpture.

Tanning's *Pincushion* belongs to the workings of the surreal. Like the Surrealists, Tanning expresses the conflicts of her inner reality and psyche through *Pincushion*. Yet Tanning

projects those conflicts onto an object she identified as a fetish, a practice commonly associated with male Surrealists. In *Pincushion*, Tanning works as a female artist in the male discourse of the Surrealist fetish.

Anna Balakian, a scholar of Surrealism, discusses the surreal characteristic in art. She writes that images should not represent direct thoughts, but invite individual thinking. Any obvious meaning would deny the viewer's complete mental freedom.[2] Reticent to talk about her art, Tanning feels that her work speaks for itself and reveals mysteries on its own. While Tanning concedes that the work of an artist is autobiographical to some degree, she aims to transcend her "self." In her paintings, Tanning has pursued an invention of another life and another world.[3] In her sculpture, she seeks to materialize three-dimensionally that otherworldly invention. However, *Pincushion* does not relate to any known painting. *Pincushion* has a life of its own separate from the family of three-dimensional avatars of her two-dimensional painted universe. In this sculpture, the artist has created an object embedded with multiple images, interpretations, and identities. Tanning uses ambiguity in *Pincushion* to stimulate emotional and intellectual responses.

In order to understand Tanning's *Pincushion*, one must explore the context in which the artist worked. The Surrealist movement greatly influenced Tanning and remains the primary impetus behind her art and imagery. Her employment of the fetish conjures up Surrealism's interest in the sacred traditions of "primitive" societies and the strong influence of Sigmund Freud's theory of sexual displacement. Although she was eager to join the Surrealist movement at the onset of her career and employed traditional surreal imagery in her earlier paintings,

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[2] Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948), 143.
[3] Dorothea Tanning in interview with Alain Jouffroy, *Dorothea Tanning* (Paris: Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1974), 44.

Tanning later felt dissuaded by the movement's members. She was not accepted by its founder, André Breton. Likewise, Tanning appears to have felt an aversion towards the patriarchal misogyny inherent in Surrealism. Over time, Tanning gradually shifted away from the movement and refused any association with Surrealism. Yet she continued to engage with Surrealist imagery and practices. Considering this contradiction, I view Tanning's *Pincushion* as the artist's exploitation and subversion of Surrealism in a whimsical yet serious manner.

The allusion to the body permeates the form of *Pincushion*, as its soft shape evokes the corporeal. The association of human characteristics is a common quality found in soft sculpture, as will be examined in the works of other artists, such as Claes Oldenburg and Yayoi Kusama. Likewise, *Pincushion*'s material and method of construction, as well as the title's allusion to a domestic object, a pincushion, elicits a discussion of feminist art practices emerging around the production period of Tanning's soft sculpture. Through my investigation of all of these elements, I will illuminate how Tanning appropriates the idea of the body from the evocation of the fetish and the inherent nature of soft sculpture to produce an object that functions both as a self-portrait and as an object open to projected portraits of the viewers clad in the language of enigma.

The Confines of Surrealism

The word "surrealist" first appeared in 1917, when Guillaume Apollinaire described his play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, as a "surrealist drama."[4] Later, André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, infused the term with ideas of the unconscious, dreams, and rebellion. As a movement, Surrealism originated in the aftermath of the First World War with Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme*. To induce thoughts of "otherness," Surrealism engaged in practices of automatism, collage, frottage, and *cadavres exquis*. In his 1924 manifesto, Breton defined the

[4] Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 11.

movement as one that "rests on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association hitherto neglected, in the all-powerfulness of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principles of life."[5] Surrealism aimed to transform the world, change everyday life, and reconstruct human understanding.[6] According to the Surrealists, industrialization, technology, and modern rationalism estranged the individual from any "real" experience of the world. Participation in the practices of Surrealism liberated one from the confines of European bourgeois life, transforming oneself psychologically and spiritually. The longstanding friction between reason and desire, conscious and unconscious, mind and body posed conflicts for Surrealist artists. Artists associated with the movement wished to reconcile rational reality with fantastical dreams. In order to supersede a Western system of values, Surrealists esteemed different cultural realities over European ones, challenging the very nature of their own reality. Surrealism based itself upon the conviction that there are hidden treasures in the human mind, which artists should extract and express in their work. They found refuge in dreams, recreating their fantasy worlds in paintings and sculpture.

Flourishing after the development of Freud's theories of psychoanalysis, Surrealism appropriated his ideas of the unconscious into its practice. Breton encouraged his fellow Surrealists to abandon all preconceived notions of style or talent and release their inhibitions. Surrealism encouraged the practice of psychic automatism, which produced unexpected images. Although intended to be automatic and spontaneous, Surrealist art was, in Robert Goldwater's

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[5] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Anne Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26.

[6] Cited in Evan Maurer, "Dada and Surrealism" in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 584.

words, “extremely sophisticated, rationally executed, with a minimum of directness and simplicity.”[7]

To Breton, Surrealism was not merely fantasy but a superior reality.[8] An important resource in tapping into this superior reality was “primitive” art. Members of Surrealism amassed large collections of masks, charms, and fetishes, zealously accumulating these items. They believed in the objects’ authenticity. These “primitive” objects originated from tribal communities in Africa, Alaska, Mexico, Oceania, and the Southwest region of the United States. In contradiction to Darwin’s theory of evolutionary hierarchies, the Surrealists upheld the “primitive” as the pinnacle of human creative achievement, prizing the tribal object. The extremity of their exaltation of tribal cultures crossed into the realm of inverse racism, disrupting the hierarchy of bourgeois culture. The Surrealist obsession with tribal artifacts aroused nostalgic ties to a “lost world,” and inspired the Surrealist object.

Based on Marcel Duchamp’s idea of the readymade, the Surrealists took “primitive,” banal, manufactured objects or commodities and recontextualized them in their art. Salvador Dali, a key member of the movement, referred to Surrealist objects as “Objects of Symbolic Function.”[9] The Surrealists’ displacement of meaning within these objects acted as comments on the societal use of commodities and their infiltration into the realm of art. Surrealist objects intended to interrogate and agitate the public’s understanding of the material world. They desired to expand that understanding by rejecting rationality as a way of making sense of the world.

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[7] Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 219.
[8] Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art,* trans. Gordon Clough (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 49.
[9] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 120.

Surrealist objects commonly referred to the body, whether or not the object directly contained bodily imagery.[10] It is not surprising that Dorothea Tanning alludes to the body in her *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish*. As will be made clear in the following sections, while this bizarre object does not explicitly outline the contours of the human figure, the *Pincushion* evokes the sense of bodily form.

The Surrealists' allusion to the body elicits questions about absence and presence, which was a central issue in the use of the fetish. Breton and his contemporaries were fascinated with totemic tribal objects, which functioned as religious fetishes in rituals. The fetish object's embellishment with feathers, hair, and fur correlated with art objects associated with Surrealism, like Meret Oppenheim's fur cup and saucer *Déjeuner en Fourrure*, 1936. The prevalence of hair-like texture relates to Freud's theory of the sexual fetish, in which the fetishist fixates on the last thing seen before traumatic recognition of the woman's "castration." Thus velvet, as a substitute for pubic hair, is a common fetish, as seen in Tanning's *Pincushion*.[11] The discourse of fetishism in the Surrealist object provides insight into desire, producing fantasy out of found objects reconfigured according to individual and collective cravings. For Surrealists, the female body presents itself as a site for fetishization. This view of women contributed to the Surrealists' denial of female artists as truly autonomous.

Breton and his contemporaries conceived of women as the male artist's mediator with the unconscious, his muse, and his object of desire. "Woman" emblemized male needs. Thus, woman's role in Surrealism conflicted with female artists' need for artistic freedom and self-expression. Woman was a construct of the Surrealist fetish: deformed, disfigured, and

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[10] Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113.

[11] Sigmund Freud, "Fetish," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 155.

manipulated. She stood as a site of desire rather than as a subject of desire, representing rather than inhabiting that desire.[12] Surrealism's fetishization of women intensified patriarchal misogyny, which Tanning and other female artists experienced.

Women more often appeared as subjects of Surrealism rather than makers of Surrealism. Prior to the 1970s, exhibitions and scholarly texts rarely included women Surrealists in their examinations of Surrealist works. Focus remained upon the male Surrealist, an extension of the historical practice of an exclusionary art canon.

Because many of the female members of this group were younger than their male counterparts and, consequently, arrived at their artistic maturity later, critics and scholars generally associate women with a second generation of Surrealists who distanced themselves from Breton and the movement's misogynist conventions.[13] And, since many women artists, like Tanning, rejected their classification as Surrealists, examining her works requires a double interpretation; one involved in the male discourse of Surrealism and the artist herself.[14]

Dorothea Tanning and the World within Her Work

Born in 1910 in the small Illinois town of Galesburg, Tanning showed early signs of surreal tendencies, playing in a dreamlike fantasy. As a young girl, she constantly drew pictures depicting otherworldly things. Like many children, Tanning had a lively imagination, creating fairy-tale drawings that envisioned monsters and strange, little creatures unknown to the real

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[12] Hal Foster, "Violation of Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus," in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 203.

[13] Gwen Raaberg, "The Problematics of Women and Surrealism," in *Surrealism and Women*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 2.

[14] Robert J. Belton, "Speaking with Forked Tongues: 'Male' Discourse in 'Female' Surrealism," in *Surrealism and Women*, ed. Mary Ann Caws et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 51.

world.[15] Although passionate about drawing and painting, Tanning received little formal artistic training. She studied briefly at the Chicago Academy of Art, but found more inspiration from the paintings in the nearby Art Institute than in the limited instruction of her teachers. The artist took time to travel, eventually settling in New York in 1936. There she spent her artistic energies supporting herself through magazine and advertisement illustrations with little time to devote to her art.

In 1936 Tanning discovered others who were depicting unusual forms familiar to the aspiring, young artist. The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* displayed works by Breton, Man Ray, and many other artists, including Tanning's future husband, Max Ernst. Encouraged and motivated, Tanning set her sights on Surrealism. Eventually, in 1942, Tanning found representation with Julien Levy, New York's top dealer of Surrealism. That same year, Tanning completed a self-portrait entitled *Birthday* (Fig. 2). Included in a show of female Surrealists at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Art of This Century, the self-portrait aroused the interest of fellow Surrealist, Max Ernst. In 1946, Ernst and Tanning wed.

Although a great admirer of Ernst and working in close quarters with him, Tanning denies any influence. She believes that "When you're so involved in your own iconography and your own vision, you're not bothered by what other people are doing, no matter who they are."[16] Because Tanning had already achieved status as a mature artist, the potentially disruptive forces of marriage did not deter the direction of her work and she was able to preserve her artistic

[15] Interview with Gruen, *The Artist Observed*, 187.

[16] Dorothea Tanning in interview with Barbara Shikler for Archives of American Art, July 11-November 5, 1990, 139.

identity.[17] Unfortunately, however, critics continuously compared her works to those of her husband, and typically dismissed, in most cases, her art by referring to her only in reference as Max Ernst's wife or, later, as his widow. To much of the art world, Tanning was merely an extension of Ernst's career, an apprentice to a master. At one point, after showing her work in conjunction with Ernst in a 1946 exhibition in Washington, D.C., critics mistook her work for his.[18] Increasingly exhausted by these limitations, Tanning gradually tried to separate herself from the Surrealists. One difference she had was that she concentrated on the craft of painting more than she felt they did:

> …I don't think the Surrealists were very good painters. They were wonderful idea men, but, with the exception of maybe two or three of them, they mostly couldn't paint. I feel my work comes out of the whole history of painting, whereas the Surrealists just used a rather summary knowledge of brushwork to put some ideas across.[19]

Tanning did not confine her art to one medium. She has been active as a painter, sculptor, printmaker, book illustrator, and theatrical designer. Although best known for her paintings from the 1940s, which more clearly resemble conventional Surrealist representation, it is her paintings from the late 1950s, known collectively as *Insomnias*, from which Tanning derived the bodily forms of her soft sculptures, bringing her two-dimensional works to life.

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[17] Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 370.

[18] Paula Lumbard, "Dorothea Tanning: On the Threshold to a Darker Place," in *Woman's Art Journal* 2 (Spring-Summer 1981): 49.

[19] Interview with Gruen, *The Artist Observed*, 189.

These canvases convey an overall sense of openness and expansiveness with less emphasis on representational imagery. An aura of mystery surrounds these works.

Leading to the *Insomnias* series, Tanning's paintings of the early 1950s reveal an artist searching for a balance between a figural mode and the speed of gesture, between the possibilities of narration and an autonomous force of impulse.[20] Eventually Tanning learned how to diffuse the contours of the body, creating an idea of corporeality based on imagination. She transformed her compositions into kaleidoscopic worlds of her consciousness. One can view the artist's move towards abstraction in her 1954 painting *Nue Endormie (Sleeping Nude)* (Fig. 3), in which a strange cloud or sheet-like apparition begins to swallow the nude female. Like a looming realm of the unknown, the sheet-scapes forming in the corner of the canvas later overtook Tanning's paintings, engulfing the two-dimensional world into a multi-dimensional mind-space of hide-and-seek, as seen in *La Mal Oublié (The Ill Forgotten)*, 1955, and *Tempête en Jaune (Tempest in Yellow)*, 1956. *Insomnies (Insomnias)*, completed in 1957, marked a turning point in Tanning's career. Conjuring feelings of obsession, anxiety, and agitation, insomnia, the inability to sleep, sometimes induces hallucinations and other forces of dreaming. In this painting (Fig. 4), figures dissolve into a storm of color, their bodies not fully tangible. Light shimmers, ricocheting and reflecting, creating a "sky" of folded light. Within the folds of this "sky," figures gradually emerge. In the effect of veiling and diluting the figures enveloped by shadow and light, critics have associated the bodies with thoughts, the thoughts induced by insomnia. Tanning has created a reality haunted by the impossible sleep.[21] No longer attached to the realistic rendering of her earlier subject matter of young girls in sexually charged settings, the artist began to loosen her

[20] Jean Christophe Bailly, "Image Redux: The Art of Dorothea Tanning," in *Dorothea Tanning*, by Jean Chrisophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 27.
[21] Ibid., 28.

paintbrush and open her compositions into a world of complex planes of color. In regard to this new style, Tanning recalls that "I wanted to lead the eye into spaces that hid, revealed, transformed all at once and where there would be some never-before-seen image, as if it had appeared with no help from me."[22]

Tanning continually dealt with emerging figures in her *Insomnias* series. Ambiguity permeates her paintings, as bodies mingle and dissolve in a shower of shifting colors. Nothing is truly definable from these interior worlds, questions hiding in every corner never to be answered.[23] These paintings contain something one cannot name. For Tanning, art should "…at least make us think about the big questions, the things that people don't want to ask themselves anymore."[24] Within the compositions are brushy suggestions of symbols, stormy and inherently charged. Tanning's paintings seek to achieve a mobile state, a becoming of a moment. This perpetual becoming gives Tanning's paintings their dramatic character.[25]

Scholar Charles Stuckey describes these works of the mid- to late 1950s as "inscapes," much like the inscape series of Roberto Matta, an original member of the Surrealist movement.[26] For Matta, paintings like his 1940 *Invasion of the Night* represent visual analogies of the artist's inner psyche.[27] Tanning was aware of Matta's "inscapes," noting how his canvases merged the "architecture of outer space with the conceits of earthly technologies."[28] Like Matta's journey

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[22] Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 280.
[23] Bailly, 41.
[24] Michelle Falkenstein in interview with Dorothea Tanning, "The Oldest Living Surrealist Tells (Almost) All," in *ARTnews* 100 (September 2001): 147.
[25] Bailly, 34.
[26] Charles Stuckey, "Insomnias" in *Dorothea Tanning: Insomnias,* by Charles Stuckey and Richard Howard (New York: Kent Gallery, 2005), 14.
[27] Valerie Fletcher, *Crosscurrents of Modernism* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 241.
[28] Tanning, *Between Lives,* 177.

into mystical realms, Tanning enjoyed an exploration of a world within the unknown, flirting with abstraction. Yet throughout her oeuvre, Tanning remains committed to the human form.

While her early drawings derived from Surrealism, as in *Early Eye*, 1948 (Fig. 5) with its meticulous handling and symbolic nature, her drawings after the 1960s exhibit signs of unpredictability and fluidity. Although not completely automatic, the artist exhibits signs of a flow of the unconscious, allowing scenes to emerge sinuously, intensifying as Tanning progressively loosens control. These spontaneous actions convey an immediate and intimate expression of individuality. While originally inspired by the conventions of Surrealism, Tanning's visions transform her drawings beyond the dogma of the movement. Donald Kuspit notes a hint of baroque sensibilities in the artist's Surrealist drawings, citing *Ornate Mother*, 1978 (Fig. 6), where a Dionysian undercurrent conveys an idea free from the confines of a self-contained form.[29] Here, the unidentified figure appears to mutate, causing uncertainty for the viewer as to the identity of the form or the emotive quality of the situation. Whatever representational design with which Tanning began, the form unfolds into something indistinct and elusive. One may argue that as the model loses particularity it opens up to more possibilities. Drama results from the unknown. Tanning leaves viewers often wondering what will happen next as her subjects continually transform and interweave, as in *Suburb*, 1979. Content remains a mystery.

Similarly, mystery surrounds the production of Tanning's soft sculptures, which can be viewed through the lens of musical analogies. In 1969, Tanning attended a concert in Paris featuring the work of Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German avant-garde musician. His music was experimental and seemingly extraterrestrial, filled with sounds made from nontraditional

[29] Donald Kuspit, *Dorothea Tanning On Paper 1948-1986* (New York: Kent Gallery, 1987), unpaginated.

instruments, like transformers and generators. It was Stockhausen's concert, which included the composition *Hymnen*, that inspired Tanning to express herself through the outlet of soft sculpture:[30]

> Spinning among the unearthly sounds of *Hymnen* were the earthy even organic shapes that I would make, had to make, out of cloth and wool; I saw them so clearly, living materials, becoming living sculpture, their life-span something like ours. Fugacious they would be, and fragile, to please me, their creator and survivor. I was suddenly content and powerful as I looked around. No one knew what was going on inside me…I felt potent and seminal the way one does about works that have not yet happened.[31]

At this time, Tanning lived primarily in the French country town of Seillans. Although making the occasional trip to Paris, Tanning worked somewhat as a recluse. It is here Tanning began making her soft sculptures. Working with her old pedal Singer sewing machine reminded Tanning of her previous experience with fabric. Sewing would occupy her artistic production for a few years, recalling her time in New York, when she designed sets and constructed costumes for plays and performances, including George Balanchine's ballet *The Night Shadow* in 1945.[32]

Focused solely on her three-dimensional works in the early 1970s, Tanning produced twenty soft sculptures in plush, tweeds, and velvet that were cut, sewn and stuffed with wool, sawdust, and other materials to give them form. Each sculpture appears like a moment of arrested movement, torn from the scenes in her paintings of the mid-1950s to 1960s. Here, only

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[30] Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives*, 281.
[31] Ibid., 281-282.
[32] Bailly, 357.

using a pair of scissors, an iron and a sewing machine were necessary. It is as though a young girl had directed her sewing lessons towards a different goal, one not centered on practicality.[33] She called these sculptures "*real* haute couture."[34] Through this label and her cynical attitude, I believe Tanning is being tongue-in-cheek, mocking the fashion world, with often absurd, unwearable garments.

In 1974, Tanning displayed the installation, *Hotel du Pivot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202*), at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain in Paris (later to be renamed the Centre Pompidou). Imitating a hotel room (Fig. 7), the piece encompassed a group of soft sculptures including *Revelation or End of the Month* and *Time and Place*. Through this installation, Tanning brought to life the phantom inhabitants of her canvases, these nameless characters transported into a physical space. The distorted permutations of the bodily forms in paintings like *Status Quo*, 1965, *Maternité III*, 1966, and *A la Dérive*, 1966, achieve another state of representation. Their soft and fragile nature imitates human nature. The sculptures are sometimes witty, often erotic, and always emotional.[35] For example, *La Table Tragique* (Fig. 8), both erotic and somewhat sadistic, is part table, part figure, and resembles the attitude of the arching body in her 1963 painting *Une Lacune à Combler* (Fig. 9). In her sculpture, a table grows limbs and is attached to the distraught body of a woman. In a tangible world, the tragic table conjures feelings of despair and agony, as the mop of coarse hair hangs limp.

Hybrid fusions appear throughout the staged hotel room, suggesting a desire to escape one's identity, losing oneself into another reality. Figures breach the wallpapered walls, their pink flesh jutting into the viewer's space. The room presents a nightmare, one in which viewers

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[33] *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: Filipacchi Books, 1979), 47.
[34] Stuckey and Howard, *Dorothea Tanning: Insomnias*, 59.
[35] Robert C. Morgan, "A Separate Anthropology," in *Dorothea Tanning*, by Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 302.

may project their own deep secrets or fears. *Hotel* functions as a kind of traumatic tableau, by offering a multi-sensory experience. These figures represent human dilemma, trading in their eroticism for despair, and present the lowest point of hopelessness, for there is no place to go.[36] Here, Tanning's figures in her *Insomnias* emerge from the confines of the two-dimensional canvas to infiltrate the three-dimensional world.

Other soft sculptures approximate the shapes in her paintings. The forms of *Ouvre-Toi*, 1970, and *Canapé en Temps de Pluie*, 1971-73, appropriate forms from her 1968 painting *La Descente Dans la Rue*. *Ouvre-Toi* presents a scene of entangled forms, unsuccessfully engaged in an attempt to open a door, extending from the floor. *Canapé en temps de pluie* invites a humorous reading, as its title translates into the amusing idea of "Studio Couch on a Rainy Day." One can only imagine the inspiration for this creation.

An element of humor permeates these sculptural forms. Tanning readily admitted to infusing her work with an ironic humor that in France is referred to as "le rire jaune," to give a hollow laugh or a sickly smile.[37] This sense of humor is evident in *Don Juan's Breakfast*, 1972 (Fig. 10), which references the literary legend of the libertine character by the same name. The sculpture depicts a dark, buttoned-up mug, brimming with white and fluffy stuffing. Covered in velvet, the buttons barely contain its foaming contents. Steadfast in her use of the female body, this mug could represent the contained female, eager for release. Thus the sculpture provokes the male Surrealist view of the ideal woman as Surrealist object, coddled, adored, and manipulated. I view this as Tanning's stab at feminist humor.

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[36] Ibid., 305.

[37] In personal interview with the artist, Daphne Beneke Jessen, "Dorothea Tanning: Multiple Realities" (Master's thesis, California State University at Northridge, 1986), 89.

Perhaps another piece imbued with feminist undertones is *Emma* (Fig. 11). The inspiration for this 1970 sculpture derived from the heroine from Gustave Flaubert's nineteenth-century novel *Madame Bovary*.[38] Escaping the emptiness of her banal existence in pursuit of love, the protagonist Emma is morphed into a compacted, round abstraction, appropriately adorned with the Victorian staple: lace. Amorphous and nondescript, *Emma* conveys the ethereal ideals of Tanning's agenda in her oeuvre.

Many of the soft sculptures previously mentioned, while sometimes humorous or witty, appear as abnormal manipulations of real forms. A conspicuous piece in Tanning's sculptural oeuvre of is her *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* (1979), in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. Originally created in 1965 (Fig. 12) (and arguably Tanning's first soft sculpture), this bizarre creature derives from the depths of the artist's inner psyche. Intrigued by the structure herself, the artist returned to the piece over a decade later, creating the work under discussion in this essay. Unsatisfied with the size of her original *Pincushion*, Tanning felt the abstract elements required a larger dimension, closer in scale to a public sculpture.[39] She expanded the 14 x 18" original into a 46 x 54" enlargement, closer in size to the human body.

The enlarged 1979 version of *Pincushion* projects a sense of ambiguity. The form is unknowable, yet, simultaneously, the object also remains full of associative images. The sculpture is lively, bulging, jutting, and projecting all over. It induces the impression of an otherworldly, nightmarish creature, indicative of Tanning's long practice of creating Surrealist imagery. Because there is no discernible relationship to her previous imagery, it is likely that the artist relied on automatism to produce the original *Pincushion*. For the enlarged version, Tanning

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[38] Jessen, 89.

[39] Correspondence between Dorothy Kosinski and Frey Norris Gallery (New York), Object file for Dorothea Tanning, *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish*, Dallas Museum of Art, 2005.

could follow sketches of the original and a miniature model. Nevertheless, Tanning made adjustments to her second version of Pincushion, as photographs document a longer protrusion on top of the sculpture (Fig. 13) than that found on the final piece.

Irregular in mass and volume, *Pincushion* appears organic, while simultaneously insinuating something almost otherworldy. This biomorphic object elicits curiosity and produces an ambivalent mood. Is it funny or somber? Humorous or emotive? Erotic or sadistic and sexually violent? Perhaps it is all these things and more. Clearly, this is a provocative piece. In sketches and photographs of the construction, one can see how Tanning worked out the engineering of the structure (Fig. 14). Petite compared to the overwhelmingly large beast, the artist prods and stuffs *Pincushion* until she reaches a satisfied conclusion. This piece stands as a powerful statement about the artist's character, both poetic and unsettling.

Pincushion's bizarre form resides in the realm of Surrealism. For instance, Jean Arp assembled a stock of "cosmic shapes," in his *Chinese Shadow*, 1974 (Fig. 15). Comprised of three waves of rounded protrusions, the form of *Chinese Shadow* does not represent anything recognizable. Instead, it evokes a feeling of sensuality and emotion. Similarly, Yves Tanguy's paintings are filled with odd, biomorphic shapes, which he translated into three dimensions, in works such as his 1936 piece *From the Other Side of The Bridge*. Like Tanning's pincushion, the soft sculpture element in his piece does not signify anything recognizable to our world. Its alien shape resembles the unusual forms in his paintings, like *The Extermination of the Species*, 1936.

Tanning's *Pincushion* also aligns with Surrealism's fascination with the "primitive." The artist performs as a shaman, conducting magic through her sculpture. When the Dallas Museum of Art acquired the piece, the artist gave the curators permission to place the pins according to their choosing. This invitation and the *Pincushion*'s form and cryptic nature situate the sculpture

into an area of sorcery. Tanning wrote: "A fetish is something not exactly or always desirable in sculpture, being a superstitious if not actually shamanistic object; and yet, to my mind it's not so far from a pincushion – after all, pins are routinely stuck in both."[40]

Pincushion also evokes the sexual use of the fetish. In Freud's explanation of the fetish's role in the male castration complex, he identifies the fetish as the site of displacement. The female body usually become the object of desire, or fetishized. The fetish object transforms into a substitute for the female's lack of penis. Since Tanning is a woman working within this gendered-male discourse, one must consider an alternative approach to reading how the fetish operates. In that regard, the *Pincushion* could become a substitute for the phallus that Tanning lacks. The illusion of this substitute alludes to the continued belief of something male and phallic, projecting a sense of power that allows Tanning to be perceived as the operative gender within Surrealism.

However, in her *Pincushion*, Tanning seems to subtly exploit Surrealist tendencies to feminist ends. Does this sculpture symbolize a woman's life? As a woman working within a predominantly male art movement, Tanning obviously encountered obstacles throughout her career. Not only did she struggle under the Surrealist conception of woman, but also under the renown of her husband, Max Ernst, whose work eclipsed hers in the art world. Perhaps the loose strings hanging from the ends of the sculpture's orifices suggest an unraveling of the artist herself, at loose ends with the reception of her work.

Pincushion exemplifies Tanning's use of *le rire jaune*. As Tanning reflects on her experiences, she employs a dark, somewhat feminist irony to convey her situation. She has said

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[40] Tate Collection, London, UK, accessed 2/17/09. http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=76407&searchid=9036

that the brutal cutting and slashing of fabric, by which to make a sculpture such as *Pincushion*, was a pleasure in itself.[41] Sewing and constructing *Pincushion* gave Tanning a sense of power, perhaps working out her frustrations and resentment through her work. Pleasure incited by inflicting a metaphorical pain during the process of needlework translates into a sadomasochistic element in the piece: the sharp pins penetrating the dark, soft velvet. The piece perhaps expresses Tanning's frustration with the art world. Its soft, languid form suggests that like analogies to a whale who is slaughtered by seamen, this forlorn pincushion could represent Tanning's efforts that are defeated, poked, and prodded by critics.

Meaning in Tanning's work remains, however, elusive. The artist deflects an easily accessible explanation of her work. Despite the publication of her autobiography *Birthday* and the revised version *Between Lives*, the artist does not interpret her work nor that of her husband's. For Tanning, a work of art lives within a world of language unknown to the public.

In one of the rare instances when she directly addresses her work, specifically her painting *Birthday* (Fig. 2), Tanning questions the stability of truth perceived in self-portraits. Often, female Surrealists turned to self-portraiture to resolve the conflicts of inner and outer realities, while male Surrealists projected their inner realities, often desires, onto an external being: a fetish.[42] Tanning's *Birthday* interweaves fibers of fantasy and reality, the abundance of doors concealing a hidden world of imagination. Discussing this self-portrait, Tanning is enigmatic:

> But what is a portrait? Is it a mystery and revelation, conscious and unconscious, poetry and madness? Is it an angel, a demon, a hero, a

[41] Morgan, 303.
[42] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 92.

> child-eater, a ruin, a romantic, a monster, a whore? Is it a miracle or a poison? I believe that a portrait, particularly a self-portrait, should be somehow, all of these things and many more, recorded in a secret language clad in the honesty and innocence of paint.[43]

A secret language permeates Tanning's pincushion. Decoded, *Pincushion* elucidates Tanning's way of "poking" at the absurdities and limitations placed on women in Surrealism by its male founders. She employs their technique of the fetish in both senses of the term: working in the realm of sorcery and "primitive" religion and the sexualized objectification of the female body. While the sculpture exudes ironic humor and wit, Tanning makes a serious commentary. She is not as concerned with the general plight of women in a feminist sense, but involved in her personal journey. With that, I believe *Pincushion* can be interpreted as a self-portrait. Simultaneously, through the guise of a language of ambivalence, the piece can function on a general level as well; *Pincushion* could function as a portrait for all those who respond to the impediments of their world. Yet the ambiguous nature of the sculpture deflects any direct or obvious statement, with Tanning inducing a state of wonder, in which the viewer must decipher meaning.

Just as her journey into soft sculpture began abruptly, so too, did Tanning's constructions suddenly end in 1974. She asks, "Why go on? I did it."[44] Apparently, Tanning felt that her five-year adventure into the three-dimensional world fulfilled her interests.

While Tanning was exploring an ironic commentary through her pieces of "real" *haute couture*, the New York art world was consumed with Pop, Minimal, Earth, and Conceptual art.

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[43] Dorothea Tanning in *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* by Sidney Janis (New York: William Bradford Press, 1944), 107.

[44] Bailly, 39.

Her soft sculptures structures were far removed from the conventions of these other art forms. Tanning's three-dimensional creations project another level of being, a being emanating from a simultaneous reality that works both inside and outside of our certainties.[45]

Pincushion challenges perceptions by working on many levels. One realm in which the soft sculpture performs is the world of magic. Evoking the practice of sorcery and old religion, the sculpture correlates with the Surrealist interest in the "primitive" and the religious use of the fetish, integrating the sacred (fetish) with the everyday (pincushion).

The Allure of the "Primitive" and the Fetish

Georges Bataille asserted that "…the quest for primitive culture represents the principal, most decisive and vital, aspect of the meaning of Surrealism, if not its precise definition."[46] The Surrealists searched for tokens of uninhibited desire, for "primitive" states of consciousness, and for the integration of the sacred into their everyday lives. Surrealism's quest to transcend the visual language of Western art led them to the exotic forms of "primitive" objects and ethnographic collections. Breton's mission drove the artist to endow tribal objects with surreal power. This use of the "primitive" attempted to undermine the value system of bourgeois Europe. Unlike the Cubists and other modernists, who borrowed the formal qualities of African sculpture to transform European imagery, the Surrealists viewed the exotic as a means to disrupt European notions altogether.[47] Through their investigation into non-Western worlds, the Surrealists felt they could create alternative universes within the milieu of bourgeois Paris.

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[45] Morgan, 307.

[46] Georges Bataille, "The Surrealist Religion" in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 1994), 71.

[47] Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), 200.

For Surrealism, beauty in the "primitive" object existed because it subverted the bourgeois aesthetic. These exotic objects challenged European notions of art, as some "primitive" items did not rely on sight. For example, masks from Mali were kept in sacred graves or placed in dark environments and small statues remained covered, not intended to be seen.[48] Meaning existed only in the object's sacred place in ritual, an idea translated into the Surrealist object that possessed a radiant energy. This perception transformed these items into a fetish in both the religious and erotic senses.

A provocative term, "fetish" has a long and diverse history. The term originates from the Latin *fasticious*, meaning "artificial" or "manufactured." The idea of the fetish began in association with notions of magic. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century seamen referred to African charms as fetishes. Fetishism connoted a belief in the dwelling of departed souls or deities in tangible objects and the religious worship of these materials.[49] The fetish exists as the link between the worshipper and the object of his or her worship. Tribal African cultures viewed the conception of the fetish as an instrument by which the spirit acts, possessing personality and will. Later, the fetish connoted a general superstitious belief in nineteenth-century Europe.[50] In both historic and contemporary use, "fetish" remains constant in its connotation of superstition, falsehood, derogation, and the foreign.[51] Freud repeatedly referred to the fetish, and Surrealists were well familiar with the term, applying it to their found and "primitive" objects. Some of these collections contained items like *nkondi nkisi* (Fig. 16), or nail "fetish," in which nails or

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[48] Jean Laude, *The Arts of Black Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 189.

[49] Alfred C. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1921), 65.

[50] Anthony Shelton, "The Chameleon Body: Power, Mutilation and Sexuality," in *Fetishism: Visualizing Power and Desire*, ed. Anthony Shelton (Brighton: Lund Humphries, 1995), 8.

[51] Suzanne Preston Blier, "Truth and Seeing: Magic, Custom, and Fetish in Art History," in *Africa and the Disciplines,* ed. Robert Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 144.

metal blades penetrate wooden bodies to activate the spirit's radiant force.[52] Appropriately, a late nineteenth-century *nkondi nkisi* from the Democratic Republic of Congo currently stands next to Tanning's 1979 *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* within the Dallas Museum of Art. Unlike Tanning's abstract bodily form, the African *nkondi nkisi* clearly depicts a human form. The artist's sculpture aligns with this African fetish, emanating a strange, supernatural power as its pins protrude from the dark, velvet flesh of the sculpture like the sharp blades that project from the tribal figure's abdomen.

Sigmund Freud adopted the fetish and reconstructed the term in relation to sexuality. Freud's theory of the fetish revealed the male castration complex in which the boy discovers the mother's lack of penis and recognizes a threat to his own. This traumatic moment displaces the young boy's anxiety onto an object or another part of the body. Fetish, in this case, manifests as a substitute for the absent maternal penis, which may appear as articles of clothing, parts of the human body, or materials, such as fur.[53] The fetish is not to be confused as a replacement for the female genitalia with an alternate, codified female, but as a substitute that permits the misconception that the woman is male and phallic. This process produces an incorrect sense of blurring of male and female sexual difference.[54] Surrealism further pursued fetishes as resources of obscured boundaries between imagination and reality, a perception Freud interpreted as the "primitive" belief in magic or animism.

Freud's ideas made a large impact on the Surrealist movement. As the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud inspired the Surrealists to explore the realm of the subconscious through

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[52] John Mack, "Fetish?: Magic Figures from Central Africa," in *Fetishism: Visualizing Power and Desire*, ed. Anthony Shelton (Brighton: Lund Humphries, 1995), 56.

[53] Sigmund Freud, "Fetish" in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 152-154.

[54] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 165.

art. According to Freud, repression creates the unconscious, where desire is suppressed. One can access these desires in the dream world, where the desires manifest in symbolic form. Removed from the world of reason, the unconscious became a repository of creativity and a main source for surreal art.

The Surrealists sought to integrate the conscious and unconscious realms, synthesizing the rational with the irrational. Tanning, however, viewed the Surrealists as overly reliant on Freud and psychoanalysis. In response to accusations that her art was teeming with sex symbols, Tanning declared, "Well I certainly think that sex is important and necessary and desirable, but there's also so much else! As for the fixation on psychoanalysis, I just never believed that Freud was the crux of the Surrealist movement."[55]

Yet Tanning cohabitated with one member of the movement whom Freud strongly influenced: her husband, Max Ernst. Freud's theories, in particular his notion of totemism, left a lasting impact on Ernst's work. Understood as the identification with an animal spirit, totemism resonated in Ernst's transformation from human to Loplop, the Superior of the Birds. He would wear Hopi masks, incorporating feather headdresses in his Bird Costume. Totemism, animism, and magic were means for humans to develop a closer spiritual relationship with nature. For Surrealists, Europe's industrialization damaged this relationship. It became their objective to recapture that connection.[56] Ernst preoccupied himself with finding his own myth, which manifested in his work in the form of animals and anthropomorphic images that are in the

[55] Interview with Gruen, *The Artist Observed*, 189.
[56] Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61.

process of transformation or metamorphosis, as seen in his 1940 painting, *The Robbing of the Bride*.[57]

In addition to totemism and personal mythology, another aspect of the "primitive" that intrigued Ernst were the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest. Through his frequent travels to the region and eventually settling in Sedona, Arizona, with Tanning, Ernst amassed a large collection of pueblo dolls, or *kachinas*.[58] Similar to the fetishes of West Africa, these small wooden carvings represented supernatural spirits to the Hopi and Zuni tribes. In addition to the pueblo dolls, Ernst admired and mimicked the sand paintings inspired by Navaho traditions.[59] Although moving to Arizona to escape New York, Ernst's main attraction to the region was the Native Americans and their customs. Ernst and Tanning frequently visited Hopi pueblos, explored rock paintings, and befriended several members of the tribe.[60]

Another Surrealist attracted to Freud was Hans Bellmer, who carried out ideas of the fetish, in his focus on the *Poupée*, or doll, in 1933. Bellmer constructed his *Poupée* with found objects that were anatomically rearranged in odd configurations, making its artificial status more obvious. His dolls recall the male fascination with the female body, a love-hate object, both suggestive and explicit. These creations emerged from Bellmer's anger and frustration with his father and society.[61] In addition, Bellmer became consumed with images of pubescent girls, luring neighboring orphans to model for his paintings and drawings, and even dabbling in erotic photography. Even more perverse was his growing infatuation with his seventeen-year-old

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[57] Elisabeth Legge, *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 42.
[58] Tythacott, 155.
[59] Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 173.
[60] Sigrid Metkin, "Ten Thousand Redskins – Max Ernst and the North American Indians," in *Max Ernst a Retrospective*, ed. Werner Spies (Munich: Prestal, 1991), 359.
[61] Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 21.

cousin.[62] On a superficial level, Bellmer made his first doll as a substitute for his cousin. As an object injected with his desires, the doll functioned as a fetish. He employed photography to document his creations, setting up somewhat sinister narratives filled with drama.[63] The images' eroticized rage evokes ideas of sadomasochism. The artist himself was aware of his sadistic tendencies and felt his art, his dolls, provided an appropriate outlet to work out those desires.[64]

Scenes of sexual frustration and violence inflicted on Bellmer's dolls anticipate the mutilation of Tanning's *Pincushion*. Probed and penetrated with sharp pins, Tanning's fetish object incites a masochistic reading. However, the pincushion's underlying affliction does not resonate with the same ferocity as Bellmer's dolls, which portray the intensity of the oppressive patriarchal objectification and fetishization of the female body, constantly reaffirming the "otherness" of woman.[65] Bellmer falls in line with the Surrealist avant-garde technique of exaggerating the establishment of gender roles and relations.

Prior to Tanning, another female Surrealist who elicited the fetish in her work was Meret Oppenheim. Her famous *Déjeuner en Fourrure* (1936) incites discussion of the oral fetish. Using an ordinary cup and saucer, Oppenheim was concerned less with the actual pieces these utilitarian objects represented than with the bizarre and unusual light they shed on the familiar.[66] A revolt against traditional expectations, "Lunch in Fur" alludes to the sexual and abject, as the furry surface conjures thoughts of hairy parts of the body. In this piece, Oppenheim avoided the symbolic and emphasized a physiological response to the covering of a cup, saucer, and spoon in

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[62] Ibid., 56.
[63] Ibid., 73.
[64] Ibid., 91.
[65] Lora Rempel, "The Anti-Body in Photomontage: Hannah Höch's Woman without Wholeness," in *Sexual Artifice: Persons, Images, Politics*, ed. Ann Kibbey et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 165-166.
[66] Werner Spies, "Meret Oppenheim's *Objet de Désir*," in *Meret Oppenheim: Retrospective,* ed. Therese Bhattacharya-Stettler and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 22.

fur.[67] Looking at the piece, the viewer feels an immediate sense of furriness on the tongue, imagining the experience of drinking from such a cup. That transformation of sensation plays with rational thought, a desired result in Surrealism. Keeping in mind Freud's theory of the fetish, the use of hair and fur were common materials associated with notions of eroticism in Surrealism. Exhibited at the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Oppenheim's humorous, disturbing, and erotic fetish was likely seen by Tanning.

The Tendencies of Soft Sculpture

Tanning's *Pincushion* is unusual in the history of sculpture. Soft sculpture has a softness that comes both from the material and the construction. Unlike hard sculpture, soft sculpture may be subject to the force of physical pressure. It possesses the potential for transforming into unintended shapes. Despite any attempts to abstract the form, soft sculpture inevitably recalls the corporeal.[68] The material of soft sculpture, often fabric, evokes the humanity of our ephemeral nature, as evident in Tanning's *Pincushion*.

The preeminent artist who introduced soft sculpture into the American mainstream in the 1960s was Claes Oldenburg. He settled on vinyl as his material of choice, its sheen and softness capable of achieving his desired effect, as seen in his first vinyl piece *Telephone*, 1963. Vinyl features impressionable qualities that allow for unlimited possibilities in playing with shapes and optics. Flaccidity becomes a dynamic, expressive quality. While presented as large, single items, Oldenburg's soft sculptures exhibit articulated surfaces through stitching, paint, or reflective materials. Despite its involvement in the traditional realm of "women's work" – sewing –

[67] Ibid., 24.
[68] Max Kozloff, "The Poetics of Softness," in *Renderings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 224.

Oldenburg never touched a sewing machine. Rather, his first wife, Pat Muschinski, worked as his seamstress for many of his endeavors, carrying out her husband's demands.[69]

Also, unlike Tanning, who finds inspiration in the subconscious, Oldenburg sources his imagery from objects of the everyday world, working between the ways an object looks and how he feels about it. This organic process was based on memories and information.[70] Barbara Rose argues that Oldenburg views all objects, whose relationships are based on their similarity in form rather than on their semantic meaning, as interrelated. Objects connect because their forms allocate them in the same morphological class, forming categories that resemble "totemic kinships," a method of ordering the world determined in "primitive" societies.[71] Just as the "primitive" utilizes categories of totemic kinships to control the world, Oldenburg employs classification as a structuring process, to bring order to the contemporary. Furthermore, Rose associates Oldenburg with the "primitive" use of the fetish. His oversized, stuffed, soft sculptures emanate an appealing personality. Although his objects bring one down to earth in his representation of common items, Oldenburg's soft sculptures maintain a presence that radiates, almost magical in the same manner that Tanning's *Pincushion* emits a supernatural power. In addition, just as Tanning enlarged her pincushion of 1965, Oldenburg often creates larger, sometimes monumental versions of his original sculptures. Therefore, Oldenburg's objects push viewers to question the real space of objects around them while responding to the sculpture and connect to the work's correlation to their own inner predispositions.[72]

Another artist who appropriates the everyday into soft sculpture is Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Moreover, she engages in Surrealist conceptions of psycho-pathological art as well as

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[69] Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 147.
[70] Ibid., 96.
[71] Ibid., 169.
[72] Kozloff, 227.

in a relationship with the fetish. Phallic forms enshrouded her sculptures, their forms alien from the domestic props from which the phalluses protrude. This juxtaposition produced something awkward, funny, and emotional, daring to be simultaneously humorous and ominous.

Although Freud applied his theory of the fetish to men only, women clearly can behave in a fetishist manner. In interviews, Kusama admitted to a fear of the phallus.[73] Coping with anxieties, like Kusama's hallucinations and her fear of sex and male genitalia, women can engage in fetishization through repetitive behavior, a mainstay in Kusama's art.

Although not a feminist outright, Kusama reflected on the conditions under which she worked through her art, responding to the environment in which she found herself in the male-dominated New York art world. In some cases, these sculptures exuded humor, as in *Traveling Life*, 1964 (Fig. 17). Here, women's high-heeled shoes struggle to climb a ladder, overtaken by a swarm of stuffed phalluses. One can interpret the shoes as representing Kusama herself, expressing how she understood her situation, one similar to that which Tanning experienced.[74] Surrounded and threatened by men in the art world, Kusama had to fight her way to the top.

Later, these body-oriented objects infiltrated the work of other artists in the 1970s, like Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. Likewise, Tanning's soft sculptures remain evidently body-centered, despite indirect representation, as in the abstract form in *Pincushion*. Furthermore, Kusama's domestic objects coated with stuffed phallic protrusions anticipated the feminist agenda of the 1970s to challenge the structures of sexual difference.

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[73] Yayoi Kusama in conversation with Akira Tatehata, in *Yayoi Kusama*, by Laura Hoptman, et al. (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 16.

[74] Lynn Zelevansky, "Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York," in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968*, by Lynn Zelevansky et al. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 25.

The Feminist Issue with "Women's Work"

Despite the advent of feminist reform in art history and its mission to give female artists their due, Tanning opposed its efforts. Adverse to the separation of women artists, Tanning refused to show in any exhibitions dedicated solely to art made by women. Nevertheless, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin included one of Tanning's paintings in their seminal 1976 exhibition *Women Artists: 1550-1950*.[75] Maintaining that women's art and men's art do not differ, Tanning, as with other women of Surrealism, claimed not to create work that focused on issues of gender. However, her paintings and sculptures usually centered around representations of the female and women's bodies. No male figures occur in Tanning's works, with the exception of her portraits of Max Ernst. She did not consider herself part of any movement, least of all feminism. She contends, "I certainly have no truck with the so-called Women's Movement. I've never been obsessed with the woman questions. You see, I'm just a human being."[76] Tanning was not alone in mocking the biological determinism she found irrelevant. Meret Oppenheim criticized the "ghettoising" of women artists, not accepting an inferior rank within the movement or the art world in general.[77]

Although an advocate for women artists, Judy Chicago presented a speech at the 1972 Cornell University "Festival of Women in the Arts," which limited women artists to specific categories of representation based on essentialism. Showing examples of her own work and works by other female artists, Chicago emphasized four patterns she discovered throughout women's art. They include: repeating forms, circular forms, organic forms, and the central

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[75]Anne Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), 338.

[76] Dorothea Tanning in interview with John Gruen, *The Artist Observed* (Pennington: a cappella books, 1991), 192.

[77] Dawn Ades, "Surrealism, Male-Female," in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 171.

aperture, or the representation of an opening in the center of a painting.[78] By identifying these uniquely female forms in art, some felt that Chicago had proposed a woman's aesthetic. No longer an imitation of men, women's art could now be seen as generating from a different universe, a different unconscious. Women's art recorded the female experience, showing an alternative view of reality.

By the 1970s, women began to band together, forming a growing feminist art movement. They addressed critical issues surrounding women, such as their exclusion from the art historical canon, cultural oppression, and issues of domesticity and femininity.[79] Women associated with the feminist art movement celebrated female knowledge and experience. Tanning's *Pincushion* raises issues of women and "skirt work." In particular, the *Pincushion* references the realm of crafts and sewing, activities associated with domesticity and feminine responsibility for the household. If one reads the soft bulbous form as an abstract representation of the female body, the pins could symbolize the male infliction of dominance over women. This concentration on women's oppression in society diffused throughout feminist art of the 1970s.

Similarly, Judy Chicago's famous *Dinner Party*, 1974-79, employs an iconography of women's history that asks viewers to ponder the value of women's contributions to both history and culture and the ways in which that history has been perceived.[80] She utilized the technique of china painting and needlework, both of which had previously been valued art forms but are now primarily derided as woman's craft or hobbies. Chicago was attracted to the reintegration of

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[78] Maryse Holder, "Another Cuntree: At Last, a Mainstream Female Art Movement," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, and Joanna Frueh (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 2.

[79] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 4th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 356.

[80] Josephine Withers, "Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 454.

crafts into fine art, recounting women's history through women's techniques.[81] By investigating the history of needlework and china painting, Chicago's project revealed the quality of life for women and their relationship to these practices, noting how women's changing position in society correlated with the change in styles and application of pattern. Overall, the project challenged the framework of what constitutes art according to the mainstream art world.

Another woman often associated with feminist art practices was Ana Mendieta. Her work focused on art made from, with, and of the body, and more specifically, her own body. For feminists, Mendieta's body-centered art was based on the issues of female identity and the ongoing struggle for women's voice and authority.[82] Some of her best-known works, her Silueta Series, involve incorporating her naked body or the outline of her figure into nature and landscapes. These "earth body" artworks incited the ancestral world. For example, her 1977 *Untitled* (Fetish Series, Iowa) (Fig. 18) elicits the *nkondi nkisi* figures Tanning references in her *Pincushion*. Unlike the abstract bodily form in Tanning's work, Mendieta clearly presents her own figure cast in mud, ritually pierced with wooden sticks. Focusing on her gender, critics interpreted Mendieta's art as embodying the male violence against women and the marginalization of women in the art world.[83]

The ideologies of the 1970s women's movement established the feminist challenge of art history's prejudices towards women's cultural and historical traditions. Some artists, like Chicago, were commanding in their incorporation of "crafts," directly addressing issues of women's roles. Others, like Tanning, insinuate issues of domesticity and women's oppression.

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[81] Judy Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (New York: Anchor Press, 1980), 10.

[82] Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 21.

[83] Ibid., 25.

Inevitably, many female artists working in untraditional materials like fabric, weaving, and the like are pigeonholed into a feminist category.

Conclusion

Although not inspired by a feminist agenda, Dorothea Tanning's *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* projects a sense of frustration derived from the struggles of a woman working in a male dominated art world. As discussed earlier, Kusama's integration of domestic objects plagued by a swarm of phalluses in her *Accumulation*s generated a connection to the artist in a way that represented her personal experience in the male world of the New York art environment. Similarly, Tanning's *Pincushion* translates as an embodiment of her personal journey as a female artist—essentially a self-portrait.

The specific object indicated in the sculpture's title aids interpretation. A pincushion's affiliations to "women's work" provide further evidence of the performance of *Pincushion* as a mutilated female body. As Oldenburg and Kusama demonstrated, soft sculpture inherently elicits a human quality, a softness of flesh. Reflecting that sentiment, *Pincushion* reads as a representation of the bodily. The chalky white lines register as scars and stitches of past experienced pains. Producing this sculpture within the discourse of Surrealism and its fascination with the woman as object, the *Pincushion* assumes the fetishized female body, manipulated, deformed, and punctured with pins. With the piercing of several pins, the *Pincushion* as the artist functions as a self-sacrificial object. The correlation between the ritual performance of inflicted violence and the sexual objectification of the female body imbues the sculpture with sadomasochistic characteristics.

By working within the vocabulary and practices of Surrealism, Tanning acknowledged the patriarchal misogyny in which she pursued an artistic identity. Her short period of production

in soft sculpture suggests that Tanning had some emotional urge to express. Because the reference of *Pincushion*'s form is not clear, the artist leaves something to be guessed. This ambiguity concedes the piece to transcend the individual and incline towards the universal. The enigmatic quality of her work encourages viewers to look beyond the limitations of exclusive interpretations into a world of multiple images and possibilities. The ability of Tanning's *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* to exploit Surrealist tendencies, specifically allusions to the fetish, with elements of soft sculpture supplied the appropriate combination for a provocative piece of artwork.

Figure 1
Dorothea Tanning
Pincushion to Serve as Fetish, 1979
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas
Reproduced in Dallas Museum of Art Collection, Dallas, TX,
http://collections.dallasmuseumofart.org/

Figure 2
Dorothea Tanning
Birthday, 1942
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 59.

Figure 3
Dorothea Tanning
Nue Endormie (Sleeping Nude), 1954
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 103.

Figure 4
Dorothea Tanning
Insomnies (Insomnias), 1957
Collection of the Artist,
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 109.

Figure 5
Dorothea Tanning
Early Eye, 1948
Collection of the Artist
Reproduced in Donald Kuspit, *Dorothea Tanning: On Paper 1948-1986* (New York: Kent Fine Art, Inc., 1987), unpaginated.

Figure 6
Dorothea Tanning
Ornate Mother, 1978
Collection of the Artist
Reproduced in Donald Kuspit, *Dorothea Tanning: On Paper 1948-1986* (New York: Kent Fine Art, Inc., 1987), unpaginated.

Figure 7
Dorothea Tanning
Hotel du Pivot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202), 1971-73
Centre Pompidou, Paris
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 323.

Figure 8
Dorothea Tanning
La Table Tragique, from *Hotel du Pivot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room* 202), 1971-73
Centre Pompidou, Paris
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 330.

Figure 9
Dorothea Tanning
Une Lacune à Combler, 1963
Collection of Mme Claude Hersaint, Paris
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 133.

Figure 10
Dorothea Tanning
Don Juan's Breakfast, 1972
Collection of the Artist
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 321.

Figure 11
Dorothea Tanning
Emma, 1970
Collection of the Artist
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 317.

Figure 12
Dorothea Tanning
Pincushion to Serve as Fetish, 1965
Tate, London
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 309.

Figure 13
Dorothea Tanning
photograph of *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* in studio, Paris, 1979
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 334.

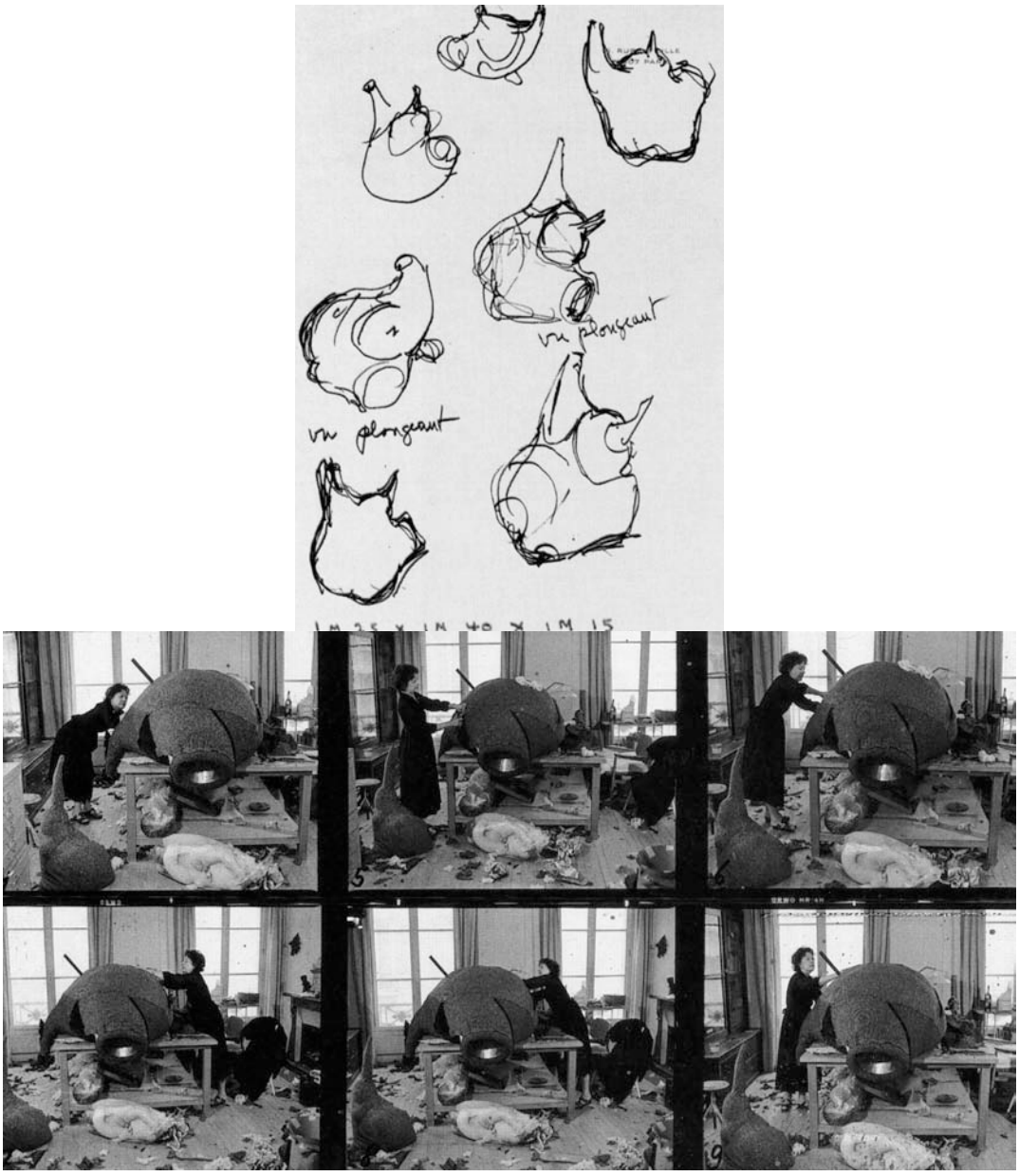

Figure 14
Dorothea Tanning
sketches and photograph of studio, Paris, 1979
Reproduced in Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 334.

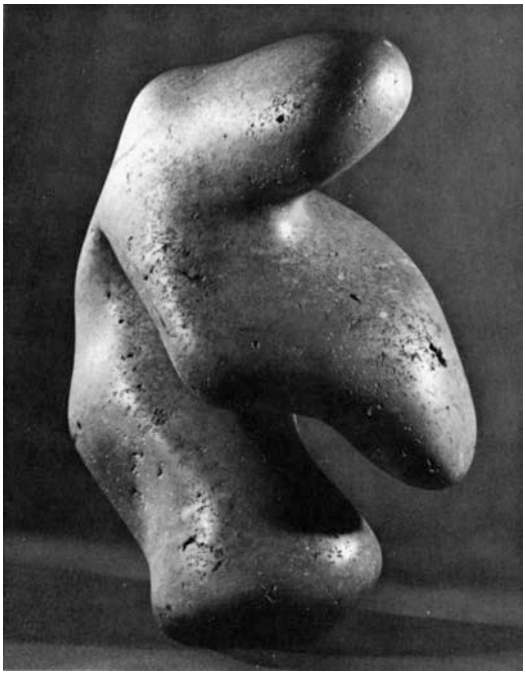

Figure 15
Jean Arp
Chinese Shadow, 1947
Reproduced in Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, trans. Gordon Clough (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 87.

Figure 16
The Kongo peoples
Nail "fetish" (*nkondi nkisi)*, 19th century
Liverpool Museum, England
Reproduced in Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 115.

Figure 17
Yayoi Kusama
Traveling Life, 1964
The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
Reproduced in Lynn Zelevanksy et al., *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 43.

Figure 18
Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Fetish Series, Iowa), 1977
The Whitney Museum, New York
Reproduced in Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 128.

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VITA

Leslie Diane Thompson was born on December 9, 1985, in Lewisville, Texas. She is the daughter of Dwayne and Shirley Thompson. A 2004 graduate of Marcus High School in Flower Mound, Texas, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art history with a minor in French from the University of North Texas in 2007.

She enrolled for graduate study at Texas Christian University in August of 2007. While working on her master's degree in art history, she also worked as the Curatorial Research Assistant to Becky Lawton at the Amon Carter Museum of Fort Worth. Additionally, she served as teaching assistant to Dr. Babette Bohn and Dr. Amy Freund.

She received Graduate Student Tuition Scholarships and Kimbell Fellowships each semester during the completion of her degree. She was awarded a Sunkel Travel Endowment Award from the Department of Art and Art History. She used this award to travel to Washington, D.C. for research purposes. Anticipating a Master of Arts in Art History in May 2009, she hopes to continue a career in the art world.

ABSTRACT

Generally produced within a five-year period in the early 1970s, Dorothea Tanning's soft sculptures evoke a sensual, emotive, and sometimes humorous character. In this paper, I examine Tanning's *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish,* 1979*,* in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. Despite its title, *Pincushion* is less identifiable than most of Tanning's sculptures, making it even more open to interpretation. More than her other sculptures, *Pincushion* encourages the viewer's mind to wander imaginatively in search of meaning.

To understand this piece, I explore the context within which Tanning worked. The Surrealist movement greatly influenced Tanning and remains the primary impetus behind her art and imagery. Her employment of the fetish conjures up Surrealism's interest in the sacred traditions of "primitive" societies and the strong influence of Sigmund Freud's theory of sexual displacement. Although eager to join Surrealism at the beginning of her career, Tanning gradually shifted away from the movement and refused any association. Yet she continued to engage with Surrealist imagery and practices. Considering this contradiction, I view Tanning's *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* as the artist's exploitation and subversion of Surrealism.

The association of human characteristics is a common quality found in soft sculpture, as examined in the works of other artists, such as Claes Oldenburg and Yayoi Kusama. Likewise, *Pincushion*'s material and method of construction, as well as the title's allusion to a domestic object, a pincushion, elicits a discussion of feminist art practices emerging around the production period of Tanning's soft sculpture. Through my investigation of all of these elements, I illuminate how Tanning appropriates the idea of the body from the evocation of the fetish and the inherent nature of soft sculpture to produce an object that functions both as a self-portrait and as an object open to projected portraits of the viewers clad in the language of enigma.