



---

## The Oceanic as Perpetual Revolt: Intimacy and Negativity in Jeanette Spicer's *Sea* (*see*)

Keren Moscovitch

School of Visual Arts, New York City

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of Hegelian negativity in radical intimacy, and how the intimate practice of contemporary artist Jeanette Spicer helps elucidate negativity as the fourth term of the dialectic, thereby activating Hegelian dialectics through feminist materialism. Though Spicer's artistic and activist practice is grounded in the discourse of power and representation of lesbian sexuality, I argue that her photographic body of work *Sea* (*see*) reveals an engagement with subjectivity reflective of negativity in Hegelian thought, and that her intimate work can help us understand the radical and subversive role of negativity in the dialectic and subjectivity itself, extending to the fragmentation of identity. Kristeva's approach to Hegelian negativity through dialectical materialism and psychoanalytic theory, understood through the Freudian drives, opens up a pathway to a nuanced reading of Spicer's monograph, by which intimacy moves beyond the triplicity of the dialectic into an erotic space of questioning that relies less on the declaration of resistant identity and more on the ambivalence and impossibility of intimacy itself. I suggest that an embodied materialist aesthetic, grounded in a practice of intimacy, is necessary to understanding Hegelian negativity as an important component of a philosophical system that avoids the complete abstraction of logic and spirit, yet moves beyond the pragmatism of dialectical materialism into a sacred space of self-questioning.

### KEYWORDS

Kristeva,  
Negativity,  
Intimacy,  
Dialectic, Revolt,  
Psychoanalysis,  
Feminist  
Materialism

21. We become like them, alive in a vision  
 fetched down through history entire. By that time she is a person  
 with scratches all over, her back especially. I felt as if I could see through them.

—James Capozzi<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Beyond the Dialectic

What lies beyond the dialectic, beyond the bonds of love and subjectivity, inside the ever-turning, perpetually twisting bodies and minds of radical intimates? This paper examines the role of Hegelian negativity in radical intimacy and how the intimate practice of contemporary artist Jeanette Spicer helps elucidate negativity as the fourth term of the dialectic, thereby activating Hegelian dialectics through feminist materialism. Though Spicer's artistic and activist practice is grounded in the discourse of power and representation of lesbian sexuality,<sup>2</sup> I argue that her photographic body of work *Sea (see)* reveals an engagement with subjectivity reflective of negativity in Hegelian thought, and that her intimate work can help us understand the radical and subversive role of negativity in the dialectic and subjectivity itself, extending to the fragmentation of identity. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva addresses Hegelian negativity through dialectical materialism and psychoanalytic theory and articulates the liquifying rejection of negativity as understood through the Freudian drives. Kristeva's gesture opens up a pathway to a nuanced reading of Spicer's monograph, by which intimacy moves beyond the triplicity of the dialectic into an erotic space of questioning that relies less on the declaration of resistant identity and more on the ambivalence and impossibility of intimacy itself. In dialogue with the theoretical literature, I introduce Spicer's photographic monograph *Sea (see)*, published in 2018 (figure 1), and offer a detailed analysis of several foundational images from the book, as well as an overview of the arc of the narrative and the imagery found within. In doing so, I suggest that an embodied materialist aesthetic, grounded in a practice of intimacy, is necessary to understanding negativity as an important component of a philosophical system that integrates the abstraction of logic and spirit as expressed in Hegel's idealism, with an engagement with lived experience found in dialectical materialism. These seemingly divergent threads of dialectics interweave in Kristeva's writings, reframed and enriched by Freudian theory to describe the subject's entrée into symbolic language via the semiotic of the drives, and are reflected in intimate art practices such as Spicer's to produce sacred spaces of self-questioning.

Spicer's photographic monograph *Sea (see)* chronicles a pivotal relationship on her journey of questioning sexuality, intimacy and subjectivity. Spicer presents quiet depictions of her lover's body at a remote beach, and in a small country house, through the lens of the lesbian gaze. The terrain of the photographs traverses summer and winter, and reveals a body simultaneously open and closed, exposed and hidden. The softness of Spicer's gaze stares openly at the object of her desire. In the perpetual comings and goings of the tide and the sea, Spicer sees into the ontology of unstable subjectivity, femininity and their collision in intimacy. A space opens up between the water and the shore, the sea and the house, the oceanic unconscious and the structure of the built dwelling. This rift is a rift in self-consciousness, and an opening for intimate revolt in confrontation with the non-representability of both self and other. Spicer literally objectifies her lover—turns

<sup>1</sup> Capozzi's poem "Myth of Origins" appears in the opening pages of Spicer's monograph. Spicer, Jeanette. *Sea (see)*. 1st ed. Hollis, NH: Kris Graves Projects, LLC, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Spicer is a founding editor of *WMN*, a zine of lesbian art and poetry. "Lesbian Art and Poetry." *WMN*, 28 Dec. 2020, [www.wmnzine.com/](http://www.wmnzine.com/).

her body, and therefore her only representable form, into the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. Just as the sea contains multitudes beyond its visible surface, however, desire is more than dialectical; it includes within its formulation that which Kristeva refers to as “the *fourth term* of the true dialectic”<sup>3</sup>—the repressed element of *negativity*, not to be confused with *nothingness* or *negation*. In his own writings on intimacy and the dialectic, contemporary philosopher Christopher Lauer invites an understanding of dialectics as a process of deepening and persistent failure. Lauer argues that “dialectics *is* philosophical engagement with intimacy,”<sup>4</sup> a position that I contend psychoanalysis shares and is articulated in Kristeva’s examination of excluded elements of the dialectic which have been subsumed by the determination of the subject. This paper presents Spicer’s project as an intimate foray into negativity as a transgressive function of the dialectic, and intimacy as the threat of subjective collapse. Through mirroring, recollection, and the “metaphorical and metonymical rifts of discourse”<sup>5</sup> described by Kristeva, Spicer enters into the lacuna of sexual intimacy, where representations slip and evade the eye, facilitating poetic collisions between concepts and the material realm.

How might we reconcile Hegel’s speculative system, couched in scientific logic and Christian religious sentiment, with a queer feminist materialist aesthetic of intimacy? Marxist interpretations of the dialectic have produced tangible, materialist interpretations of Hegel’s logic, which are directly mappable onto hegemonic human relations and have played an important role in feminist, queer and postcolonial investigations. Kristeva’s contributions, however, are unique in their appropriation of the spiritual foundations of Hegel’s writings, working in concert with the interior mining endemic to Freudian psychoanalysis to produce a secular philosophy of poetic subjectivity with intimacy at its core. We may find the roots of Kristeva’s arguments in Hegel’s theological beliefs, through which Hegel articulates the dissolution of the mind-body dichotomy via dialectical engagement between, and consequent sublation of, subject and object. Hegel’s writings presage Kristeva’s contemporary ideas and Spicer’s visual practice when he argues:

Just as religion and religious worship consist in overcoming the antithesis of subjectivity and objectivity, so science too and philosophy have no other task than to overcome this antithesis with the medium of thought. The aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, to find ourselves at home in it: which means no more than to trace the objective world back to the notion—to our innermost self.<sup>6</sup>

The return to interiority via the quest for knowledge is perhaps the quintessence of the analytic process. This inward turn is emphasized in Kristeva’s writings on intimacy and her interest in Hegelian negativity as a term that can both be situated outside the structural triplicity of the dialectic, as well as understood to be inextricably embedded deep within its functioning.

By extracting negativity out of the dialectic as the *process* underlying negation—a fluid moving between Being and Nothingness—and examining it through a psychoanalytic lens, Kristeva identifies a function of the Hegelian system that engages the intimacy of the unconscious

---

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006, 113.

<sup>4</sup> Lauer, Christopher. *Intimacy - A Dialectical Study*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Logic of Hegel*. Translated by William Wallace. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1892, 335.

and the drives. According to feminist political scholar Sina Kramer, “Kristeva reads Hegel as having subordinated this negativity to determinate negation and the ultimate unity and identity of spirit.”<sup>7</sup> By doing so, Kristeva argues, Hegel represses the rejuvenation available in dialectical thinking. Kristeva believes that negativity in Hegelian thought has been wrongly abstracted into nothingness, “a negative theology.”<sup>8</sup> She maintains that, to the contrary, “what the dialectic represents as negativity, indeed Nothing, is precisely that which remains outside logic (as the signifier of a subject), what remains heterogeneous to logic even while producing it through a movement of separation or rejection.”<sup>9</sup> Negativity is not simply the negative entity opposed to the positive, or each individual operation of negation or sublation. In psychoanalytic terms, negativity can be analogized to the death drive—subjectivity striving to dissolve itself with the continual motion of self-annihilation—and the repetition compulsion of rejection and cyclical re-emergence that occurs in repression and the return of the repressed in the form of the symptom. Spicer’s photographic project, by engaging symbolic constructs of masculinity and femininity and dissolving them through the intimate gaze, affirms the material heterogeneity of sexual intimacy through the rejection of logical categories and oppositions, and allows new poetic significations to emerge from the unconscious. According to Kristeva, these categories are re-situated by Hegel as “a fundamental reorganization of these oppositions—one that will establish an *affirmative negativity*, a *productive dissolution* in place of ‘Being’ and ‘Nothing.’”<sup>10</sup> While negation operates as a logical opposition in the dialectic, negativity does not merely nullify or cancel out logical constructs in favor of new constructs; negativity operates on an organic, materialist plane, dissolving boundaries between constructs, including the constructs of being and nothingness.



Figure 1, cover of *Sea (see)* by Jeanette Spicer (2018)

<sup>7</sup> Kramer, Sina. “On negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 3 (2013): 465–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-013-9272-y>.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

## 2. Liquifying Categories: Jeanette Spicer's *Sea* (*see*)

Spicer's project documents the year-long duration of her first sexually and romantically intimate relationship with a woman. According to the photographer, executing the series in collaboration with her partner was a way for both of them to claim power through the female gaze, by seeing through, and performing for the camera eye. Spicer describes how taking time to look at the female body from the position of a first-time lover was a process of slowing down and seeing. She states: "The pausing and stillness of time let me contemplate, re visit [sic] and attempt to understand my partner."<sup>11</sup> Throughout *Sea* (*see*), the materialism of the female body and feminine sexuality interweaves with the ambivalence of gender in the sexually intimate body. Spicer states: "The ambiguity of [my partner's] masculinely feminine figure made her body that much more intriguing, familiar, yet unfamiliar."<sup>12</sup> Images that explicitly display her partner's female genitalia, trimmed and exposed, turned into an object of beauty and fascination, play with this slippage between male and female, subject and object. In one such image, the rounded lobes of Spicer's partner's labia and clitoris, lightly dusted with dark hair against peach-hued skin, are framed inside of a rouge sunburn shaped like a pair of boy shorts. Afternoon light drifts across her skin, delineating her navel and hips, and the slight spread of her thighs. Her genitals protrude, almost, countering the expectation of wetness and interiority that so often defines the female body, as does the notion of lack, the missing organ of the patriarchal psychoanalytic tradition. In this image, we see just the lower half of a black sports bra, a reminder that the person in the photograph is presenting us not with a feminized view of the female body, but with a vision that speaks of the singularity of queerness and its resistance to categorization.

Spicer's handling of space underlines the ambivalence of intimacy, and the notion that that which is most interior is also the most exterior to consciousness. In the opening image of the monograph (figure 2), Spicer's lover stands nude inside a domestic space behind a glass door, a beam of sunlight and the reflection of the sky and trees fragmenting her body into limbs, buttocks, breast and the hint of a petulant glance. Her face melts into the reflection of a line of trees, the blue sky taking on a fluid, watery appearance in the undulations of glass and light. A pink polka-dotted towel adorned with a cartoon bow frames her hips, highlighting the part of the body most in question, and containing the physical components of sex and gender, while also perhaps most open to the rupture of identity generated in sexual intimacy. The ambivalence and tension between interiority and exteriority in Spicer's monograph bring to mind the Lacanian term *extimacy*, which, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, indicates that "the exterior is present in the interior" and designates "the unconscious as discourse of the Other, of this Other who, more intimate than my intimacy, stirs me. And this intimate which is radically Other."<sup>13</sup> Spicer's lover's androgynous presentation renders her impenetrable to the patriarchal gaze, indecipherable without the clear signifiers of gender, yet having pierced Spicer's innermost being—that ambivalent unconscious space where inside and outside collapse, through which the Other intrudes and disrupts subjective stability. Hegel's quest for knowledge is simultaneously complicated and deepened by intimacy. Spicer finds herself stirred by the radical exteriority of her partner's otherness, her separation from her lover and from elements of her own body—on one hand, familiar and comfortable to assimilate, and on the other, like the sea, an ever-withdrawing entity.

---

<sup>11</sup> Spicer, Jeanette. "Jeanette Spicer: Sea (see) (2018)." Artsy. Kris Graves Projects, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jeanette-spicer-sea-see>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Extimacy." *The Symptom* 9. Lacanian Ink, June 20, 2008. <http://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimacy.html>.

As we move through the monograph, we encounter images that challenge perception, form and the clarity of gender, and that integrate both natural and built locales into fragments of space, time and the question of sexuality. A woman's face in shadow, a mere slice of her countenance exposed in a beam of light; she sits unclothed on a beach, the rounded oblong forms of her labia point toward the carcass of a small dead shark in the foreground, the animal's grimace mirroring the shape of her own mouth pressed against her shoulder. In another image, the same woman's hand is covered in menstrual blood—the photographer's—the bloody limb splayed out on a strangely shorn bedsheet (figure 3). In another context, this scene may have appeared violent, but the softness of the light and the intimate narrative unfolding between the two women neutralizes the aggression of the camera-gaze. What might we find beyond the dialectic? How, and why, might we open up the triplicity of Hegel's model to what Kristeva refers to as the 'fourth term'—*negativity*—which she contrasts with Hegel's "nothingness (*Nichts*) and negation (*Negation*)."<sup>14</sup> Kristeva argues that there is a tendency to conflate these concepts, but that negativity is actually a distinct gesture that lends the dialectic its intimate and perhaps even transgressive qualities. According to Kristeva, "negativity is the liquefying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates new organizations and, in that sense, affirms."<sup>15</sup> In the investigation that follows, I explore Spicer's queer aesthetic in context with Kristeva's semiotic reframing of the symbolic materiality of sexuality in the psychoanalytic tradition, and propose that Hegelian negativity presents new possibilities for intimate revolt.



Figure 2



Figure 3

### 3. The Intimacy of Negativity

The concept of negativity is essential for considering Kristeva's contribution to dialectical thought, and to developing discourses pertaining to art practices that employ intimacy in subversive ways, challenging ideological thinking and the hegemony of modern subjectivity. Kristeva's persistent emphasis on materialist praxis and her grounding in female materiality invite an inquiry into the dialectical underpinnings of the intimate, while retaining a tether to the materialism of sexuality. Her work, including the early writings in *Revolution in Poetic Language* that are cited extensively in this paper, may be read as essentialist and potentially overly grounded

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

in binary gender constructs. Her contemporary writings and interviews, however, clarify her position “that there are more than two sexes and that we invent our sex in our intimate life: this process is always a creative act.”<sup>16</sup> I suggest that the creativity of sexual intimacy, as well as its subversive dimension, may be found in the Hegelian dialectic, as read through Kristeva’s psychoanalytic feminist materialist sensibility and her writings on intimacy and revolt. The creative process that Kristeva attributes to both negativity and sexuality intersect in the intimacy of gender, sex and the individual’s spiritual quest detached from the ideology of religious conviction.

Kristeva reframes negativity as a process, which she derives directly from her study of the Freudian drives, particularly the death drive—the inescapable urge towards self-annihilation. She notes that “the term ‘drive’ denotes waves of attack against stases, which are themselves constituted by the repetition of these charges; together, charges and stases lead to no identity.”<sup>17</sup> Beyond the reinvention of self that occurs cyclically through lived experience, Kristeva makes a broader philosophical claim about human subjectivity that both relies upon Hegelian oppositions and surpasses them by reassessing the role of negativity as a liquefying agent. Kristeva argues that negativity “reformulates the static *terms* of pure abstraction as a process, dissolving and binding them within a mobile law.”<sup>18</sup> Citing Lenin’s *Conspectus* on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Kristeva notes Lenin’s emphasis on negativity “as an *objective* principle—the principle of all physical and spiritual life,”<sup>19</sup> rather than a mere dismantling of fixed concepts and categories driven by subjective desire. Kristeva notes that negativity is “both the cause and the organizing principle of the *process*,”<sup>20</sup> accordingly, “[a]s the logical expression of the objective process, negativity can only produce a subject in process/on trial.”<sup>21</sup> Kristeva’s persistent emphasis on process and the constant reformulation of self and identity, and her rejection of categories and the stasis of *being*, are informed by Hegel’s dialectic while eschewing its moments of determination. These ideas intersect with her description of the intimate as “where we end up when we question apparent meanings and values”<sup>22</sup> as well as “what is most profound and most singular in the human experience [...] this interiority that the Greeks called ‘soul’ (*psūkhē*), defined by its proximity with the organic body as well as by preverbal sensations.”<sup>23</sup> With this theoretical backdrop as a foundation, I situate Spicer’s practice in the lineage of radical intimacy in contemporary art, facilitating radical thought through the eternal questioning of the subject in revolt.

Spicer’s work depicts sexuality among queer women, a community whose intimacies Spicer contends are underrepresented. She states: “I don’t often see a lot of photographic bodies of work that show queer women looking at each other, whether intimately or otherwise and this body of work gives voice to my community, who are marginalized and often silenced.”<sup>24</sup> By creating her own photographic record of subjectivity in process, questioned and destabilized in intimacy, Spicer participates in a culture of intimate revolt. Kristeva argues that revolt, rooted in

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “The Psychic Life: A Life in Time: Psychoanalysis and Culture.” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-1.

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Intimate Revolt*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, Stanley, and Jeanette Spicer. “Body Intimacy in ‘Sea(See)’ by Jeanette Spicer ~ Velvet Eyes.” *Velvet Eyes*, November 4, 2018. <https://velveteyes.net/features/jeanette-spicer/>.

part in the Copernican notion of revolution as celestial turning, “is the idea that being is within us and that the truth can be acquired by a retrospective return, by anamnesis, by memory. The return to oneself leads the individual to question his truth.”<sup>25</sup> Through her intimate photographic practice, Spicer questions the hegemony of masculine subjectivity—the seeing, thinking subject of certainty—interjecting a feminized material existence that queers divisions between the body-mind-soul, the earth-sky-sea. In this way, she poeticizes the gender divisions that congregate particulars into universal categories and confine being to the dialectic of language—a dialectic that requires negation, sublation and erasure to move forward. Here, we begin to see the importance of the intimate to finding freedom in the dialectic. In his own engagement with negativity, José Esteban Muñoz describes queerness as a rejection of political categorization and a constant looking towards the horizon of the future: “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic.”<sup>26</sup> I suggest, however, that we may find in Spicer’s aesthetic a queerness that fully participates in the present moment, through the compression of time found in the psychoanalytic discourse of anamnesis and the drives.

How does Spicer articulate revolt and an immanent beyond, in the perpetual turning back of memory and the body as it is activated by the unconscious? The aforementioned photograph of menstrual blood (figure 3) speaks directly to the intimate exchanges amongst women, and internal to the female body, which are celebrated by some feminist theorists who may be re-considered through feminist new materialism. For example, Luce Irigaray pays homage to feminine sexuality and rebukes the patriarchal psychoanalytic position centered on castration and negation as representing a literal void or absence inherent to the female body. By contrast to this ideology, she writes: “I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed. There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. Blood is familiar, close.”<sup>27</sup> Spicer’s photograph performs a similar role as Irigaray’s text, elucidating the immanence of sex and gender, and the physical, material realities that open up pathways to intimacy inside the dialectic itself, eschewing the need to negate histories of the body and its drives in the search for transcendence or forward-movement. Spicer’s image re-signifies blood away from the negation of the phallus in castration, into an affirmation of interiority and the fluidity of time, language and the body in intimacy. According to Kristeva, Hegel’s logic “will become materialist when, with the help of Freud’s discovery, one dares think negativity as the *very movement of heterogeneous matter*, inseparable from its differentiation’s symbolic function.”<sup>28</sup> The ripped bedsheet evokes a tear in time, a cut that frays and leaves uneven edges, signifying the unstable boundaries of the intimate. Kristeva notes that the Freudian term *rejection* “best designates, archaeologically, the instinctual, repetitive, and trans-signifying aspect of the dynamics of signifiante,”<sup>29</sup> however, she also insists on using the terms *scission* and *separation* “because they emphasize the underlying unity which withdraws and is reconstituted in the return of rejection

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, Julia, and Philippe Petit. *Revolt, She Said: An Interview by Philippe Petit*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2002, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Irigaray, Luce. “When These Lips Speak Together.” Essay. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, 205-18. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, 206-7.

<sup>28</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 113.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

[. . . and] signal the permanent logical constraint of an insurmountable *consciousness*.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, within the dialectic of self-consciousness and self-unity is the working of a persistent presence of its own negativity which does not deny but actually forms itself even as it cuts and withdraws from itself. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the cyclical return and withdrawal of memory, housed and activated in the unconscious, is inextricably bound to the body and its functions. Subjective consciousness is not denied but is acknowledged as a consistent presence that negativity cuts across.

Here we turn to Kristeva’s committed interest in revolt and the role of intimacy in revolutionary activity. Rather than looking towards an always approaching future, a discourse of negativity and rejection looks inwards and beyond linear time through memory and the workings of the unconscious. Pertaining to the language of rejection, Kristeva argues that “[i]ts law is one of returning, as opposed to one of becoming; it returns only to separate again immediately and thus appear as an impossible forward movement.”<sup>31</sup> Spicer’s photograph opens up the dialectics of intimacy to a space beyond the forward propulsion of time, which still carries with it the promise of eternal flux and reinvention fueled by memory, the body, and a return to one’s ambivalent interiority. Citing Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Kristeva explains: “A subject submerged in negativity is no longer ‘outside’ objective negativity as a transcendent unity or a specifically regulated monad; instead he positions himself as the ‘innermost and most objective moment of Life and Spirit.’”<sup>32</sup> Here, Kristeva highlights Hegel’s use of the term *innermost* which also echoes her own interest in the etymology of the term *intimacy*. Kristeva notes that “[t]he word [intimacy] comes from the Latin *intimus*, the superlative of *interior*, thus ‘the most interior.’ So, although it includes the unconscious, the intimate does not have to be reduced to it and may go well beyond it.”<sup>33</sup> Kristeva shows us that this ‘beyond’ always already exists in the dialectic, as a radically exterior otherness that is most internal to itself, found within its own semiotic function, its own intimate language. Through her poetic constructions, Spicer addresses and destabilizes the bonds of sexual difference through the intimate lens while at the same time highlighting the participation of sex in pleasure and the internal transcendence of self for itself and for the other, found within the material of the body, which is inseparable from memory. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Kristeva argues: “What makes sense today is not the future (as communism and providential religions claimed) but revolt: that is, the questioning and displacement of the past. The future, if it exists, depends on it.”<sup>34</sup> We can position Spicer’s work in the lineage of intimate revolt, as elaborated by Kristeva, as a function of Hegelian negativity, Freudian rejection and the materialism of feminist practice through the body and sexuality.

Kristeva’s framework of revolt is both directly applicable to Spicer’s professed project and a reframing of her intention. Spicer uses the language of “power” when describing both her and her partner’s relationship to the exposure of queer feminine intimacy through photographic and performative practice. She states: “This work was an opportunity for me [to] explore and express my female gaze upon [the] female body. I was able to claim my power in that, and she was able to claim her power in how she expressed herself with me, and for the camera; to be seen over and over again in many ways.”<sup>35</sup> Here, again, we have the language of repetition and its nod to the

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 147-8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>33</sup> Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>35</sup> Spicer, Artsy.

subject's recurring rituals of self-expression. It is useful, however, to explore the affirmation that Kristeva claims is embedded in the dialectic via negativity, as an alternative to the discourse of power, which retains its grounding in patriarchal hierarchies and hegemonies. The discourse of power dissolves into intimacy in the fluidity of negativity, providing a materialist approach to the dialectic that nevertheless retains a connection to the generative poetics of interiority.

The image of Spicer's lover's bloodied hand signifies the ambivalence of boundaries between inside and outside the body, subject and object. The jagged fabric provides a literal representation of Kristeva's 'scission' and supports her contention that "[w]e must *leave the verbal function* and move toward what produces it, so as to understand the process of rejection which pulsates through the drives in a body that is caught within the network of nature and society."<sup>36</sup> Spicer's image, if understood through this notion of scission, points toward a preverbal function of subject-formation in which subject and object are only beginning to mark their separation in language, and signifies an intimacy which may be linked to the womb and birth—the very location from which menstrual blood emerges. Seen through this lens (both literally and figuratively), menstrual blood signifies the cyclical loss of the possibility of birth, and a repetition of the foreclosure of subjective being. This photograph can be read as the ejection of being through orgasm, the presumed physicality and renewal of sexual intimacy, and a return to the preverbal ambivalence of self and other, subject and object, inside and outside. According to Kristeva, Hegel's dialectic yields materialist praxis and, I suggest, intimacy, when reimaged through the drives rather than through desire, which requires the subject to already be in formation. Despite Hegel's insistence that "self-consciousness is *desire*, full stop,"<sup>37</sup> Kristeva counters that the intricacies of the psychoanalytic subject extend beyond desire. She explains: "[T]his subject's desire is founded on drives ('the psychosomatic articulation [*charnière*']) that remain unsatisfied, no matter what phantasmatic identifications desire may lead to because, unlike desire, drives 'divide the subject from desire.' Desire's basis in drives will thus be dismissed and forgotten so that attention may be focused on *desire itself*, reactivated by the reiteration of castration."<sup>38</sup> On its surface, Spicer's work may appear to address desire for the other, the lover, the object; however, read through a theory of the drives and negativity, the images speak to a pre-subjective moment, signified by the body's materiality and its rejection of identity in intimacy. Desire exists, and may manifest in a relationship to castration, but intimacy operates on a pre-symbolic level that, rather than negating castration and sexual difference, operates through an ambivalence of boundaries and a creativity that activates intimacy's role in freeing the subject in process from the patriarchal confines of prescribed sexuality and gender.

Kristeva's activation of the intimate in revolt feels particularly potent in a contemporary era of crumbling institutions, when many of us find ourselves left without the grounding of religion, threatened by the instability of democracy. According to Kristeva, "[i]n periods that we vaguely sense to be in decline or at least in suspension, questioning remains the only possible thought: an indication of life that is simply alive."<sup>39</sup> Kristeva offers a potent example of how psychoanalytic feminism, while always in danger of being reduced to essentialist doxy, participates in philosophies of resistance and freedom through the material realm, with the body and artistic

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited and translated by Terry P. Pinkard. Cambridge University Press, 2018, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 131.

<sup>39</sup> Kristeva "Intimate Revolt: The Future of the Culture of Revolt, The Life of the Mind, and the Species." *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 3, no. 1, (January 2006).

production as primary vehicles. Spicer's photographic works offer a feminist materialist response to the hegemony of heterosexism and patriarchy and invite female intimacy to disrupt categorical thinking. Kristeva states: "The universe of women moreover allows me to suggest an alternative to the robotizing and spectacular society that is damaging the culture of revolt: this alternative is, quite simply, sensory intimacy."<sup>40</sup> The argument unfolding in this writing regarding negativity in Spicer's work and the materialist line of inquiry traversing through Hegel's dialectical thought does not aim to reify feminist essentialism above non-binary modes of thought and being in queer theory, but rather to situate feminist materialism in thought itself, and in the material manifestations of philosophical inquiry. By reading Spicer's monograph through Kristeva's arguments on Hegelian negativity, we are also invited to witness the interwovenness of body and spirit in the intimacy of the dialectic, serving both materialist and sacred roles in intimate revolt.

#### 4. A Revolt of Spirit, a Process in Time

In her writings on intimacy and revolt, Kristeva explores the relationship of revolt to both space and time, ideas that echo Hegel's dialectical formulation and his interest in spirit as a function of history. Chronicling the etymology of the word *revolt*, Kristeva moves through literary contexts, topological roots and scientific usages, and finally its modern and political evolution. Early origins of the term refer to concepts such as "the idea of circular movement and, by extension, temporal return," "turning back," "wrapping' or 'covering,'" "twisting or enveloping," "interpretation," "violence and excess," and "opposition,"<sup>41</sup> to name a few. More recently, it has been "used to mark the end of a period of time that has 'evolved'; it signifies completion, an occurrence [...and] the notion of space is added: mirrors, interlocking objects, the projection of images."<sup>42</sup> These historical linguistic roots support Kristeva's argument that revolt needs to be rethought in the contemporary moment to include more than the strictly political implications it has taken on in modern revolution and incorporate a poetic, literary and bodily understanding of the term, which she links to the intimate and its working-through in psychical time. By linking the concepts of intimacy and revolt, Kristeva unfolds both terms to a more nuanced and materialist understanding of how they may operate in the negativity of the dialectic when approached through the Freudian drives, which materialize both in time through memory, and through space via the body and its erogenous zones. We see these ideas collide in Spicer's photographic memoir, its narrative traversing time, space and the intimate body, through the time-based medium of photography.

Spicer's practice is an expression of the intimate that interjects into the Hegelian notion of the subject achieving absolute consciousness via simultaneous sameness and difference—the knowledge of self as spirit reflected into itself. According to Hegel, "through this concept of inner difference, what is unlike and indifferent, space and time, etc., is a *difference* that is no *difference*, or only a difference of *like poles*, and its essence is unity; they are reciprocally spiritualized as positive and negative."<sup>43</sup> Spicer seeks in her object a reflection of subjectivity which is both self-identical and knows itself through the movement of difference and negativity. In this way, she searches for the self-expression of truth in the intimate, a truth that eschews universal and concrete knowledge in favor of intimate revolt, reveling in its incompleteness, which defines its ever-becoming movement towards a unity which the intimate disallows. Therefore, we see the self-

---

<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 98.

defeating quality of intimacy unfolding in form, through time and space, in photographic narrative. Hegel's description of the dialectical process may provide insight into the use of photography as a durational time-based medium that facilitates the expression of the intimate self through time. On the progression of the dialectic, he states: "On the one hand, the *length* of the path has to be endured, for each moment is necessary—but on the other hand, one must *linger* at every stage on the way, for each stage is itself an entire individual shape, and it is viewed absolutely only insofar as its determinateness is viewed as a whole, or, as concrete, or, insofar as the whole is viewed in terms of the distinctiveness of this determination."<sup>44</sup> Hegel's own words remind us that, despite the teleological motivation of his philosophy, form is found in the material manifestation of the process of self-transformation and perpetual re-signification.

Kristeva's argument poses questions about negativity, for example, whether it is a destructive element that nullifies as it liquifies, annihilating itself and its objects; or whether we might understand something new emerging from it, and perhaps a different framing of spirit. Such is the question of the "fourth term"—for the "third term" is always a synthesis, a teleological conclusion that eventually leads into the self-knowledge and self-consciousness of the Absolute. *Negativity*, however, this elusive fourth term, presents the possibility for freedom through the constant digestion and regurgitation of the subject reflected into itself. One might understand this freedom as Hegel's use of the term 'speculative'—the ability to think beyond the given, assumed resolution of the dialectic, to think one's self into the divine image of God. Hegel's dialectic concludes in a revelation of the Absolute: "God is therefore here *revealed as He is*; He is *there* in the way that He is *in itself*; He is there as spirit. God is solely attainable in pure speculative knowing, He is only in that knowing, and He is only that knowing itself, for He is spirit, and this speculative knowing is revealed religion's knowing."<sup>45</sup> Shall we understand Kristeva's argument as affirming Hegel, even as she rejects his theism and moves beyond his teleology, or is there a missing piece in Hegel's philosophy that Kristeva finds in the intimate, through the materialist process of negativity? Kristeva explains that "rejection *reconstitutes* real objects, 'creates' new ones, reinvents the real, and re-symbolizes it."<sup>46</sup> Spicer's work may help us elucidate the relationship of negativity to the speculative, as well as to better understand the role intimacy plays in both the quest for knowledge, and the move towards freedom of spirit through the material realm. On the materialism of the dialectic, Kristeva argues that "[w]hat made its materialist overturning possible, in our view, was the key notion of drives in Freudian theory."<sup>47</sup> In other words, what psychoanalysis offers dialectics—specifically feminist psychoanalytic materialism as demonstrated by Kristeva—is a committed grounding in the body and the ways it expresses unconscious and pre-symbolic drives, which can be understood as a rejection of the language systems that define the sexualized subject, through a cyclical return to an interiority that lies behind and beyond the categorizations and directives of sex.

Reading Spicer's work through Kristeva's understanding of negativity, with her grounding in the Freudian theory of the drives, allows us to see its underlying current of revolt against ideological thinking and its gestures toward a renewal of spirit, enacted through sexual intimacy. Hegel's dialectic opens up beyond the abstractness of logic, into the possibilities generated by dialectical materialism to develop a new feminist materialism from the destructive elements of the triplicity. Rather than complete sublation, the dialectic separates into fields of knowledge made up

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 155.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 116.

of detritus of its own process. In defending the speculative, Hegel argues that “[t]he *proposition* ought to express *what* the true is, but essentially ‘the true’ is subject. As the latter, it is only the dialectical movement, this course of self-engendering, advancing, and then returning into itself.”<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, however, critiques Hegel’s own understanding of negativity as leading right back into the abstractness of the notion in the speculative, and argues that the dialectic is an incomplete system without the materialist engagement of the fourth term. She states: “In conceiving radical negativity as an *expression*, the idealist dialectic deprives itself of negativity’s powerful moment: the scission that exceeds and precedes the advent of thetic understanding.”<sup>49</sup> The importance of a feminist materialist art practice, as well as the role of the photographic, is the extension of these pre-thetic moments into elusive forms that visualize the subject-in-process without making it rigid and concrete, or allowing it to dissolve into total abstraction.

Kristeva’s position is compelling for the visual arts due to her insistence on the sacred, which she situates in sexuality, ritual and poetic signification, over the idealism of the spiritual. She writes: “This is the ambiguousness of the idealist dialectic: it posits division, movement, and process, but in the same move dismisses them in the name of a higher metaphysical and repressive truth, one that is differentiated but solely within the confines of its unity: Self-Consciousness and its juridical corollary, the State.”<sup>50</sup> By displacing the center of authoritative gravity away from institutions, to the body and its semiotic movements, to memory and its poetic possibilities, Kristeva advocates for a centering of the subject in process/on trial, eternally cycling through creation and rejection, and the negativity embedded in the dialectic of the subject in revolt. Kristeva argues that “Hegelian negativity prevents the immobilization of the thetic, unsettles doxy, and lets in all the semiotic motility that prepares and exceeds it.”<sup>51</sup> Her reading of Hegel and her own research on intimacy helps us to uncover hidden significations and, in Kristeva’s terms, semiotic and poetic motility in Spicer’s photographs. Spicer moves beyond desire, but not past it. The beyond that she engages operates deep within the body and the psyche and is mirrored in the bodies of water that figure repeatedly in the monograph—both as literal bodies of water and also in the body of her lover, whose fluid sexuality is mirrored in shapes, forms and gestures that resist categorization and understanding. We may turn back to Hegel himself in our unfolding of these images and their significations. Hegel writes, “The fluid element is itself only the *abstraction* of essence, or it is only *actual* as a shape. That it divides itself into groupings is again an estranging of the expressed groups, or it is their dissolution. The whole cycle constitutes life.”<sup>52</sup> Between these lines, we may join Kristeva in reading Hegel’s negativity as a dissolution of subjectivity itself as it forms itself; the ambivalence that constitutes its self; and a destruction that predates its formation, that lives in difference, memory and the unfolding of time that turns back on itself in recollection and the intimacy of discourse.

The subject of desire disarticulated by the drives, dissolving and fragmenting into itself, and rejecting parts of itself in poetic rupture, is visualized by the final image of the monograph of a cloaked figure facing an icy body of water (figure 4). The photograph echoes Freud’s grappling with what he termed the *oceanic*, the “sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded”<sup>53</sup> that defies scientific analysis and rationality but dominates the realm of devotion.

<sup>48</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 115.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Freud, Sigmund. “Civilization and Its Discontents.” Essay. In *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay, 722-73. New York, NY: Norton, 1999, 723.

For Freud, this was “the true source of religious sentiments,”<sup>54</sup> but misinterpreted as having mystical provenance. While claiming that he, himself, could not personally relate to this “feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole,”<sup>55</sup> he nevertheless takes interest in what he deems as a break with the ego as sense of self, and the disruption of its sense of wholeness in the experience of love and sexual desire. In this closing image, Spicer’s lover stands facing a partially frozen body of water, presumably naked and vulnerable inside of a white terrycloth robe. The whiteness of her protective covering reflects the whiteness of the fragments of ice floating in the water; the blue of the sky echoes in the un-still blue waters into which she gazes. Her head downturned, an air of sadness emerges from the image. The photograph is cropped just at her knees, maintaining obscurity around the figure’s grounding in the earth, as well as the physicality of the shoreline itself. We can imagine her standing in the water, feet submerged in ice, or floating just above it, invulnerable. The cloaked figure evokes the fragility of body and spirit and the fracturing of the subject that must take place in order for self-reflection to occur in the negative reaches of the dialectic. The brown wisps of hair and pointed bangs of her crew cut lead subtly into the grey-brown wisps of winter tree trunks on a hillside in the distance. The image seems to communicate that, in order to see one’s self, one must not only see one’s reflection in the other, but the reflection is also necessarily fragmented, melted and itself almost acidic in its ability to dissolve the seemingly homogeneous state of unified being.

This self-effacing unity eschews determinations, categories and ideologies in favor of a return into itself, where it mines its own depths again and again, searching for its own sites of fragility. Kristeva suggests that “[t]he ideational closure of the Hegelian dialectic seems to consist in its inability to posit negativity as anything but a repetition of ideational unity in itself.”<sup>56</sup> Perhaps this materialist negativity is the true Freudian oceanic—not some false sense of unity with the universe, but the motility found in the repetition compulsion, manifest through the return of the lover’s gaze, in intermittent outbursts of sexual joy and pain, and in the cycle of desire and rejection that returns the subject to its origins in the drive, where it activates itself in revolt. The shoreline—an ambivalent space with unstable boundaries, threatening to collapse objects of order that stray too close to the periphery—contains the elements necessary for signifying the intimate, where the edges between conscious and unconscious dis-integrate.

Despite her own avowed atheism,<sup>57</sup> Kristeva is clear that her materialism is not one that seeks the subject’s formation and freedom through the complete denial of a theistic teleology; rather, her position is compelling due to its insistence on creative practice as a process of finding the sacred and perhaps even the mystical in the secular. She argues that “[t]he materialist overturning of Hegel was accomplished at the cost of a blindness to the Hegelian dialectic’s potential (subjected, as we have shown, to the dominant notion of totalization) for *dissolving* the subject.”<sup>58</sup> Spicer’s photograph of a fragile, fragmented icy body of water and a similarly fragile, fragmented figure formed inside a white shroud-like cloth nods to Kristeva’s interest in art and literature as “a continuation of the sacred by other means,”<sup>59</sup> as well as in the intimacy of discourse. Kristeva muses that “the ultimate goal of art is perhaps what was once celebrated as incarnation. I mean by that the desire to make one feel—through abstraction, form, color, volume, sensation—a

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 159.

<sup>57</sup> “I consider myself one of the rare atheists remaining on earth.” Kristeva, “The Psychic Life: A Life in Time,” 85.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 136.

<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, 13.

real experience.”<sup>60</sup> Spicer’s icy image is tender in its paradoxical co-presentation of warmth and coldness, hardness and softness. It is both a shared space between photographer and lover, and an impenetrable space between subject and object, and between the subjects and their inner selves. Hegel’s triplicity falls apart in the face of the Lacanian Real—that which resists symbolization, language and logic—without the ability to return to questioning and desire, which require an inherent lack or emptiness. Unity is not the goal, nor is it the answer, and having an experience of the Real is less about concretizing experience, and more about opening up the question of being and the impossibility of a true response, which nevertheless continues to take form in the subject in process. Kristeva asserts, “What Hegel does not envisage is the moment the One is *shattered* in a return of Repulsion onto itself, which is to say, a turning against its own potential power for positing and multiplying the One.”<sup>61</sup> The subject, as answer to the Real, is an impossibility in its constant dissolution into the liquidity of itself, and this final image operates as a potent metaphor for the negativity of the dialectic, elusive even to Hegel himself.



Figure 4

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>61</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 159.

## References

- Bloom, Stanley, and Jeanette Spicer. "Body Intimacy in 'Sea(See)' by Jeanette Spicer ~ Velvet Eyes." *Velvet Eyes*, November 4, 2018. <https://velveteeyes.net/features/jeanette-spicer/>.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Civilization and Its Discontents." Essay. In *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay, 722-73. New York, NY: Norton, 1999.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited and translated by Terry P. Pinkard. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- . *The Logic of Hegel*. Translated by William Wallace. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1892.
- Irigaray, Luce. "When These Lips Speak Together." Essay. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, 205-18. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Kramer, Sina. "On negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*." *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 3 (2013): 465–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-013-9272-y>.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- . "Intimate Revolt: The Future of the Culture of Revolt, The Life of the Mind, and the Species." *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 3, no. 1, (January 2006).
- . *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- . *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- . "The Psychic Life: A Life in Time: Psychoanalysis and Culture." *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 81–90.
- Kristeva, Julia, and Philippe Petit. *Revolt, She Said: An Interview by Philippe Petit*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2002.
- Lauer, Christopher. *Intimacy - A Dialectical Study*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016.
- "Lesbian Art and Poetry." *WMN*, 28 Dec. 2020, [www.wmnzine.com/](http://www.wmnzine.com/).
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Extimity." *The Symptom* 9. Lacanian Ink, June 20, 2008. <http://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimity.html>.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009.

Spicer, Jeanette. *Sea (see)*. 1st ed. Hollis, NH: Kris Graves Projects, LLC, 2018.

—. “Jeanette Spicer: Sea (see) (2018).” Artsy. Kris Graves Projects, 2018.  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jeanette-spicer-sea-see>.