CORONAL PLANE

Cristin Millett
“A Bodily Invasion: Coronal Plane and the Evolving Medical Gaze”
Grace Linden
Edited by Shannon Egan
In 1595, the world’s first permanent anatomical theater opened in the Palazzo del Bo at the University of Padua; it remained operational until 1872. The theater is a round room, a series of concentric circles wrapped in warm, blond wood balustrades nested like matryoshka dolls. At the centre, in one final oval, is the dissection stage. This was not the first anatomy theater, but earlier versions were impermanent structures, dismantled after each completed procedure. Padua’s theater was designed by Girolamo Fabrizi d’Acquapendente (Hieronymus Fabricius), the father of embryology and the Chair of Anatomy at the university. He believed in teaching a holistic, anatomical philosophy which relied on music and sermon-like presentations to support his dissections. Fabrizi may have been a pioneering scientist, but he also was a showman, and the theater reflects a striking, performative aesthetic. Indeed, the term anatomy theater implies a specific sort of drama, and each semi-annual presentation was crafted to be a performance with the anatomist and his cadaver the stars of the spectacle. (And given the Church’s condemnation, these rare presentations were all the more electrifying.)

Theater requires bodies, both as actors and as beholders; who else can activate the stage? And like any performance of Ibsen or Shakespeare, anatomy theaters assume such a presence, both alive and dead, and the space is infused with and devoted to this expectation. Without a corpse, an anatomy theater is rendered useless. Without an audience, there is no witness to the dissection and no one to instruct. Fabrizi implicitly understood this, and his theater had a hierarchical seating arrangement with the most distinguished displayed in the front rows. Attending a dissection was about learning, but also about being seen, and so the spectators, thus, become the watchers and the watched. Medicine has always been predicated on the idea of observation and looking, how else could we see into the body, to make visible the hidden, to cut into skin, to root around and scrutinize? It is a performative gesture of its own, and like performance, it too requires “a bodily presence” and a physical investment. The eighteenth-century turn towards clinical examination and the birth of the modern hospital solidified the concept of a clinical, distancing gaze, a history traced by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963). The growing reliance on visual aids, dissection, slides, and the like, privileged observation and produced a gaze that is both levelling and, according to Foucault, “refrains from all possible intervention.”

Western medicine has come to accommodate this gaze, to its penetrating, exploratory qualities. After several years of research into Padua’s elaborate anatomy theater, artist Cristin Millett created *Coronal Plane* (2017), a large-scale installation that considers what it means to be examined to be probed and to probe. Drawing from the site’s original plans, *Coronal Plane* presents a single slice of the theater, two walls punctuated by circular, red shadow-boxes. It is a celebration of Padua’s architectural substructure, a meta-reference to the dissection act. In Millett’s vertical section of the theater, two thin walls form a passageway, at its end sits a white table inscribed with the imprint of a female form, rounded hips and narrow waist, a bodily cavity whose absence is jarring. By existing in a physical and inhabitable space, *Coronal Plane* encourages visitors to fill its fictional stage with their own narratives and interpretations; it is a work open to audience intrusion. Without a body to dissect, visitors are forced to satisfy the table’s void with a substitution, a metaphorical sacrifice at a sterile altar.

Millett has printed illustrations from Fabrizi’s text, *De Formato Foetu* (1604) onto the portals, a fetus, a uterus, an umbilical cord. The delicate black line diagrams act as
a double frame, a gendered filter, partially obscuring the view of the passageway. Beneath the windows, low risers let visitors kneel and watch, and Millett likens this dynamic to Catholic confessional booths, a relationship echoed in the installation’s chapel-like configuration. Coronal Plane points to the intertwined, thorny relationship between medicine and religion, and the ways in which the Church has attempted to regulate depictions and politics of the female body, particularly with regards to reproductive health. The gaze, Coronal Plane reminds us, is not so impartial after all.

Millett’s installation evokes this complicated history, as Coronal Plane simultaneously stares backwards towards the Renaissance and Fabrizi’s reflexive performances, and forwards, into the age of the Quantified Self and Big Brother medicine. In November of 2017, the United States Food and Drug Administration approved Abilify, the world’s first digital medication. Abilify pills come with sensors so that patient use can be monitored by doctors and, if permitted, family members. Smart phone trackers similarly allow our every breath, calorie and step to be recorded and compared. Abilify is but the latest in a string of technologies aimed at imaging the body; it is the heir apparent to the anatomical theater. We may now (mostly) understand the body’s component parts, how blood flows and bones are structured, so the next phase is to study intimately the self and its outputs—a personalized physiology. With these developments, the performance stage shifts from external to internal, from the arena of the anatomy theater to within the body itself. Coronal Plane forces visitors to contend with bodily surveillance, to become acutely aware of a specific, and often gendered, sort of objectification. The gaze may seem levelling, but it has grown increasingly invasive as it endeavours to scan the most microscopic and private of places. Coronal Plane may ask the viewer to cast back to some of the earliest days of anatomical enlightenment, but in doing so, Millett reckons with the rapidly evolving status of the medical gaze today.

— Grace Linden
University of York, United Kingdom

2 Cynthia Klestinec, “Civility, Comportment, and the Anatomy Theater: Girolamo Fabrici and His Medical Students in Renaissance Padua,” Renaissance Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 2 (Summer 2007): 443.
5 Petersen, Installation, 147.
Coronal Plane

MdO (medium density overlay), LED lights, inkjet prints mounted on glass
6 x 30 x 30 ft.

Coronal Plane is the culmination of Millett’s research on the anatomical theater at the University of Padua built in 1594, the oldest surviving anatomy theater in the world. The installation allows viewers to walk into and through a space that evokes physical, emotional, and psychological reactions similar to those experienced in the historic anatomy theater in Padua by audiences of the past. Illustrations depicted on red “windows” in Millett’s work are appropriated from De Formato Foetu, a text written by Girolamo Fabrizi d’Acquapendente (Hieronymus Fabricius), the Chair of Anatomy at the University of Padua. It was under his leadership that the anatomy theater of 1594 was built. Millett’s allusions to Catholic confessionals and kneeling benches in the installation invite the viewer to question the contradictory stance between surgeries performed for medical education and dissections completed in order to disperse sacred remains for widespread worship. Particular references to sexuality and sexual differences are also central to Millett’s investigation of historical medical practices and philosophies. The University of Padua was one of the first institutions that dissected both male and female cadavers.

In anatomical terminology, the coronal plane is a vertical plane that divides the body into stomach and back sections. Adopting this approach for dissection, Millett created a partial section of the Paduan anatomy theater, thereby metaphorically “dissecting” the space and exposing the supporting structure within. In plan, the installation recreates a lateral section of the anatomy theater, with the section rotated 90° and placed horizontally at floor level. By incorporating the concentric tiers of balustrades, the installation directly refers to the architecture of the anatomy theater. The lateral section is extruded to a height of six feet in order for the viewer to physically engage with the installation. From the outside, the supporting funnel-like framework is revealed, a structure that is largely invisible in the historic anatomy theater. In keeping with the aesthetic of the historic anatomy theater, the balustrades are constructed of wood milled using CNC technology. Thus, the partial section with an exposed skeletal system suggests a methodology similar to the study of anatomy through dissection, removing layers to reveal the internal workings.

At the heart of the installation is Transection of the Anatomical Planes, a dissecting table incised along the three anatomical planes. The piece was created while Millett was a resident artist at the Digital Stone Project in Gramolazzo, Italy. There, Millett used a 7-axis robotic arm to carve Visible Phantom and Transection of the Anatomical Planes. The slab “table” normally supporting a supine cadaver is instead a sunken cavity suggesting emptiness and loss. The sculpture references the tradition of écorché models (figure studies that depict the body’s musculature without skin) as well as contemporary medical modes of imaging the body.
The Consumption of Agatha’s Excision
wood, mirror, cast plastic, cast vinyl, gut, silver, electronic mechanism
73 x 42 x 30 in.
The two sculptures, Consumption of Agatha’s Excision and Sever: Agatha’s Offering, examine the concept of “sacred anatomy,” a term coined by literary historian Jonathan Sawday to describe the pre-sixteenth-century practice of dismembering cadavers, particularly nobility and saints, in order to disperse the remains for widespread worship. St. Agatha was martyred after rejecting the advances of a Roman official, and her breasts were cut off as part of her torture. She is often depicted carrying her amputated breasts on a platter. Similarities in the form of the severed breasts with bells and buns led to her attribution as the patron saint of bell-founders, bakers, and more recently, breast cancer survivors.

Sever: Agatha’s Offering

cast plastic, cast vinyl, gut, silver-plate platter, synthetic moss, LED lights
11 x 16 x 13 in.
Drawing on her extensive research of historical birthing chairs, Millett altered and refurbished a found chair to create *Coronation Throne for Artemis*. Giving birth in a bed is a relatively modern practice for labor and delivery; depictions of birthing scenes from antiquity through the early nineteenth century reveal that squatting and sitting positions were more common, and perhaps also more effective for delivery across cultures. Millett’s obstetric chair, characterized by its U-shaped seat, allows for gravity to encourage the baby’s movement out of the birth canal.

The sculpture also invokes Artemis of Ephesus, the Greek goddess of fertility, who is often depicted wearing a garment with numerous breast-like forms to symbolize her reproductive prowess. With an awareness of the current controversies surrounding reproduction and reproductive rights, the artist encourages viewers to consider the occasionally fraught position of women’s health within institutional medicine.
CRISTIN MILLETT

Exploding traditional disciplinary boundaries, Cristin Millett’s investigations of medicine and its history are integral to her process. Her research and discourse takes its genesis from her childhood. She grew up in a medical household where dinner discussions focused on the human body: its diseases, symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments. In her family of scientists, those conversations continue to this day. Those discussions, both past and current, have a profound effect on her work, a theme of visual semiotics that has endured throughout her art.

While her interest in the body and the body politic was birthed in her childhood, she began to focus on obstetrics and gynecology as a gender-specific metaphor twenty-five years ago. Through grant funding, she has studied collections of medical instruments, anatomical models, historical texts, and anatomy theaters throughout Europe and the United States. Whereas most scholars interact with their research through writing, as a visual artist, she expresses her critical analysis as works of art. Her toolkit of sculptural methods and processes incorporates new advances in digital technology, CNC machining, 3D printing, and robotics, along with established methods of sculpture such as stone carving and bronze casting. Her objects and installations prompt a contemporary cultural critique of societal issues surrounding reproduction and gender identity.

Millett began her professional studies in art at the North Carolina School of the Arts. She received her B.F.A. from Kent State University and her M.F.A. from Arizona State University. Prior to her appointment at Penn State, she taught at the University of Maine for four years where she built the sculpture and foundry program. Since 2001, she has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in sculpture, foundry and installation at Penn State.

Her work has been widely exhibited both nationally and internationally in solo and group shows, including at the Villa Strozzi in Florence, the International Museum of Surgical Science in Chicago, the Exploratorium in San Francisco, and the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. Millett is a Professor of Art and an Embedded Faculty Researcher in the Arts + Design Research Incubator at Pennsylvania State University.

GRACE LINDEN

Grace Linden is a PhD candidate in History of Art at the University of York, United Kingdom. Her research interests include contemporary photography, youth culture, and media studies. Her thesis looks at dynamics within New York City’s post-9/11 downtown art community. In 2016, she co-organized the conference “Act-Up: Thirty Years Fighting AIDS” at the University of York. Prior to this, Grace worked as the primary researcher for the FOR-SITE Foundation’s exhibition @Large: Ai Wei Wei on Alcatraz (2014), and as the Spiegel Fellow at the Institute for Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania where she contributed to a number of exhibitions including Jeremy Deller: Joy in People (2012), First Among Equals (2011) and the Excursus series (2011-2013). Grace graduated with distinction from New York University in 2011 where she studied History of Art and French. In 2013, she received her Master’s degree in the History of Art from the University of Oxford, Hertford College. Her writing has appeared in Afterimage, C Magazine, Peripheral Arts Journal, among other publications.
CORONAL PLANE
CRISTIN MILLETT

JANUARY 26 – MARCH 9, 2018

ARTIST’S TALK | January 26, noon, Lyceum, Pennsylvania Hall, 3rd floor
RECEPTION | January 26, 4:30 – 6:30 pm

The exhibition is supported in part by EPACC and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Gettysburg College.

IMAGES: Coronal Plane, MDO (medium density overlay), LED lights, inkjet prints mounted on glass, 6 x 30 x 30 ft. Photographs by Cody Goddard and Robert L. Martin.