

A Book Review of Mariella Greil's (2021) *Being in Contact: Encountering a Bare Body* published by De Gruyter

Rebecca Lloyd, University of Ottawa, Canada
Email: rebecca.lloyd@uottawa.ca

Mariella Greil puts forth an intricate, aesthetic text – what she refers to as a choreographed book – which weaves together contrasting philosophical and body-political perspectives on how the bare body is both performed and experienced in contemporary art. More than a text that speaks to the many ways the body is experienced in art – from dance, to theatre, to performative lecture – it is a standalone work of art in its very design. Black pages of scanned journal reflections handwritten in white pen are interspersed with white pages of academic references to the ways we might encounter the bare body – from Deleuze and Barad inspired intra-action to the more phenomenological dimensions of affect, attunement and resonance in human inter-action.

Images of hands holding the raw flesh of a red herring, to concealing and revealing printed words, to touching the ground of a studio floor in a collection entitled *Handapparat* appear throughout the pages of heavily cited text. One senses with immediacy Greil's passion for "*minor gestures and movements*" (2021, p.13), details that manifest in the form of fragmented footnoted quotations and elaborations that constitute the spine of the book. As a reader, spectator, or what Greil refers to as an audience of this work (pp. 94-95), a gradual appreciation of feeling unsettled manifests in the unfathomable back-and-forth darting between words put forward by the author and works cited from countless others.

"Will you review this book?", I am asked. "Will you comment on the extent to which it advances our understanding of the intersection between artistic and phenomenological practice?" I accept the offer with an immediate "yes", an affirming response before I receive my copy in the mail and get caught in the labyrinth of Greil's brilliant fragments of introspection. While I intended to read this book like any other, I must admit there were moments, especially when my eyes strained to make out the handwritten parts, that I just flipped through the pages to look at the images. On other days I found myself getting lost in the burrow of seemingly endless, albeit fascinating, footnotes.

What I longed for the most when reading this book, however, was to experience less diversion of academic citation and more of a visceral encounter. I wanted to be thrown into textualized sensations of bare flesh. I wondered what it would be like to sense firsthand, instead of simply look at, the choreographed images of *Handapparat*. What would it be like to be on stage and sit on a glass bench while pulling the sides of my buttocks apart? What would it be like to bare myself in a partially filled aquarium on

public display? What would it be like to photograph myself in a studio where I bare myself to its ceiling and walls as I fold over in a down dog-like stance? As a phenomenologist, I longed to be invited into these visually captured moments. I wanted to know what it would be like to not only encounter images of bare flesh but to also be encountered in bare flesh.

Despite wanting more phenomenological description throughout this choreographed book, what I consider to be a profound contribution for the way we may experience art, is Greil's theorizing about the relationship between the spectator and the performer. Greil differentiated acts of spectating art and from witnessing it with a relational sensitivity, what she poetically transformed into an act of "wit(h)nessing" (p. 95). She turned to etymology to distinguish viewing, watching or even engaging in the forbidden act of voyeurism from political notions of solidarity. In citing Greil, we get a more nuanced sense of the way she encourages us to encounter a bare body in performance:

Unearthing a sense of solidarity in the act of wit(h)nessing, means to understand solidarity as a base condition, a form of being-with, a way of presence-ing in or in relation to performance, to another human or non-human being, text, sound or artwork. The activity of wit(h)nessing happens not only in time, but rather moves across time. The movement – in creative contexts often lead by intuition – from felt affinity to affect towards attitude is an open porous experience, sometimes a maturing or fermenting process that takes time. (pp.100-101)

As I conclude my review of Greil's creative and artistic work, I am not only left with a deeper sense of appreciation for how the bare body may be encountered within performative contexts, I am also curious how this text might inspire us to think differently about the places and spaces we bare ourselves to others and the world. To what extent are we comfortable to bare ourselves in our academic text, lectures, artistic expressions, and everyday life for others to witness? And in what ways are we being judged or objectified by others versus encountered with a sense of what Greil describes as wit(h)ness? These are the bigger questions Greil leaves us with as our artistic and phenomenological practices intersect – questions that inspire us to move away from feelings of naked vulnerability and instead toward the feelings and body politics of solidarity.