

The gendered sacredness of Lawrence Buttigieg's box-assemblages



Fig 1 *Triptych for us*, 2014
view of Idoia's fragmented body
mixed media
W 230mm, H 336mm, D 75mm (when closed)

In this paper I discuss the three-dimensional, body-themed box-assemblages that I have been producing for the past five years. These artefacts are a result of my endeavour to transform my studio practice into a collaborative process with Idoia, a specific woman who has been its cynosure for the better part of my artistic career. Moreover, mindful of the extent and merit of her demiurgic contribution to my art work, I venture to say that, within its context, she not only epitomises but also, on a purely imaginary level, transcends womanhood. Although in appearance the box-assemblages are reminiscent of polyptychs, tabernacles and reliquaries, they contain representations of our bodies and objects related to them—an idiosyncrasy through which they engender a confluence of the erotic and the religious [fig. 1]. This artefact acts as an elaborate representational device which goes beyond the mere portrayal of the subjects in question and complexly disrupts the traditional complementary positions of the viewing subject and viewed object. In the process, an alternative mode of looking at the human body, especially the female one, comes into being/takes shape. By challenging the traditional role of male subjectivity in the Western world, it thus serves as a medium through which I explore notions of alterity and selfhood.

The outer walls of a typical box-assemblage not only conceal from uncontrolled viewing what lies inside, namely fetishised and sacralised representations of our bodies, but also withhold the ambivalency of its setup. While the purposefulness of the artefact is catalysed by Idoia's affected presence, each expresses an incessant self-reflexive

process of concurrent rapprochement and disengagement between myself and the other. Through the dynamics of its design and contents, the box-assemblage is amenable to a process whereby my relationship with Idoia is continuously re-fashioned; it also serves to identify links between our fluid association and the diametrically opposite notions of the hallowed and the profane. The artefact's exploration into the mystical is aimed at exploiting that which is 'other' in the Western theological tradition, namely God and the Divine.



Fig. 2 *Cabinet of intimate landscapes*, 2009- (unfinished)
detail of simulacra of Idoia's vagina and Lawrence's lower face
mixed media
W 552mm, H 551mm, D 545mm (when closed)

The box-assemblage partly realises this pursuit through the manifold representations that form part of its morphology, and which may take the form of paintings, collages, photographs, video-clips, and body-casts [fig. 2]. While the first two may be produced away from the subjects, the second and third have the benefit of chronicling their actions and loci in real time; as for the body-casts, these require for their materialisation not only the presence, but also the direct intervention, through touch, of the subjects' bodies.

Body-casting is a collaborative and intimate technique that allows us to metaphorically transfer fragments of our bodies into the structure. Consequent to the direct intervention of the female subject, as the moulds used come directly off her body, the box-assemblage questions and disrupts the traditional assumption that tangible esthetic experiences can only be brought about through the artist's (invariably male) mind and its supposed predilection to ingenuity (Mey 2007:13). The specialised procedures entailed by the production of these simulacra are digitally registered by camcorders; excerpts of raw footage thus captured are screened as looped video clips inside three of the box-assemblages. All this demonstrates that, rather than the passive associate in the creative process, Idoia transforms herself into a creative agent and direct accessory. She not only partly bears the

responsibility for how her persona is conveyed to prospective gazers through the artefact, but enables herself to come up against the ‘onslaught’ of indiscriminate male scrutiny.

While with its distinct design the box-assemblage is meant to tempt viewers to get around it and examine it, forthright disclosure of its possessions is ruled out. It is only following familiarisation with the artefact’s outer fabric and subsequent unfastening of its closure mechanism, that the prospective partakers may set themselves on an intramural journey through its contents. Such an action calls upon them to take the pertinent role of ‘participant-spectators,’¹ readily and physically available to interact with the structure. This artwork not only subverts the unequivocalness that characterises traditional subject-object positioning in Western art history, but also implicates the viewers in its perception.

When the box-assemblage’s outer hinged panels are agape, in sight is just a fraction of what it has to offer—what lies at its innermost is still hidden. However, here one gets the correct impression that the artefact is primarily a complex representation of Idoia, one that through a game of concealment and partial revelation makes her an elusive prey for the male gazer. Further ingress into the structure translates into contact with this woman’s prurient body-parts, intimate belongings, and also treasured first-class relics of her.²

With its multiple doors and chambers, the box-assemblage sets in motion a provocative and highly self-reflexive mise-en-abyme, and through representations and objects entices the viewers to experience the next in line, while narrativising my relationship with Idoia. The participant-spectators are beckoned to move from the innocuous images adorning its outer walls to the provocative representations of this woman within. Each ‘step’ translates into more explicit exposure of this female subject’s body, and at times also my own. The mise-en-abyme culminates at the very centre of the structure where, in lieu of what they might expect—Idoia’s complete and idealised body, the partakers are presented with a raw and prurient token of her femininity whose shock value is augmented by the accompaniment of the sealed vial of pubic hair plucked from her skin. Confronted with such unexpected and explicit imagery, the male gaze is liable to lose its domineering power, that accrued over past centuries, the result of ingrained Western visual culture that considers female subjectivity to be inferior to the male counterpart.

At this juncture I wish to explicate the significance of Idoia’s yanked pubes which, having ‘traversed’ her bodily boundaries, are subsumed to the box-assemblage through a ‘relic-ing’ process—not unlike reliquaries-cum-relics guarded and idolised in many churches and other places of worship [fig. 3]. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, although a reliquary sustains such a remnant as tangible memory of its pious owner, tenet-wise it is a segment of a soul’s previous and future container, a specimen derived through body-partitioning, a process awaiting to be reversed through resurrection (Bynum 1991: 263-4); as part of an actual person, such a keepsake transcends the distinction between ‘representing’ and ‘being present’ (Bynum and Gerson 1997). This assertion corroborates the power of the fragment that, in lieu of the integral body, establishes a presence that goes beyond the temporal and physical attributes of its actual source. As real body-parts unified with the box-assemblage,

¹ Marsha Meskimmon uses this term to denote viewers whose interest in a work of art goes beyond just gazing. She uses it in several of her works including *Contemporary art and the cosmopolitan imagination* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) and in the editorial introduction to *Women, the arts and globalisation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013).

² Here it is pertinent to point out that a first-class relic is the remnant of the body of a saint or a holy person. In an act of playfulness, Idoia acquires holiness through the agency of the box-assemblage.

Idoia's hairs obscure the differentiation between the artefact's state as representational device and that of substantial presence of this woman (Bynum and Gerson 1997). Here the box-assemblage exploits the lure of the body and the belief that identity is locked inside it—that the body is the locus of the self. And so, the partitioned Idoia is re-corporealized through the box-assemblage and, whether to be yearned or lusted, dreaded, or dispassionately examined, it is capable of substantiating desire (Fierman and O'Donnell-Morales 2011: 35).

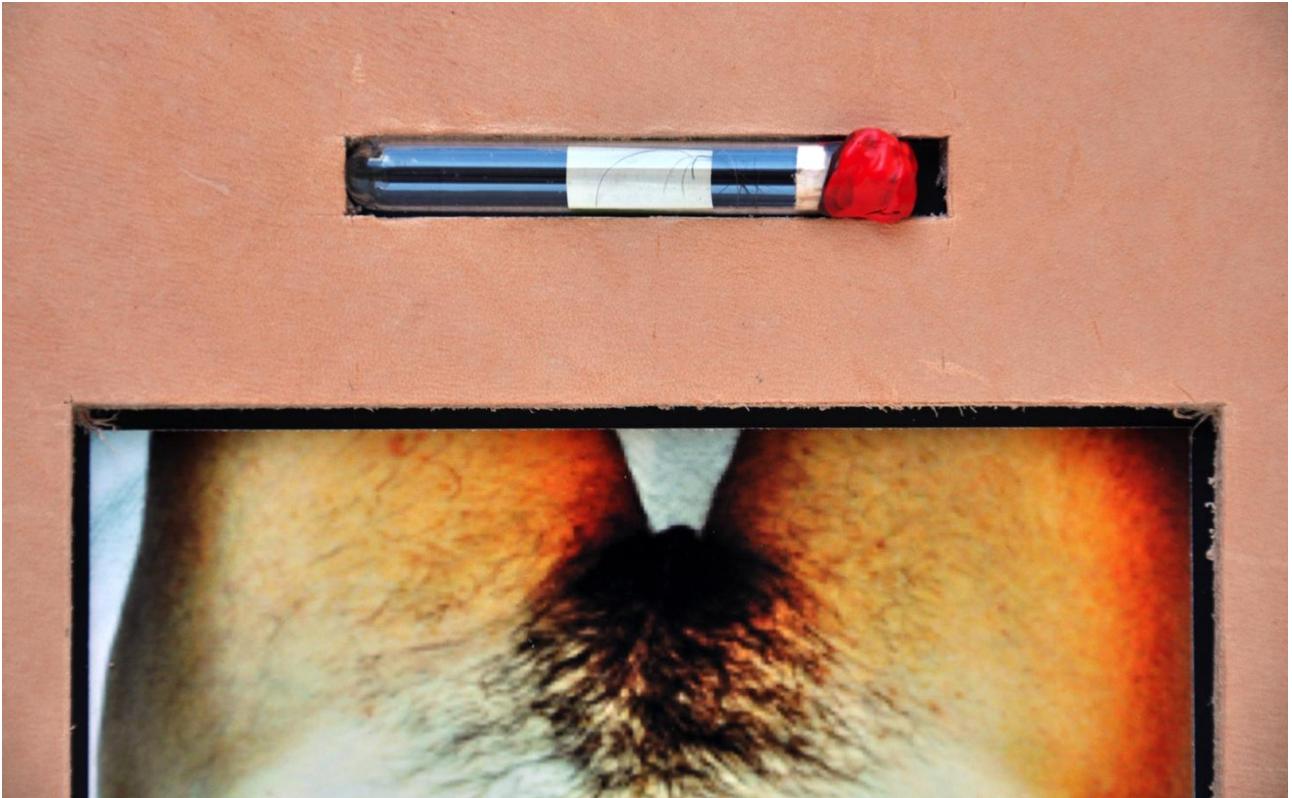


Fig. 3 *Triptych for us*, 2014
detail displaying sealed glass vial containing first-class relic of Idoia and provenance of relic

All this goes on to show that while the box-assemblage initiates a partitioning process on Idoia, and readily fetishises and sacralises the resultant body-in-pieces, it is a full circle for this woman, as ultimately it presents her fragments, together with all its other components, as a collective recreation, albeit a transfigured one, of her plenitude. Here I venture to say that just as Roman Catholics assert that the disunited body and blood of Christ in the ciborium and chalice constitute his absolute presence, the artefact's contents, metamorphose into a transformed Idoia who lacks nothing (Bynum 1991: 295). And pushing this analogy further, I dare say that there is an intriguing parallelism between the contents of a church tabernacle and that of my box-assemblage. Both are a body-in-pieces, however, while Christ's promises an incorporeal indulgence achievable through death, that of the female subject offers a corporeal appeasement, the subjectivity of which is achievable through the acknowledgement of one's fluid boundaries.

Of consequence to the above is the circumstance that the pluck of Idoia's pubes and the choice of paraphernalia to be eventually placed inside the box-assemblage, starts off around the time when the the artefact itself is still at conceptual stage. This means that the structure and the newly-acquired significance of its contents come into being together, a process not unlike the materialisation of a holy reliquary that one finds in a church [fig. 4]. The vial of yanked body hairs and personal belongings inside the box-assemblage hint to the presumed inherent

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potency of first-class and second-class relics, the corollary of their origin and their contiguity to hallowed persons. The faithful believe that relics, no matter how materially insignificant they may be, uphold a power that transpires from this contact. They also trust that such things, besides serving as links with the persons they represent, are capable of manifesting the divine endowments attributed to them (Hahn 2011: 13). My box-assemblages endeavour to elicit from their viewers reactions which are somehow akin to those evoked by reliquaries from their devotees. Although I absolutely do not attempt to claim that the items treasured inside the artefacts possess any metaphysical qualities, through their new circumstance they do acquire new values empowered with a strong evocative function. Once inside the boxes these objects reinforce the processes of recollection and become capable of directing attention to past experiences which might also have preceded their existence. According to Cynthia Hahn, the relic cannot exist without the reliquary as the latter defines, enshrines, and indeed, en-frames the former. In the same breath, Hahn acknowledges the controversial nature of her assertion since every reliquary, with its design and preciousness, aims at stressing to the faithful that, rather than being party to a collusive process of relic-ing, its sole aim is to emphasise the intrinsic worth of the thing in its hold (Hahn 2011: 8).

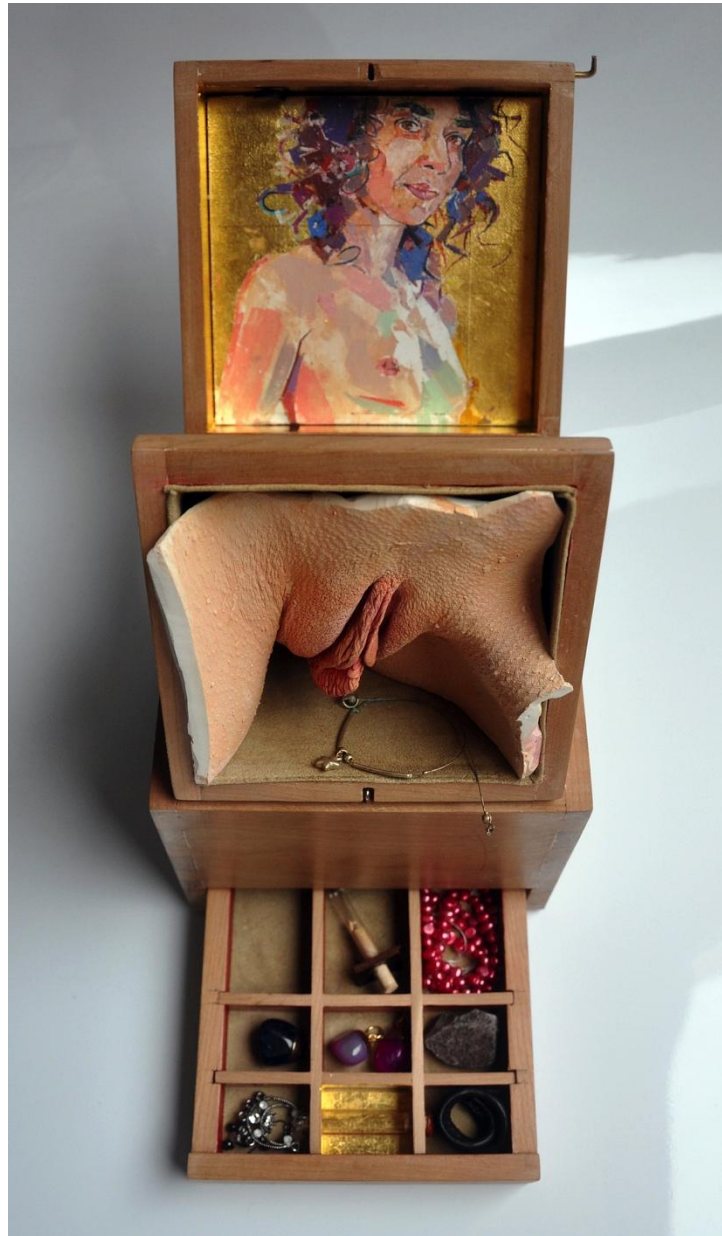


Fig. 4 *Reliquary of Idoia*, 2011
open
mixed media
W 149mm, H 149mm, D 149mm (when closed)

However, the notional significance of the fragment within the Catholic faith goes beyond matters pertaining to reliquaries and relics—preeminent is the dogma of the Eucharist with its affirmation that the fragmentary Host encapsulates Christ's whole body. And this compels me to suggest that likewise, with its treasured body parts, the artefact may effect a 'presencing' of its subject or subjects, as at times I coalesce fragments of my own body with those of Idoia; in so many words, it may be contemplated as an entity that is autonomous from its precursors. This may be viewed as a paradoxical or twisted interpretation of Jean Baudrillard's notion that a representation may exist without an original (Baudrillard 1975). Any box-assemblage that carries minutiae of our beings transmutes itself into a hypostatised bi-corporeal entity that, unlike the temporality of our breathing existence, is suspended in time together with particular moments of togetherness, sameness and equivalency. The artefact becomes the locus of mergence of our subjectivities; and just as both of us are the binary impulse behind it, we are invariably present and visible through it. Here it is pertinent to point out that the enclosure of

the box-assemblage not only situates Idoia in a particular frame of reference strictly identified with her and myself but, with its reference to religious tropes, obscenely suggests that it is capable of apotheosising her. The artefact does not simply engender the fusion of the profane and sacred, or rather the sexual and religious, but readily subjects the raw sexuality of its protagonists to a process of transubstantiation³ whereby the ordinary years to be converted into high-art (Gosden 2004: 37-8; Nead 2001: 85).

Furthermore, as the box-assemblage eroticises and fetishises our bodies through fragmentation, it roots within itself the notions of Eros and Thanatos. On one hand, the discontinuity and displacement the artefact yields to not only enables Idoia and myself to complexify our appearance and performance within its confines, but also enhances the representation and exposure of our binary eroticism. On the other hand, it may be construed as violent in nature because of its mechanism of mutilation and de-composition, and its resultant effect on our bodies.

As for Idoia, the box-assemblage not only transforms her raw nakedness, but through fragmentation, reconfiguration and sanctuarization, prosthetically establishes for her associations that go beyond the confines of her corporeality and temporality. Characterised with such circumstances the artefact is meant to confound further the male gazer's encounter with it. He may wish to believe that this artwork is just a composite portrayal of a woman, at least 'once removed' from its original; however, the artefact makes itself amply clear that it is an actual presence of a transformed Idoia that transcends womanhood and harbours the unknown.

This compels me to make direct reference to *Tabernacle for Idoia*, 2011 [fig. 5], which from its inaugural state of 'openness,' not only hints at a transformation of its protagonist, but brings to light embedded signs that are enough to establish its own links with the Christian faith. Design-wise, its similarity with polyptychs and tabernacles is unmistakable and Idoia's poses recall notable life experiences of Christ. Whilst this box-assemblage's array of nested and closable spaces secures an exciting spectacle, it ensures that the mise-en-abyme experience referred to earlier on, and the partakers' gradual take on its inwardness, are sustained. At its innermost, the link between Idoia and the divine is at its most forceful and disconcerting, whelmed with obscene and sacrilegious issues. As with a number of other examples, the penetralia of *Tabernacle for Idoia* holds the look-alike simulacrum of this woman's vulva in all its naturalness, complete with its asymmetrical form, protruding labia, and rugulose texture—the result of deliberately and unashamedly adopting an open pose in my studio. Idoia is aware that by doing so, her sex with all its minutiae is not just being presented to me but also to prospective and anonymous viewers through the simulacrum. Although with such a disconcerting trophy of her femininity Idoia challenges and preempts the power of the male gaze, she sets forth a greeter, the welcoming gesture of her right hand. In all this, Idoia is staunchly countering the coercion of the male gaze and also what Lisa Tickner calls the 'de-sexualising of women and the fetishisation of their image' in the Western world through the 'anaesthetisation' of the vagina or its outright omission (Tickner 1978: 243). Her exposed sex is neither pathologised nor eroticised, it is just it—one of several components populating the artefact. The contextualised setting of all these parts within the artefact is crucial to its purpose and function. Here it is worth mentioning that the box-assemblage's frame of reference and imagery is influenced by esthetical considerations

³ In the case of the Catholic faith, *transubstantiation* refers to the process whereby the Eucharistic bread and wine alter their substance but not appearance and molecular structure.

in such a manner that it enables itself to trigger the sensuous and spiritual perceptions of the participant-spectators. Contemporaneously, it is also affected with others that are surely to bring on emotions of lewdness, dislike, distaste, and maybe also revulsion. Imbued with this contrariety—a result of its innate capacity to juxtapose the sacred and the profane, the esthetic and the obscene—the box-assemblage generates a distinct style of iconographic power, one that is strong enough to countervail the ‘violence’ of the male gaze.



Fig. 5 *Tabernacle for Idoia*, 2011- (unfinished)
detail of inner chamber showing simulacra of Idoia's vagina and right hand, and other contents
mixed media
W 480mm, H 480mm, D 480mm (when closed)

Here it is pertinent that I address Idoia's self-exposure in my studio, and through the box-assemblage, within the contextual association between the act of taking off one's clothes and the varied bodily sensations inferred through it. The last mentioned may be anything from a sense of pleasure, and an allurements to caress, to distressing feelings of vulnerability. Hers is based on absolute trust between us and at times translates into an invitation to intimacy. Her skin is the barrier which protects her but at the same time a means through which she communicates with me. I dare say that when Idoia displays herself and performs naked in my studio, her skin becomes the interconnection between myself and the other, not unlike the superficies of the consecrated host and wine which are the delineation between that which is profane and that which is sacred. A fair example of this is *Tabernacle for ourselves*, 2011-(unfinished) which, with its paradoxical nature, not only effects an intersection between the feminine and the divine but also a hypothetical coalescence of the bodies-in-pieces of Idoia and myself. It clearly shows that the artefact not only acts as a receptacle and shrine for our broken down bodies, but also constitutes part of an ongoing process whereby the relationship between myself and Idoia is re-visited,

metamorphosed, and matured to an acutely intense level. Also, in the process it re-negotiates the conventions associated with what is traditionally considered to be a strictly dichotomic relationship in the studio, that between male artist and female model. While time-honoured criteria make a clear distinction between the observant position of the former and the acquiescence of the latter, my work shuns such divergent statuses and opts for a mutually beneficial collaboration between Idoia and myself (Polinska 2000: 48). Ultimately, the box assemblage translates into a concerted and synergetic rendezvous, one that is distinguished with an aura of transcendence, with the other.

However, this faculty can only be sustained by the libido engendered by Idoia, a particular kind of erotism that she willingly shares, through the context of the box-assemblage, with anyone longing to entertain a mutually beneficial relationship with her. Relevant to all this is Georges Bataille's claim that erotism compels us to transit from what we believe to be a state that mirrors our true selves, and over which we confidently feel to be in control, to a state of 'partial dissolution,' one that brings us a loss of self-possession and self-discipline. Here Bataille is not alluding to some sort of calamity befalling partners in love; nonetheless, he connotes that through their erotic engagement they are likely to succumb to violations of their persona. In such discourse on erotism and the changes it brings about, Bataille claims that the altered state transitioned to is qualitative and gender specific:

The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the real of discontinuity... In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity (Bataille 1986: 17).

Bataille's analysis of cross-gender erotic desire is an interesting one; however, the modus operandi of the box-assemblage challenges his assertion that in such a sexual rendezvous the prime mover is the male partner. Any male spectator wishing to experience Idoia's erotism through the artefact must forfeit his anonymity which, in other contexts, advantages his position vis-à-vis the female subject. Also, as a consequence of the partitioned state of her body, he may never know whether she is still capable of countering and returning his gaze; this uncertainty may prove unsettling to anyone attempting a voyeuristic engagement with her. Furthermore, any dynamic and physical interaction with the artefact not only subjects him to an ever-changing depth of field relative to it, but also obliges him to continually shift his viewpoint in relation to Idoia. All this results in the fracturing of his gaze into a series of glances, a process which not only weakens the dominating power of his scrutiny, but renders it harmless. As for Idoia, she not only permits but also controls the fragmentation of her own body with the knowledge that her plenitude is eventually restored and secured by the box-assemblage. At no instant is she violated or subdued.



Fig. 6. *Peep-hole box*, 2013- (unfinished)
hinged panels open to reveal peephole and simulacrum of Idoia's vagina and anus
mixed media
W 319mm, H 321mm, D 657mm (when closed)

Probably, the better example which discredits Bataille's assertions regarding the roles of the male and female participants in the sexual encounter is *Peephole box*, (2013-unfinished) [fig. 6]. If the male gazer is game to this box-assemblage's idiosyncratic attributes, it awards him with a particularly forceful relationship with Idoia, albeit characterised by a power imbalance in her favour. Anyone wishing to gain access to its interior and experience the 'spectacle' that lies beyond the orifice alluded to in its title, must relinquish his inconspicuousness and detachment. Visually and tactually examining the box-assemblage, and familiarising oneself with it, is a must.

While the outer recesses of the doors along its longer sides hold innocuous painted images, their inner counterparts carry photographs of an unveiled Idoia striking poses next to painted and oversized representations of herself. At the back of these doors are variedly sized spaces that contain a miscellanea of cast simulacra, objects, and mementos of her existence. As for the actual peephole, this lies behind two overlapping doors countersunk on one of the shorter façades. The recesses on either side of each of these two doors, save one, hold painted representations of Idoia's body fragments. While the frontmost and constantly visible painting shows her face and the crest of her left breast, the others with one exception show more of her intimate parts.

Once the last mentioned pair of doors is drawn wide open, the spectators are confronted with a direct and exact replica of Idoia's genitalia and perineal area with actual pubes embedded in it. This vagina and anus simulacrum is niched underneath the structure's own 5 millimetre wide orifice through which the spectators are invited to peep. When the structure is configured in such a state of 'openness,' this intimate body fragment comes flanked by a painting of a pussycat on the left and another of Idoia's vagina on the right. Although one might say that in opening these doors the spectators are getting more than what they bargained for, it is amply clear that throughout this unfolding of body-parts, Idoia is calling the shots. While through her first- and second-class relics she effects a 'presencing' of herself, she also returns the participant-spectators' gaze through her genitalia,

anus, and the pussycat who acts as proxy and also visual pun. For the ‘voyeur,’ ocular access through the peephole comes at a price—he must effectively thrust his face against Idoia’s prurient body fragment, which is in lieu of her worldly existence. All this clearly shows how the box-assemblage disrupts the traditional anonymity and detachment of the male gazer vis-à-vis the unawareness of the woman gazed-upon, a subject extensively addressed by Laura Mulvey in *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* (Mulvey 1975). With the facial and perineal contact established, the spectator looks through the peephole to see moving images of a naked and uninhibited Idoia performing in my studio. From time to time, she directs her own gaze toward the peephole to engage with whoever might be looking at her. Any feeling of separation between the two is thoroughly extinguished.

Within the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, the *Peephole box* amplifies any distress caused to male gazers as a result of woman’s anatomy. Fully experiencing this artefact comes at the price of literally shoving one’s nose against the intimate parts of a particular woman. While on one hand Idoia ‘succeeds’ in humiliating her viewers, on the other hand she effects a rapprochement with them. Idoia offers them not only the privilege of closely looking at and touching intimate areas of her skin, acts which go a long way toward ‘demystifying her mystery,’ but a direct association with a ‘reformed,’ albeit unidealised and truthful, version of herself. Any visual pleasure that a male gazer might attempt to draw out of it, and as alluded to by Mulvey, is harnessed and subdued toward obliteration (Mulvey 1975: 42).

The success of the box-assemblage is contingent on the sequence of covert spaces crafted inside it; these contribute to its versatile and contradictory nature—from one point of view implying confinement and control, from another permitting the grouping of unrelated objects. In the aforementioned physically defined areas, contrariety, such as that between the antipodal concepts of the sacred and the profane, is addressed. The perverse associations on the inside are also mirrored through the box-assemblage’s oxymoronic outlook, one that bears a shape reminiscent of a sacred artefact but is coupled with irreverent iconography.

Here it is worth noting that the launch of this project was affected by Emmanuel Lévinas’ affirmation that the Divine is an epitomisation of the other. Just when I started to deliberate on the idea of producing three-dimensional structures that would host inside them representations of Idoia and myself, I not only set about carefully examining examples of Christian ecclesiastical furnishings, but also embarked on researching the significance of various divine tropes (Lévinas 1969: 194, 197). I was after an artefact that could take on an aura of sacrality and transcendence, and a blend in of profaneness; more importantly, it had to be of an architecture that not only provided an agreeable shelter for its subjects but a privileged space, or rather a sanctum, for the ‘othered’ person. Furthermore, I endeavoured to make such a structure responsive and amenable to the interchangeability of the feminine and the sacred as expounded by Irigaray (Irigaray 1985: 191). The resultant box-assemblage provides a haven where Idoia and myself are impartial active players. Its micro-ambience encourages and stimulates a de-othering process between and in relation to ourselves, culminating in a melting-pot of our subjectivities.

At this point it is pertinent to comment on the box-assemblage’s operativity as representational device. Through its complex design, forgathered representations, and preselected contents, this kind of artefact not only reflects Lisa Tickner’s view that an unconditional link with the real is unattainable, but also manifests Susanne Kappeler’s

assertion that whatever is revealed to an audience is always strictly controlled (Tickner 1998: 357; Kappeler 1986: 2-3). Such a regulation is directed toward sentiments of objectification which, aided by cultural premiss, might stem from specific components of the box-assemblage. These are neutralised through the artefact's collective and complex constitution which affords the appropriate mitigating actions, and also by the very nature of how the partakers' engagement with these objects is meticulously regulated. Furthermore, the artefacts are not meant to be displayed just anywhere and to anyone, thus reducing further the risk of commodification and objectification which is so common with explicit images that circulate the present digital age.

In view of the above, it stands to reason that in return for granting access to prospective partakers, the box-assemblage requests a degree of their commitment. This is because to be looked at and explored the artefact requires a sustained period of time throughout which their gazes are interrupted and broken up, while they are stared back at by its protagonists through their fragmented bodies. Art historian Norman Bryson affirms that the gaze, as a direct connective agent between artwork and viewer, may be replaced by a series of glances, that takes into account the viewers' mobility and, as in the case of my artefact, its intrinsic dynamism (Bryson 2006). While in the box-assemblage the bodies are re-visited and trans-valued in parts through fragmentation and multiplication, the straightforward gaze usually associated with traditional artworks is broken down into a series of gazes brought about by the ever-changing depth of field between the parties concerned.

Furthermore, through the process of gradually taking in the fragmented bodies of Idoia and myself, knowingly or unknowingly, the participant-spectators establish a relationship of complicity, based on visual and tactile contact, with us. Using Irigaray's words, the box-assemblage becomes a space for '... the meeting with an other, another who is different while being the nearest to ourselves: the clearing for the advent of a dialogue or conversation between the two parts of humanity in the respect of their otherness to one another' (Irigaray 2004: xii).

Germane to all this is the circumstance that while each of the box-assemblages deals with subjectivity and alterity in its own particular way, they all express gender fluidity. Through their various representations they not only uphold Rosi Braidotti's assertion that a person's sexuality is mutable and readily adapts to his or her identity adjustments, but also vindicate her idea that the body is the outset of one's subjectivity and the interface between a person's organic aliveness and its milieu (Braidotti 1994). This explains why a number of box assemblages are in a state of 'unfinishedness;' harmonised with that of their protagonists, the artefacts' actualities are in states of flux, direct impressions of their mercurial subjectivities. The project in reality can never be finished, it simply draws to a close. And in such states they share the ultimate goal, albeit ungraspable, of bringing about a convergence and assimilation between the self and the other, or rather between myself and the female subject.

I push this hypothesis further by suggesting that in more ways than one, the box assemblage transmutes itself into a prosthesis of myself, an existence that goes beyond the status of inanimate object, capable of reaching out to the female subject and securing its essentialness. I draw on Lévinas to assert that such an existence is a token of how responsible I feel for Idoia (Lévinas 2008: 95); and also on Elaine Scarry to claim that the affinity between Idoia, myself and the box-assemblage is so intimate and forceful that the latter translates into a tangible actuality of our sentient consciousnesses, or rather our 'awareness of aliveness' (Scarry 1985: 289).

Through the unbiased confluence of our subjectivities, my box-assemblage suggests that the idea of rectifying the inequality of gender relations in the west through Fine Arts does not necessarily need to be the exclusive remit of feminist artists. Toward this aim these artefacts uphold the notional activity of ‘witnessing’ as a means of going beyond recognition in terms of interpersonal relationships (Oliver 2001). While identification with the other is a restrictive approach to that who is not oneself, bearing witness to the other implies discernment with the possibility of a response. Witnessing subsumes ‘address-ability’ and ‘response-ability,’ two faculties that are capable of seeking, accepting and assimilating the other’s true uniqueness. However, this is only possible if the parties concerned acknowledge and uphold the inherent potentiality of each other, no matter the milieu, race and gender of every individual. Rather than contrived, the address to such an inequality should be a natural consequence of the sincere recognition of each others’ inherent values.

All this is possible through my box-assemblage because it addresses my liaison with a particular woman whose physical presence, as well as her psychological makeup, has been the focus of my studio work for a considerable length of time. Although non-sexual, our relationship is characterised by sexual undertones; the passionate yearning that has permeated my consciousness for the past years, and my persuasion that key to its indulgence is Idoia, the other-ed person in relation to me, reckons Georg Hegel’s affirmation that otherness is an effect of self-consciousness (Geniušas 2008). Idoia, the embodiment of otherness from my perspective, is critical to my deeply felt emotions. I am also mindful of the artefact’s limitedness in achieving the desired performance. Nonetheless, it does allay the anguish I feel as a result of my knowledge that Idoia’s allurements on me will forever be coupled by the elusiveness of her alterability. Also, each of the box-assemblages is a fair substitute for Idoia’s presence when she is not around; and a perpetual reminder of that which is other, that which is elusive but tantalisingly real.

Here I will make reference to the *Memoriale*, or rather *Book of visions and instructions*, of Angela of Foligno, a Christian mystic who lived between 1248 and 1309, as it shares an affinity with my box-assemblage and what I just said about it. Accessing this document translates into experiencing the relationship of a person (in this case Angela) with the transcendental, an intimate rapport based on affectivity rather than knowledge. In her writing Angela does not hide her inability to fathom its mystery; for her ‘God is the human Christ, but God is also inaccessible darkness.’ Notwithstanding Angela’s corporeal and spiritual limitations, the *Memoriale* documents and witnesses her incessant pursuit at converging and assimilating with him and, ‘[i]n the end, Angela discovers that she resides within God’ (Mazzoni 1999); lack of knowledge does not hinder her from achieving a ‘good enough’ relationship with him. All this is very familiar with the box-assemblage. I am emotionally ‘attached’ to Idoia and I go through great pains to permeate this affinity into the box-assemblage. Ultimately, the box-assemblage equates Idoia with the transcendental and this intimates that, just as Angela vis-à-vis God, I can be intimate with her but never completely discern her, and the con-simulation⁴ set in motion by the artefact remains as elusive as ever.

The aforesaid suggests that the box-assemblage concords with Luce Irigaray’s assertion that the other may be interpreted as contemporaneously feminine and divine (Joy 2006: 17; Barker 2010: 322). Her hypothesis is based

⁴ *Con-simulation* is my play on the words convergence and assimilation.

on the intersection between philosophy and theology and her research on the writings of mediaeval women apophatic mystics, including Angela of Foligno herself. What Irigaray finds so compelling in the texts of these writers, who lived at a time when women were considered as corporeally unchaste and their gender inferior, is the assertiveness with which they conveyed their experiences as ordinary and devout women. By undauntedly accepting the denigrated status bestowed on them, these visionaries were able to correlate their existence with the inexplicability of God, whose antithesis to anything rational paralleled their own presumed predisposition. The status of God in their texts is very similar to that of woman in post-feminist writings. Here is Irigaray's own attempts at describing what is woman:

Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her*. She is not infinite but neither is she *a unit(y)*, such as letter, number, figure in a series, proper noun, unique object (in a) world of the senses, simple ideality in an intelligible whole, entity of a foundation, etc. This incompleteness in her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say that she is ever univocally nothing. No metaphor completes her. Never is she this, then that, this and that....But she is becoming that expansion that she neither is nor will be at any moment as definable universe (Irigaray 1985: 229).

Ann-Marie Priest suggests that such a colloquy picked from *Speculum of the other woman* is comparable to the texts of mystic writers (Priest 2003: 5-6). While Irigaray adopts their linguistic approach and their conceptual verse structure to develop a 'feminine negative theology,' I appropriate the design of cabinet-styled ecclesiastical furniture to re-vision and re-assess the female body. In so many words, just how Irigaray, notwithstanding linguistic constraints, exploits and directs her perceptual limitations of muliebrity toward a comprehensive, albeit tentative, narration of the feminine, I follow suit through artefactual jargon.

Irigaray advances the idea that God is also woman to emphasise the fact that patriarchy relentlessly subjects God and women to the same treatment, that of appropriation, repression and interpretation. Her arguments are motivated by the personal accounts of these female mystics in whose texts she identifies a hypothetical realm in which woman and God may be juxtaposed and reappraised in relation to each other. Angela's pursuit was a complete assimilation of herself with God through Christ to whom she affectionately referred to as the 'God-man.' For her, partaking of the Eucharist was an ecstatic and sensual experience that climaxed into an intersection with Christ's body. She made no distinction between the edible Host and his corporeal body so its consumption was a way of blending their bodies into one.

Molly Morrison suggests that ultimately Angela's physical connection with Christ, which involved carnally identifying herself with him, consuming him, and being embraced by him, also led to piercing his body (Morrison 1998: 2). She describes one such intense visionary experience that took place in the square of Foligno as follows:

It seemed to me that I had entered at that moment within the side of Christ. All sadness was gone and my joy was so great that nothing can be said about it (Lachance 1993: 176).

This is an atypical situation whereby the sexual protocols of man and woman are reversed—the male Christ is penetrated by the female Angela. A similar kind of powerful intersection is reenacted by the agency of the box-assembly as an entity permeated by Idoia's body-in-pieces; as soon as the artefact is taken to stand for myself, it translates into a case where the male artist is 'penetrated' by the female subject.

In the enigmatic realm of their mysticism and through their profound love for the divine, women such as Angela were capable of attaining affinity and intimacy with God that were so strong as to suggest a metamorphosis of themselves into Him. In *La mystérique* Irigaray describes a conceptually and contextually analogous realm:

...the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames. This is the place where 'she'—and in some cases he, if he follows 'her' lead—speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about 'subject' and 'Other' flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another, about contempt for form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of *jouissance* and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason (Irigaray 1985: 191).

Here Irigaray pushes further the idea of an exceptional association between woman and God by suggesting that she is not only capable of acquiring her subjective identity, but also that the figurations of the feminine and the divine may become interchangeable. Such an unorthodox relationship is the basic principle underpinning my box-assemblage; while Irigaray asserts that the divine is a means through which women may achieve a form of spirituality which is unconditionally their own, I claim that the box-assemblage is a palpable form of this transcendental state. Grasping the radical significance of women mystics' writings, Irigaray affirms that the feminine and the divine belong to an indeterminate space that is beyond the outer limit of reason. In her discourse, she exploits the very fact that the otherness of God is a keystone of Christian theology and thinking and speaking about this otherness is a Christian's interminable pursuit. Woman and God share a conceptual space placed at an antipodal position relative to that which is considered rational and masculine. It is this kind of space that is engendered within the box-assemblage and through its choreographed iconography it posits intriguing questions which may remain unanswered:

Do they consecrate the carnality of an ordinary woman while playing off the 'grace and sanctity' of God's carnal mother, the Virgin Mary (Lasareff 1938)?

Do they tap the flux of eccentric devotion usually associated with reliquaries of holy people and direct it to the corporeality of an ordinary woman (Mitchell 2002)?

Do they implicate an unconscious desire to create transcendental associations with female sexuality?

Are they meant to concur with Irigaray's view that Mary, a woman, might be the physical link between the divine and the flesh (Martin 2000: 200)?

These questions not only intimate that the realisation of a box-assemblage involves complex thought processes that hinge on the antipodal notions of the sacred and profane, but also expressly suggest that contrary to Western theological thought the deific may be sourced from a woman. As already stated, they go beyond their artefactual existence and become mediums through which I re-visit female sexuality and erotism, albeit in the circumscribed framework of Idoia, and assess them within a spiritual context. And while disrupting attempts to be collectively used as a mirror which reflects the 'otherness of sameness,' the representations of the female body within the perimeter of the box safeguard her 'true otherness' (Irigaray 1985: 152).

By correlating Idoia's body with the divine, my box-assemblage seeks to give this person, as an embodiment of the 'true other,' a trans-corporeal identity. Rather than exerting control over the other, it provides a space with pious overtones whereby one is able to encounter the other and initiate an equitable relationship, unhindered

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with presumptive knowledge. The artefact's esthetics and dynamics further a process of disengagement from preconceived dogmas, a sort of reversal cognition. The participant-spectators are meant to examine the box-assembly by carefully opening it up stage by stage; throughout this, various representations and objects are revealed to them just to be concealed again by the next move. In the process they render visible, at times only fleetingly, that which is private and intimate; each step disclosing and sharing pertinent information with them and inviting them to deliberate on what they observe. Metaphorically, these stages may be considered as 'landings,' what Meskimmon describes as '...pauses, moments frequently marked by an extraordinary intensity of self-reflection and the possibility of setting a new course, of opening oneself to a new direction, not from an ahistorical "empty" starting point, but from the material legacy of the journey undertaken thus far' (Meskimmon 2011: 75). The participant-spectators may discriminate between the various simulacra and components inhabiting the box assembly's penetralia, and negotiate for themselves what to look at, scrutinise, and dismiss. A process of action and interaction ensues between the viewers, the box-assembly, and more importantly, Idoia's apotheosised body, establishing a physical and gestural connectedness between them—what laid dormant a few moments earlier, the dynamical character of the artefact—is stirred up and transferred to the partakers' bodies (Heath & vom Lehn 2004: 53).

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