

Essay on Janice Gordon's Exhibition *Embodiments*,

La Specola Museum, Florence, Italy

Acaademia.edu 2014

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The exhibition *Embodiments: Medicine, Metaphor, Metaphysics* states that 'Implicit in Janice Gordon's work is the question "What is embodied?'. Using both this exhibition and the wax anatomical models of La Specola which inspired it, I explore the concept of embodiment.

Occasionally there is a contemporary art exhibition which is so profoundly moving and thought provoking that you almost forget it is 'of the moment' because it feels like it has or should always have existed. Everything the artist brings together blends so effortlessly and poetically that the entire experience transcends mere academic prose, making the communication of the artist's ideas in this way rather challenging. This essay takes the recent exhibition of Janice Gordon in the Museo di Zoologia 'La Specola' at the University of Florence, where she asked 'What is embodied?' She is not the first to ask this question but through her art she clearly and eloquently formulated an answer, proving that all art is able to provide us with a form of condensed

knowledge that captures our concrete and lived experience in ways that escape discursive prose.¹ Her personal art/visual media was not just inspired by medical procedures and bodily trauma but it is a historical narrative of what it is to be Janice Gordon. We may have had similar health experiences to the artist, but the physical manifestation of her point of view is unique, just as our or your experience would be.

What I shall be demonstrating here is how she did this, drawing on and combining the three points of exhibition, location and theory as ways to discuss the concept of embodiment. Literature on the topic is vast therefore I have taken three books – dipping into others where necessary – that discuss embodiment from different viewpoints; the sociological, the aesthetic and clinical/psychological. This ensures that Gordon's art has a theoretical structural framework, especially regarding the duality of body and mind, as well as the arguing that it is within the very nature of

embodiment to encompass both the particular and the general. I open with a description of the exhibition; Gordon's representations of the body in wax, paper, video, found objects, combined with a dialogue with the exhibition's location, enables discussion regarding the nature of embodiment from many perspectives. At the heart of the essay there are deeper interpretations of her work, where I connect references to the feminine body, heart disease, the wax Venuses of 'La Specola', anatomy and its relation with art history.

Academic writings on Gordon and her art are limited. Explanations and responses to her ideas emerge in exhibition catalogue introductions, a 1994 MA thesis on primitivism, videos, news articles, blog posts and her writings, with her contributions to the women and heart disease science debate being of special interest.² In journalistic interviews about her personal and artistic interest in life and death, she explains that she was exposed to the notion of death in a traumatic way which fundamentally shaped her practice.³ Her latest

1 Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, 'Art and embodiment: Biological and phenomenology contributions to understanding beauty and the aesthetic', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (June 2005) <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=291> (accessed 21/4/13)

2. 2 This is useful for material up to 2010
<http://www.janicegordon.net/resume.pdf> accessed 23/3/13
3. 3 Excerpt from Artist's Gallery Talk,
<http://www.janicegordon.net/transitions-text.html> accessed 16/3/13

exhibition showed three major series, *Matters of the Heart* (2006-present), *Transmissions*, *Materia medica/metafisica*, and was interspersed with three video pieces, 'Operation one' (2012), 'Looking Inside' (2012) and 'Looking Inside: An Anatomical Timeline' (2012). In 2006 she had a heart attack and *Matters of the Heart* grew out of that experience, when she started taking organic materials, wrapping them in paper and creating sculptures. However a meeting with a cardiologist/electro-physiologist led to her incorporating catheters, pacemakers, defibrillators and other medical materials and she witnessed open heart, thoracic, robotic and endoscopic surgeries. *Transmissions* emerged a little later, a development of *Matters of the Heart*. The final series *Materia medica/metafisica* which emerged from her recent time in Italy, moves away from the sculptural and focuses on a collage of manuscript, anatomical drawings, renaissance icons, glued together with beeswax from a monastic apiary. She has created images which are

beautiful, recognisable yet emotionally unsettling, uncanny and probably the most commercial works in this collection.

What was not commercial was the location. It was situated in a corridor in a building which houses the natural specimen collection of the University of Florence. Room after room demonstrates the mania of Medici imposition of order on the natural world from the 16-18th century, as supplemented by later regimes. However what sets this place apart are the rare wax anatomical collections from the 1700-1800s. The change from fur and feather to the human is announced by a wax skeleton in a glass case. Stepping straight out of a William Cheselden illustration, his delicately wired parts quiver with vibrating footfall. He holds up his hand up to catch your attention and make you pause before going straight into the next room. Alongside him are cases containing contemporary model making instruments, bowls, wax and wax colourants. [fig 1] These simple tools and materials do not prepare you for the overwhelming suite of rooms to come, as Anna Maerker accurately describes,

these anatomical wax models include life sized bodies of men and women at various degrees of dissection, upright and reclining; miniature figurines of flayed men in various poses, demonstrating the muscle layers, enlarged or isolated studies of anatomical details – a hand, a heart, a brain – all of them displayed in elegant wooden showcases behind glass, mounted on cushions or on gilded pedestals⁴

She then goes on to describe the real hair and lifelike expressions on the faces of some of the models as they lay under the clinical museum lights. I was arrested by the expanse of reddish-brown in those rooms; from the ubiquitous Italian terracotta floor tiles, the wooden cases, water-coloured drawings, red velvet and above all, the muscular flesh, relieved only by the yellowish fat and greying internal organs [fig 2]. The primary use of these models was to assist in the teaching of anatomy at the University, however Maerker writes that knowledge about the body was important for different reasons, suggesting that ‘government officials were keen to improve public health to increase state revenue; and intellectuals argued that self-knowledge was central to

⁴ Anna Maerker, *Model Experts: Wax Anatomies and Enlightenment in Florence and Vienna, 1775-1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p1

the creation of the enlightened citizen'. These ideas underwent certain modification to encourage the right type of public, such as timed tickets and exclusion of 'unsuitable, strange persons', visitors' books show that 'la Specola' did apparently include all regardless of rank, gender or nationality'.⁵ More interestingly is the visitors' response to the collection, depending on levels of knowledge ranged from religious inspired enthusiasm to criticisms of accuracy from experts. However, unlike Gordon, no earlier visitor explicitly states that the waxes inspired them artistically, though anatomy was certainly central to painting and sculpture but I will return to this.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is 'the Philosopher of the Body' which is why his philosophy is drawn upon at length by the writers discussed below. The artist is aware of him though she hasn't read him extensively. Given that his philosophy appears to lie at the heart of her art and all three books, it is sensible to briefly explore what he wrote about embodiment. In one lecture where he was refuting the mind-body duality of Renee Descartes, he stated,

Of course *another human being* is certainly more than simply a body to me: rather this is a body animated by all manner of intentions, the origin of numerous actions and words [...] another person for us is a spirit which haunts a body and we seem to see a whole host of possibilities contained within this body when it appears before us; the body is the very presence of these possibilities. So the process of looking at human beings from the outside – that is, at other people – leads us to reassess a number of distinctions which once seemed to hold good such as that between mind and body.⁶

Clearly for Merleau-Ponty's the body is very much more than the sum of its parts, not merely a living machine but a 'return to the world of actual experience'.⁷ As Michel Foucault points out, when Descartes compared the body to 'a clock constructed with wheels and weights' he created the 'age of man the machine', an enlightenment view which has continued into our networked, scientific, rational modern world. The processes of medical intervention referenced in Gordon's art could mistakenly be interpreted as a metaphor for Descartes's 'fleshy automaton'. For example *Transmissions*, the Japanese paper torsos modelled on the artist's own body have amulets placed over where the heart would be. These amulets are made from transformed biomedical devices used to diagnose or remediate medical problems of the heart and appear machine-like. However despite our rational awareness of the heart as a mechanistic pump, it remains for many as the seat of the emotions. When William Harvey was demonstrating his

theories concerning pulmonary transit, he maintained that it ‘remained the fountain or dwelling house of the body [...] the beginning of life, the sun of the microcosm [...] the sun deserves to be call’d the heart of the body’.⁸ Therefore knowledge is created by relations and joint activities and not simple Cartesian rational cogito...we do not create knowledge and understanding through logic but through a sociologic.⁹ This is precisely what Gordon is conveying in her art; by combining the doctor's specialist knowledge of the/her malfunctioning body, with the less rational social constructions of heart as being broken, she is communicating a whole host of possibilities.

5. 5 Maerker, p121

6. 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Man seen from the outside', in *The world of perception*, tr. by Oliver Davis (London: Routledge, 2004) p 63

7. 7 Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,2008), p75

8. 8 Fay Bound Alberti, 'The Emotional Heart: Mind, Body and Soul', in *The Heart*, ed., James Peto,

(London: Wellcome Collection, 2007), p135

9. 9 Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of thought: Embodiment, identity and modernity* (London: Sage, 1999), p71

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The books I have focused on are Malcolm Maclachlan’s *Embodiment: Clinical, critical and cultural perspectives on health and illness*, *Bodies of thought: Embodiment, identity and modernity* by Ian Burkitt and Paul Crowther’s *Art and embodiment: From aesthetics to self-consciousness*. All are relatively modern and published within a decade of each other. Each author gives an explanation of embodiment; the most straightforward is presented by the clinician who states ‘embodiment is the identification of an abstract idea with a physical entity’.¹⁰ Maclachlan clarifies, ‘the abstract idea could be a self, a nation, anger, love, God, the devil or whatever. When such ideas are identified in the flesh, we say that they are incarnate: ‘the devil incarnate’ an expression of the devil, in the *flesh*’. A perfect introduction to a book which explores embodiment through a range of health and illness experiences, using Merleau-Ponty’s holistic or Gestalt view of the body. He doesn't claim to be saying anything new, rather he emphasises ‘the

importance of understanding, in addition to explaining people's distressing experiences of their bodies'.¹¹ Chapters cover body plasticity, body sculpturing, illusory body experiences and enabling technologies. For instance he talks sensitively about the experience of 'technology through replacement' where recent implantable replacement heart systems are reviewed. Where the clinical trials are discussed, he brings in the symbolism of the heart and the effects (if any) on the recipient. He concludes with a philosophical view which many clinicians would be wise to embrace; 'Merleau-Ponty argues for a perception of the world that is *particular* because of the being that one is embodied in'. It both constitutes and constructs an embodied point of view, so that we can move outside the confines of cerebral neurology and include all aspects of the human body.¹² Keeping in mind this important clinical empathy, I want to turn the other texts.

The philosopher, not surprisingly, defines embodiment by contrasting it with Cartesian attitudes toward consciousness. He introduces the idea that embodied beings 'engage in a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification...they do not gaze out upon an external world; rather their self-awareness appears as an inhering in the sensible, and hence as having to negotiate constantly with an otherness engaged through the body's 'sensori-motor capacities operating as a unified field''.¹³ This suggests that we are not just passively standing by, but taking an active role in our combined internal and external bodily roles. Crowther states that 'abstract concepts alone cannot fully recapture the concreteness of ontological reciprocity...the act of analysis and description is at best a kind of looking on from above'.¹⁴ By this he means taking something like an

10.10 Malcolm MacLachlan, *Embodiment: Clinical, critical and cultural perspectives on health and illness* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004), p2

11.11 MacLachlan, preface

12.12 MacLachlan, p180

13.13 Paul Crowther, *Art and embodiment; From aesthetics to self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p1

14Crowther, p4 4

experience and translating it into something that another person can understand. For example, the piece called 'Surrender' (2012) documents Gordon's experience

of open heart surgery. It opens with jerky camera work and vivid green scrubs colour, suggesting the effects of pre op medication. As the patient goes under, the film fades to black and white, focusing inwards on the chest, lungs and breath. The x-ray provides a journey into an imagined unconscious body, allowing the viewer to experience the theatre as both the 'operator' and 'operatee'. Fading in and out are glimpses of the actual heart, an open cloudy sky, and a swimmer fighting to break the surface of a pool. As the tension is raised the body under anaesthetic panics and imagines drowning, this is finally released as the operation continues successfully, and the swimmer surfaces with colours returning with the patient waking. Her video narrative 'weaves substance into spaces of ignorance' by taking unfamiliar experiences and making them familiar, for example, we are more able to imagine drowning than surgery.¹⁵ Art offers a fusion of the sensual and conceptual that means that all experience can be shared, or as Crowther says, 'enables art to express something of the depth and richness of body in a way that eludes modes of abstract thought'.¹⁶

Sociologist Burkitt defines embodiment through our relationships with others, as well as suggesting that

the body should not be seen as an ontological foundation for sexuality and gender identity, it never the less has a contingent relation to them, contributing to the experiences through which we live out our sexuality and gender¹⁷

He spends most of his book writing about 'the body' as if all bodies were the same, which of course he acknowledges and remedies in the chapter 'Feminism and the challenge to dualism'. Here he discusses the work of Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and others, raising issues and some of the dilemmas concerning the 'feminine experience of the body'. As well as gender, power and social relations, this literature primarily concentrates on the medicalisation of female bodily functions surrounding procreation, menstruation, childbirth, menopause and so forth. They suggest these experiences have tended to leave women feeling powerless and alienated from their own bodily experiences. He dwells at length on Emily Martin's exploration of women's experiences and his description resonates with what Merleau-Ponty says about experience and humanity, that there is an integrated understanding of the biological and the social. It is inevitable that literature on the female body will focus on reproduction, however he does stress that 'there are other embodied experiences, other aspects of the habitus which present alternatives to this and suggest the possibility of wholeness in women's bodily experience and a point of opposition to current medical and patriarchal

practices'.¹⁸ And from here I turn to develop and illustrate a number of his points with reference to Gordon's

- 15.15 *Between Embodiment and Identity*. Susan Alworth, Andrew Carnie, Karen Inghams. Kings College London 19-30 April 2012
<http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/337581/> accessed 23/3/13
- 16.16 Crowther, p5
- 17.17 Burkitt, p108
- 18.18 Burkitt, p108

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art and heart health work.

Gordon has had a personal relationship with heart disease for a long time; her mother died from it when the artist was young and in 2006 despite being fit and healthy, she had a heart attack. She explains, 'I was already an artist at the time, and though I knew a lot about the heart metaphysically and spiritually, I didn't know a lot about it from a physical point of view...it grew into a body of work'.¹⁹ However though her beautifully crafted stone hearts and paper casings, blood red felt and knitted hearts gives the viewer a sense of her coming to terms with the relative fragility of her/the human body, she has also been working with Womenheart to raise awareness of heart disease in women.²⁰ Since 2009 she has appeared at symposia, WomensHeart.org events and the United States Library of Congress Health Forum in Washington DC. She points out that 'women's heart disease is under recognised, underdiagnosed and undertreated' and in her talks she likes to bring together art, science, history and startling medical facts.²¹ Though 'bodies' are the same in many mechanical and electrical ways, she quotes Gloria Steinem, saying that the [female heart] was reduced from power to romance by centuries of male dominance. This view was taken by feminist theorist Betty Friedan who died from heart disease in 2006.

Anne Pollock in her article on Friedan explores her work in relation to this disease, but points out that 'disease becomes a way to negotiate our roles in relationship to others; it can open up opportunities for us to act, when it strikes others or ourselves'.²² Gordon did just that. Instead of passively accepting the disease, she seized an opportunity to channel the effects of a negative health event into flourishing art experience. The process of making and exhibiting art, learning from and talking with doctors, and taking her experiences out to the community, she has

turned an internal 'self' congenital bodily weakness into an external 'other' embodiment of strength to help other women. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world'.²³ That is to say, the opening of the artist's world to others and their world to her, the body makes its presence known and so makes it possible for us to undergo and react to the experience of the world and of others.

Her art raises many other questions in relation to the science of the body; the historical and the modern woven

- 19.19 Brenda Dionisi, 'An interview with Janice Gordon: Exploring the link between art and medicine', *The Florentine*, 13/12/12
<http://www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocId=8152>
accessed 23/3/13
- 20.20 'Matters of the heart' <http://www.asci.org/artikel1101.html> accessed 23/3/13
- 21.21 Janice Gordon, Library of Congress power point lecture, Feb 17, 2010
- 22.22 Anne Pollock, 'Reading Friedan: Towards a feminist articulation of heart disease', *Body & Society*, 2010, 16, (77-97) p89
- 23.23 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 354 and 406

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into a narrative which results in something far more intimate and human. The modern way of seeing into and mapping the human body is designed to keep the cutting to a minimum and use technology as demonstrated by Gordon. The video piece 'Looking Within' (Part 2, 6:00 minutes) (2012) with echoes of the maxim 'know thyself', is a montage of anatomical images. The life-like eyes of one of the most famous wax models from 'La Specola' gaze at the viewer, inviting us to go on a journey through the bone, muscle, heart and blood of the human body. Cleverly merging the fine drawings of Vesalius and Leonardo and the wax models with modern medical images, they come together to allow us to see the changing ways of looking within. For instance, an ivory anatomical figure becomes a body at the centre of Padua's renaissance anatomical theatre, then the concentric ovals of the theatre morph into an early electrophysiology image, and then the next images (the larger upper left image and the smaller lower right image) are electron microscopic images of a plaque filled vein. These images then become an

angiogram of the heart, which happens to be an angiogram of the artist's heart.²⁴ Gordon says, 'this is one of my favorite 'morphs' in the video because the round angiogram images become moon-like discs, and then these images shift to the discs of the red corpuscles, and so on'. Another key moment uncovered wax torso of the anatomical Venus. Her wax skin is replaced and a modern coloured ultrasonograph sees into her belly instead, covering her modesty like a skirt. The film ends with return to the wax female's gaze. Merleau-Ponty would argue that 'there is always more to experience than any analysis can capture...to be sure we do not live and breathe, suffer and succeed in our explanatory models'.²⁵ Taken by themselves the images are useful only to medical professionals, however brought together by the ideas and experiences of an artist with a particular medical condition, they take on a new living context.

It is women's ability to produce new life that Burkitt says has created the most fear in society through the ages.²⁶ Even if 'fear' is too strong a word, medical attitudes to women has been – and remains – ambivalent. To explore this, I will use 'La Specola's' eighteenth century anatomical Venuses. Much has been written about these pieces, for example, looking at the differences between Italian and English wax work methods,²⁷ use of wax in teaching anatomy, the artists who created them, the waxwork, politics and the state,²⁸ as well as feminist readings by Ludmilla Jordonova. 'Decomposable statue of a pregnant woman' (or 'The Medici Venus') (1782) by C. Susini and G. Ferrini is one of many female figures in the 'La Specola' collection. These female forms are presented smaller than life sized, carefully preserved reclining on cushions in closed glass display cabinets.

24.24 Email exchange with the artist, Mar 2013

25.25 Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's philosophy* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008) p48

26.26 Burkitt, pp103-104

27.27 Lyle Massey, 'On Waxes and Wombs', in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, (Getty Publishing: 2008), pp83–106

28.28 Anna Maerker, *Model experts: wax anatomies and Enlightenment in Florence and Vienna, 1775-1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

They have slender, youthful limbs which remain free from anatomists marks, real hair, jewellery hiding the wax joints and beautiful idealised faces which 'seem conscious of their role as open corpses and accept it quietly; they even seem to express a sadomasochist satisfaction'.²⁹ Jordonova noted the 'ways in which images of male and female bodies carry assumptions about sex roles...these models thus reflected cultural assumptions about gender roles via 'visual signs of gender'' and convincingly links the idea of understanding female anatomy by removing successive layers of organs to a concern with depth in the eighteenth-century life sciences. For example, she cites Jean Baptiste Lamarck's technique of moving through organ systems from the external to the most essential and the earliest in time.³⁰ Burkitt confirms this idea of women's bodies being open to penetration, permutation and cyclical processes, contrasting it with the perception that male bodies are closed and 'armoured'. Whether this metaphor should continue is debatable, medical science is not so concerned with gender when looking within using ultrasound, x-ray and the like.

The most recent article on the female wax figures summarises previous scholarship crisply and portrays them as figures on the cusp of a new era, '[they are] passing the torch from religion to science and medicine as the primary way of dealing with death and disease, of understanding the nature of life, our purpose, and our place in the universe'.³¹ However it is important to note that it seemed that the woman's place in the universe was to have children; each of the female models when fully dissected is found to be pregnant, regardless of the lack of other physical manifestations of pregnancy. Given that these are the last to be uncovered, following Lamarck, there is a suggestion that they are the most essential role of the female. They leave the modern viewer slightly uncomfortable in a way that the male figures do not and I think it is the ambivalence of them being beautiful both inside and out. The anatomy of the female form when seen for the first time in gleaming wax is stunning and combined with a saintly doll-like exterior, the allure, intrigue and curiosity around these figures is assured.

The *Materia Medica/Metafisica* series of portraits are described in the exhibition catalogue,

Gordon has constructed "portraits" using images from antique anatomical drawings, art history and nature, creating them on original 17th century materia medica manuscript pages. The beeswax that has been used contains virgin wax from the apiary at the Benedictine Monastery of Torrechiara near Parma, Italy. While "materia medica" refers to medicinal substances used to heal the body,

“metafisica” refers to the aspects of spirit, mind and mystery, which transcend the body

- 29.29 R Ballestriero, 'Anatomical models and wax Venuses: art masterpieces or scientific craft works?' *J Anat.* 2010 February; 216(2): 223–234.<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2815944/>
- 30.30 Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p45-46
- 31.31 Joanna Ebenstein, 'Ode to an anatomical Venus', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Winter 2012, 346-352, p351

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In order to draw out some of the complex iconography, I want to concentrate on one image in the series [fig 3]. The most recognisable feature is the face of Leonardo da Vinci's 1477 portrait of Ginevra de Benci which sits within a profile dissected head, surrounding her face like a halo. A skeletal orange torso with arms folded is affixed to her forehead. The serious austerity of her gaze looks sad due to her slightly tilted face. The lines of her neck continue downwards towards the head and arms of a sleeping foetus which lies over her upper chest, whilst figures in old fashioned diving costumes surround it. Snippets of red musculature, a curved spine, cut ribs and coloured nerves form her shoulders and truncated arms, in a parody of a stiff renaissance costume. The three quarter pose with cropped arms is familiar from other fifteenth century portraits. The beeswax marks the manuscript parchment at the top and bottom of the collage. Incidentally her use of beeswax echoes the material of the waxworks. This image presents so many questions regarding embodiment that it's worthwhile staying with it to discuss a couple of Erwin Panofsky's theories, followed by observations on emotions of the body.

In a famous essay Panofsky states that without the early anatomists, there would have been no renaissance art as we know it.³² He argues that the rise of anatomy cannot be understood in isolation from the renaissance in art; the history of anatomy is deeply embedded in art history.³³ He lists a number of painter anatomists, Pollaiuolo, Michaelangelo, who he suggests took more of an interest in the bones, muscles and tendons than the intestines, 'placing anatomy in the service of art'. As artists looking to depict the human body faithfully, an understanding of the muscle structure would be more important than the internal organs. He

continues with the ultimate observer of nature, Leonardo da Vinci, whose faithful recordings of dissections 'placed art in the service of anatomy and thereby [he] became the founder of anatomy as a science, based on [his] extensive research' from life, or indeed death.³⁴ As Panofsky can occasionally be master of the sweeping statement, Martin Kemp elucidates saying da Vinci 'was not undertaking 'descriptive anatomy' in the sense of Henry Gray's famous and enduring text book of 1858 [but] pursuing what we might call, anachronistically, physiological anatomy'.³⁵ So when Gordon brings well known renaissance artists in her collages together with medical manuscripts and anatomical images, I would argue this is Panofsky's view of renaissance art/science history embodied in a piece of contemporary art. Gordon is reimagining a time 'where an untold variety of mixtures of interpenetration which seen in retrospect, may either look like synthesis or like chaos'.³⁶ This

³²Erwin Panofsky 'Artist, scientist, genius: notes of the 'Renaissance-Dammerung' in *The Renaissance: Six essays*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1962). He defines 'renaissance' broadly, from 13th - 16th centuries

³³José van Dijck, *The Transparent Body: A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2005), p49

³⁴Panofsky, p142

³⁵Martin Kemp, *Leonardo: Experience, experiment and design* (London: V&A Publication, 2006) p51 ³⁶Panofsky, p128

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modern revisiting of a renaissance decompartmentalisation endows the portraits with extra psychological depth, enabling them to actually embody an emotion.

Given in the title of this exhibition, I wouldn't expect that this 'portrait' is a new reading of Ginevra de Benci; it is merely using her as an association or metaphor. Instead here I return to Burkitt and his investigation into social relations, embodiment and emotions. This aspect of embodiment is probably one of the most slippery simply because of the variations; cultural, historical, psychological and individual. Although 'individuals are trained in the emotional habitus from infancy, and through this, develop emotional disposition that can be expressed throughout a person's life', emotion is very much held together in the 'weave of behaviours that make up our social lives'.³⁷ So for me - with my personal emotional behaviours - to interpret the expression on Ginevra's face in the Gordon

image as distant pensiveness or sadness is ill advised without using other bodily clues provided. As Burkitt says, 'what shows itself on the outside, for instance on one's face, is merely a derivative or else a [distorted] expression'. Further information should be taken from the symbols around the face, such as the skull 'brain halo'. This could suggest that she is deep in thought, unsure of an outcome of an illness or condition. The body language of the skeleton with folded arms is in keeping with a person to whom she is talking who isn't receptive, or is unwilling to hear/see her point of view. The divers in her upper chest surrounding the foetus, I imagine to be both her lungs rising and falling, inflating and deflating. Or perhaps they are the life support to the sleepy foetus? In Gordon's 'Surrender' (2012) video she used the diver as a metaphor for anxiety, so it might suggest maternal worries. Given its position over the heart, I read this as her love for the child. Thought, preoccupation, anxiety, love are incredibly abstract ideas to convey but her use of metaphors ensure successful communication of feelings and emotions.

I began by stating that this essay weaves together three concepts; the exhibition, the location with its contents and theories on embodiment. I have demonstrated how they interact with and inform one another raising themes such as the interdependence of art and science, how aspects of feminism and medicine can be used to educate different communities about health risks, and how methods of the medical past inspired the present. Historically and physically the art and theory was brought together by the location of the exhibition. The surroundings of 'La Specola' informed and illuminated Gordon's work, adding an extra dimension and layer of meaning. For me personally, questions regarding knowledge of human body and its mechanics are always going to engender an emotional response. The long journey of medical history from early modern dissections, 18th century waxworks, and modern non-invasive explorations is so profound and intimately connected with lessening the suffering of fellow humans. The fact that viewers had to travel to this specific location was significant and led to an increased connection with Gordon's art/heart, as we could experience it – and the wax models – intimately, with all our senses.

37 Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of thought: embodiment, identity and modernity* (London: Sage, 1999), p117 10

Background reading and my work here has emphasised the importance of experience and emotion around the notion of embodiment. The theoretical and artistic practical interaction of these appears consistently through my exploration

and they are central to an understanding of embodiment. Simply put, they come together and enable us to make connections so that we see, learn, develop and more deeply understand what lies within. Embodiment is not static, it is a person constantly, infinitely 'becoming', or as Merleau-Ponty would have it, 'being-in-the-world'; though your external body may not change, through existential, cognitive, physical, medical, social influences, your internal shape morphs into something which is projected out onto your world view. Therefore the question 'what is embodied?' is deceptively simple. It is paradoxically both vague and specific which is why ultimately definitions of embodied/embodiment are whatever the philosopher, sociologist, clinician, artist or audience want. All views are necessarily different due to the group or individual's purposes, motive, experience or outlook. In this case the artist's exploration of the question provides a simple, obvious answer. The work is her; *she* is actually embodied within the art. As she concludes 'the work comes out of contemplative process in which I give myself over to the materials, until something new emerges in me and in the materials themselves. As I weave my presence into the materials, I too feel transformed'.³⁸ It is her that is embodied and she is able to construct a meaningful way of sharing her experiences with us, the viewer. Therefore an individual event becomes a shared experience, where 'I and you becomes us'.³⁹ The viewer responds to and empathises with the experience of the artist, reflecting back with their own internal shape in order to fully appreciate her work and its surroundings.

³⁸Janice Gordon, Library of Congress power point lecture, Feb 17, 2010

³⁹Burkitt, (London: Sage, 1999), p133

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Fig 1. Examples of wax, resin, colourants and various other materials used in the wax works

Fig 2. The museum galleries



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Fig 3 'Portrait'