

POSTMODERN BODIES AND FEMINIST ART PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines, from a feminist perspective, conceptions of the body proposed by poststructuralist philosophy and postmodernist art practice. Within both feminist and postmodern critiques of the humanist subject, the body has come to be understood as a site of cultural inscriptions. In tracing the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, the thesis addresses specifically the shift from celebratory, affirmative female imagery typical of feminist art in the seventies, to the semiotic analysis of images of women which, in the eighties, problematized the question of sexual difference as one of representation. During the eighties women artists generally eschewed figurative representations of the female body in recognition of its over-determined socio-sexual status. Within this historical framework, the tension between the "de-materialized" body of postmodernity and the insistently present body of gendered experience is explored both in the work of feminist theorists and contemporary women artists. In conclusion, three corporeal sites - the cultural, the epistemological and the psycho-sexual - are analysed in the postmodern practices of Jana Sterbak, Nell Tenhaaf and Kati Campbell.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire traite des conceptions du corps proposées par la philosophie poststructuraliste et la pratique artistique postmoderne selon un point de vue féministe. Par les discours féministe et postmoderne concernant le sujet humaniste, le corps a graduellement été perçu en tant que site d'inscriptions culturelles. En remontant à la source de la relation entre le postmodernisme et le féminisme, le mémoire trace de manière spécifique le changement qui s'est opéré par rapport à l'imagerie féminine de nature affirmative et enjouée caractéristique de l'art féministe des années 70 et l'analyse sémiotique de l'image de la femme qui, durant les années 80, a entraîné une remise en question de la différence sexuelle en la situant au plan de la représentation. De façon générale, les femmes-artistes ont évité, durant cette dernière décennie, la représentation du corps féminin en reconnaissance de son statut socio-sexuel surdéterminé. Selon cette grille historique, l'étude de la tension entre le corps "dématérialisé" du postmodernisme et le corps toujours présent de l'expérience sexuée est explorée en se référant au travail de théoriciennes féministes et de femmes-artistes contemporaines. Pour terminer, l'analyse de trois sites corporels - le culturel, l'épistémologique et le psycho-sexuel - est effectuée en conjonction avec les pratiques postmodernes de Jana Sterbak, Nell Tenhaaf et Kati Campbell.

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P R E F A C E

"Rather than treat the body as a site of knowledge, a medium for thought, the more classic philosophical project has tried to render it transparent and get beyond it by reducing it to the mind's idealizing categories." ¹

Jane Gallop's book Thinking Through the Body brings together, in a critical and autobiographical re-examination, a series of her essays written between the mid-seventies and the mid-eighties. The title, a phrase from Adrienne Rich's classic 1975 treatise on the institution of motherhood, Of Woman Born, is both a homage to Rich and, implicitly, a reference to Gallop's own re-thinking of her position as a feminist theorist. In reassessing her earlier texts, Gallop reflects upon "second wave" feminisms and the profound influence of French poststructuralism on feminist theory. These reflections are marked by an uneasiness, expressed in the quotation above, with the persistence of a Cartesian binarism in Western metaphysics. As the body has occupied an increasingly central position in critical and theoretical discourses during the past decade, the misgivings of a feminist scholar about any deep structural change in the

ways that we conceive of body and mind, and their tacit signifying role in sexual difference, seems worthy of consideration.

Over the past two decades, feminist artists and art historians, like feminists in other disciplines, have participated in a necessary movement away from the naturalized female body and toward an equally urgent theoretical examination of the cultural construction of this body. But here, too, the spectre of an essential binarism both haunts and inspires new forms of inquiry, whether material or theoretical. In 1976, the feminist art critic, Lucy Lippard, concluded an essay on women's "body" art positing representations of the maternal body and procreation as the "next tabu (sic.) to be tackled..."²

The cover illustration of Gallop's 1988 book is a close-up view of an infant's head emerging from its mother's body amidst a visual confusion of doctor's hand, nurse's face and mother's thighs. Under the camera's democratic gaze an erasure of depth and context results in a curious multiple disembodiment. Chosen for its disturbing power (as editorial objections acknowledged in Gallop's introduction attest), the image is, among other things, a provocatively explicit depiction of our origins in female flesh. Powerfully embedded in matter (mater), the infant's head becomes a self-conscious and hyperbolic foil to the position

from which Gallop speaks: that of a woman who is an academic intellectual.

It is virtually impossible to displace the physicality of this image - the immediacy and intimacy of such an encounter with birth. And it is precisely such an insistence on embodiment that Gallop poses against a philosophical tide of disembodiment, when she states: "At this point in history, thinking that truly passes through the body only occurs in brief intervals, soon to be reabsorbed by the powerful narratives of mind over matter."³ The infant's head, its face strained under the force of expulsion, its body still within its mother's, is, for Gallop, an unforgettably graphic illustration of such a brief interval. This "brief pause in an irrepressible progress" will, like the decoding of the disorienting photographic amalgam of baby, mother, nurses and doctor, "soon be sorted out into (their) proper categories."⁴ And the primary mechanism for this process of categorization is language, the vehicle, too, for the child's entry into the symbolic register of social relations where bodily excesses, signified by both the polymorphously perverse infant and the mother, are brought under control.

The "absolute" body of modernism, a body which served as the unequivocal "reality" of our being, has given way to the "textual" body of poststructuralist postmodernism, a body culturally constructed in representational systems, a

body as relative as its discursive deployment and as relational as the linguistic model in which it is produced. Within this ascendancy of the body in discourse, the historical investment of the female body as sign has been addressed by feminist theorists and artists alike.

NOTES

1. Jane Gallop, Thinking Through the Body (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 3-4.
2. Lucy Lippard, From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (New York: Dutton, 1976) 138.
3. Gallop, Thinking Through the Body, 3.
4. Gallop, Thinking Through the Body, 8.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

"Women's bodies have always been postmodern because they have always been targets of a power which, inscribing the text of the flesh, seeks to make of feminine identity something interpellated by ideology, constituted by language, and the site of a disassociated ego." ¹

In recognizing the hyper-discursively marked female body as *a priori* postmodern, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's description also encapsulates aspects of a theoretical apparatus inherited from the language paradigm of structuralism: specifically, the semiotic articulation of difference via Althusser's concept of ideology as it participates in Lacan's re-reading of the Freudian subject. Within this concept of the subject, identity is constructed as an "Imaginary" image and the unconscious is "structured like language." Indeed, this model of the symbolic and ideological construction of subjectivity, and specifically sexuality, was a preoccupation of much feminist thought from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties. Central to this approach is a recognition of the crucial role that systems of representation play in producing differences.

The body has remained the bedrock of a range of feminist practices, politics and theories because of its over-determined role in representing sexual difference. But as Michel Foucault and, more recently Thomas Lacqueur have shown in their historical analyses, the body was not always seen so clearly as the incontrovertible seat of sexual difference. Rather the modern notion of sexual difference is, according to these authors, the relatively recent product of an historical, cultural moment in which social, economic, and political arrangements underwent a seismic shift with the rise of capitalism. In the resulting transition of epistemic regimes, from a pastoral to an empirical one, the body is recast, subtly encoded in the morphology of a secular system of power relations. In Foucault's words: "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration." ² While one could perhaps draw some comfort in the loosening hold of essentialism implied by such historical malleability of the body, the body remains a highly contested theoretical territory, poised as it has been in Western metaphysics on the threshold between nature and culture.

Lacqueur is not alone in perceiving in all this body-talk a postmodern paradox: there is a waning of the body as

material presence and existential condition, that is as affect, as it undergoes a discursive transformation into effect.³ Does the body risk disappearing altogether as it is reformulated in what Susan Bordo has described as a "new postmodern configuration of detachment, a new imagination of disembodiment, a dream of being everywhere"?⁴ Or, as Charles Levin states: "Deconstruction theorizes the body, to be sure, but only as a kind of negative theology or temporal mystery. The body becomes the unlocalizable antecedent of the sign - an absence lurking behind the dense significance of the signifier: merely the site of a future depletion."⁵

Like the postmodernist insistence on the self as a "position in language," the body, liberated from the flesh, is potentially fictive. Yet, as Jane Gallop remarks in relation to the Lacanian transcendental signifier: "The disembodied phallus is the linchpin of the move that raises maleness, a bodily attribute, to the realm of the spirit, leaving femaleness mired in inert flesh."⁶ What can this bodily double-talk mean, then, for women? While the body is dispersed in theory (language), it remains, in all its dimensions, to be lived in, in practice. And all that is body has been deeply inscribed in the symbolic order as female.

Jane Flax states the implications of this postmodern dichotomy for women in the following manner: "Within women's experiences, the dramatic episodes might not be the three

deaths (the self, the author, history - my addition), but rather an ongoing series of struggles: to give birth or to avoid giving birth, to be represented or to avoid being misrepresented; to be concretely in time and to have one's activities order time and conceptions of history; not to exist as the eternal "feminine," "other" or "mysterious" life source." ⁷ Likewise, the consequences of the disappearing body in a Baudrillardian "hyperreality" may be less than salutary for women.

In the constantly splintering and mutating conditions of postmodernity, conditions which privilege flux over fixity and fragmentation over totalization, the body is continually assimilated in what Arthur Kroker describes as a "fantastic simulacrum of body rhetorics." ⁸ Thus, though perhaps discursively liberated from the bonds of nature, the body becomes, like any other reality - "that which is already reproduced." What, then, are the possibilities for feminists to retrieve the body fragments - this "**corps morcelé**" - left in the wake of deconstruction and re-present themselves with some sort of corpo-reality which does not simply fold back into the problematic binary logic of flesh and spirit? Rosi Braidotti states the dilemma this way: "...in so far as fragmentation and disqualification from the position of subject are part of the historical heritage of women, how far and how fast can feminist theory propose a new form of bodily materiality, a sex-specific reading of

the bodily self?"⁹ This thesis will return to such questions through the consideration of works by women artists that engage, variously, in a discourse of the body.

* * * * *

The Body as Site of Knowledge

Jane Gallop's concern that the body's claim to thinking and knowing is continually usurped by the category of mind was cited in the preface. For feminists of Adrienne Rich's generation, however, the body was a site of knowledge, a revolutionary one in which women sought to repossess their sexuality and discover their subjectivity for themselves. As the body has become an increasingly intense locus of cultural inscriptions and the self an already "spoken," decentered and fragmented subject, any unproblematic mapping of self onto the body, or concept of the body as an absolute anchor for the self - as if both are transparently available - now appears naive, even quaint. Yet of the spate of books on female sexuality that appeared in the late sixties and throughout the seventies (Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1969), The Hite Report (1976), etc.), one title, the Boston Women's Collective's Our Bodies, Ourselves (1971), has endured in the imagination as well as through several reprintings, so fundamental is the link between women's

self-possession and possessing reproductive control of their bodies. In Susan Rubin Sulieman's words: "The call went out to invent both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women's reclaiming what had always been theirs but had been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it." ¹⁰

Helena Michie notes in her literary study, The Flesh Made Word, that "second wave" feminist literary theory and practice "have defined themselves implicitly in opposition to Victorian representational coding." She continues: "Since the early nineteen seventies feminism has, in most of its manifestations, set out to do just that: to construct a female body in the face of patriarchal convention." ¹¹ The same might be said of women's practice in the visual arts. This trajectory of a discourse of the body in a broad range of feminist practice and theory will be traced here through work produced by women artists from the seventies through the eighties. This period is considered as one of metamorphosis from a celebratory, affirmative stance in which the liberated body was the guardian of the self, through an interrogation of signifying practices which constitute representations of woman as body, to a de-emphasizing of the male gaze in favour of issues surrounding female spectatorship and a focus on a desiring, embodied female subjectivity. However these transitions were neither smooth nor definitive, for, like feminism itself, feminist

art practice is by no means monolithic or even limited to specifically feminist intention, despite repeated claims for a distinctive aesthetic.

* * * * *

The Body as Site of Representation

The increased visibility of women artists in the seventies and the extraordinary diversity of the avant garde media they then utilized were no doubt inspired by feminist politics of the time. Sexual liberation made possible by wide availability of the birth control pill, the affirmation of female genitalia and orgasm, the recognition of unspoken aspects of women's experience discovered in "consciousness raising," and a focusing on power relations dividing public and private into male and female spheres which gave rise to the slogan "the personal is political," were all crucial to the permission women artists gave themselves to experiment with new forms and imagery during a period dominated by abstraction. The seventies not only marked the entrance of women artists into the art scene in unprecedented numbers, but it was also during these years that the proliferation of video, performance and installation art occurred. As many have remarked, these media were perhaps chosen and entered into more easily by women due to the fact they were still

considered outside the official canons of painting and sculpture dominated by male artists.

Within a decade the proliferation of hybrid, multi-media forms, and their suitability to narrative and allegorical content that embraced the world beyond art, were the cause of a re-writing of those canons in the form of postmodern theory. Andreas Huyssens writes: "It was especially the art of writing, filmmaking and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender - and race - based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and the emergence of alternative forms of culture." ¹² Huyssens makes the important point that definitions of postmodernism which position themselves in opposition to modernism conceived as either late Greenbergian formalism or the tradition of the historical avant garde remain limited to arguments dependent on a dichotomy. He shifts the question of postmodernity into a larger sphere than theory or art when he states: "in political terms, the erosion of the triple dogma modernism/modernity/avantgardism (sic.) can be contextually related to the emergence of the problematic of "otherness," which has asserted itself in the socio-political sphere as much as in the cultural sphere." ¹³ Huyssens is among the

few male theorists of postmodernism to fully acknowledge the impact of feminism on contemporary art practices, although Craig Owen's essay "**The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism**" ¹⁴ is the most frequently quoted in this respect.

As the hegemony of modernist formalism eroded and the teleology of a procession of art movements dissolved into the simultaneity of pluralist art practices, feminist art shifted away from the body as revolutionary statement and towards a critical analysis of representational politics. (It is in this respect that feminism and postmodernism have been linked in the discourses of contemporary art.) Representations of the female body by women artists, particularly those in which the artist's body itself was the medium for re-presenting the self, were surrounded by conflicting opinion. Some feminists continued to insist on the importance of acknowledging female experience and sexuality, of breaking the silence of women's oppression with the body, while others called for a shift from an emphasis on experience to an analytic approach that would uncover the ideological framework which determined the nature of that experience. From today's perspective, both positions are flawed to the extent that they tacitly assume a common experience.

By the late-seventies, the task of re-appropriating the female body could no longer be seen as one of simply re-

inventing this body against a background of definitions and imagery in which woman is figured as the other to man, in which her body is offered up for male consumption and the reproductive capacities which reside in her are at the heart of her exchange value within a patriarchal system. Given that the female body is so culturally over-determined in a signifying system that elides woman with her body and her sexuality with a female body culturally prescribed in both terms of age and appearance, the notion of using representations of this body, even alternative ones, was severely challenged by their all-too-quick cultural recuperation. As Janet Wolff has remarked, the female body's "pre-existing meaning as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intention of the woman herself." She notes: "Crucial to the debate about the political potential of the body is the more fundamental question of whether there is any body outside discourse." ¹⁵ Indeed, the question of whether women could represent themselves at all through the body at this historical moment and within such a signifying system, engaged many feminists in the pursuit of psychoanalytic theory both because it appeared to provide a cultural rather than biological description of sexuality and because it promised to reveal the unconscious underpinnings of desire as it is played out in representational practices.

Paralleling these developments in the visual arts, the anti-porn /anti-censorship debates of the early eighties, too, were embroiled in the issue of "images of women" and the nature of female desire (not to mention artistic freedom), rallying women who shared concerns on many other fronts into diametrically opposed positions. Clearly there was no single "feminist" body or sexuality, and feminism itself was outgrowing the utopian sisterhood of the seventies as it was forced to recognize its own heterogeneity. The controversy over these issues erupted in a radical split around the body and sexuality, as illustrated by the vehemence of the fracas which occurred over the theme "Pleasure and Danger," chosen by the organizers of the 1982 Barnard conference "The Scholar and the Feminist." ¹⁶

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The Body Re-figured

As the body became an increasingly contested territory and theoretical positions gained in number and complexity, figuration of the female body which had been a political tool for one generation of feminist artists became tantamount to taboo for another. But this is not to imply that artists merely tailored their work to the drifting

contours of critical theory and feminist politics, for these cannot be separated from internal shifts within the art world in which both the traditions of the historical avant-garde and the doctrines of formalist late-modernism were being critically reassessed, and both neo-marxist and feminist analyses of artistic institutions were in the process of creating a "new" art history. Within this broader and layered context, and in an ironic twist, by the mid-eighties the figurative body in feminist art seemed to virtually disappear in a vortex of discourse around it. It was also in this deconstructive moment that feminism and postmodernism began to be aligned by several critics in a union championed by some, found uncomfortable but necessary by many, and for others, considered simply untenable.

The thesis that follows will delineate these changes as they became evident in women's art practice, their relationship to current developments in critical theory and the implications of a feminist/postmodernist alliance. If postmodernism's suspicion of meta-narratives, its dissolution of the unified subject and its rejection of the metaphysics of presence are profoundly anti-Cartesian in spirit, one might ask not only to what extent the postmodernist project is a feminist project but, conversely, to what extent postmodernism provides for feminism a "body image" that challenges the transhistorical gendering of the body as female.

A discourse of the body runs through the shifts in representational strategies used by contemporary women artists, whether self-avowed feminists or not. This discourse is frankly spoken in the early seventies but quickly enters a period of re-articulation. It will be argued that the aforementioned disappearance of the body did not, in fact, occur so easily or so completely, nor is the dispersal of the body in postmodern artistic practices equivalent to a dematerialization of the body. Rather, like a return of the repressed, the body is present in recent works by women artists, often forcefully inhabiting them precisely from the position of a significant absence.

The classic duality of mind and matter is dissolved, at least discursively, in a contemporary body that has come to represent an unstable borderline locus, neither mired in the flesh nor without interest in its fleshly representations. Developments in the biotechnologies, the profound alteration of our perception of time and space brought about by communications and transport technologies, not to mention work currently being done on virtual reality, have destabilized distinctions between body and non-body, perceived and imagined, organic and synthetic. Moreover sexual difference has taken its place amongst the multiple differences addressed more recently by critical and artistic practice. The issues of subjectivity, representation and the body raised by feminism necessarily merge today in a

concatenation of corporealities no longer simply distinguished by dialectical oppositions.

Points of convergence and departure in the relationship between postmodernism and feminism will be addressed, then, in the contexts of both feminist theory and feminist art practice. Within these histories of theory and practice, it will be suggested that a distinctly feminist postmodernist body can be discerned. It is this body, in its various guises, which will be explored in the analysis of specific works made over the past five years by three Canadian artists: Jana Sterbak, Nell Tenhaaf and Kati Campbell.

NOTES

1. Arthur Kroker & Marilouise Kroker eds., Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1987) 24.
2. Michel Foucault, The Foucault Reader ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 71.
3. Thomas Lacqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 12.
4. Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism," Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York & London: Routledge, 1990) 144.
5. Charles Levin, "Carnal Knowledge of Aesthetic States," Body Invaders, eds. Kroker & Kroker, 104.
6. Gallop, Thinking Through the Body, 8.
7. Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 226.

8. Kroker & Kroker, Body Invaders, 21.
9. Rosi Braidotti, "Organs without Bodies," Differences, vol. 1, Winter 1989: 147.
10. Susan Rubin Sulieman ed., The Female Body in Western Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 7.
11. Helena Michie, The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 125-127.
12. Andreas Huyssens, "Mapping the Postmodern," After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985) 198.
13. Huyssens, "Mapping the Postmodern," 219.
14. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism," The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). In referring to Owen's essay Susan Rubin Sulieman is less enthusiastic than most, for she perceives feminism as providing a political engagement which legitimates postmodernism, and postmodernism, by embracing feminism, in turn, lends a certain theoretical authority to women who have traditionally been excluded. While none of this is bad in itself, she implies that the specificity of feminist discourse and practice may be eluded at a price to feminism's own political objectives. ("Discourses of the Postmodern and the Emergence of a Feminist Postmodernism," Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant Garde, ed. Sulieman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 189.
15. Janet Wolff, Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) 120.
16. Carole Vance ed. Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

C H A P T E R O N E

CORPO-REALITIES: FROM POSTMINIMALISM TO POSTMODERNISM

In this chapter the body will be examined more generally as it has emerged through postminimalist practices of the seventies to become the "body politic" of postmodernist art in the eighties. It will be argued through specific examples that feminist work in postminimalist and postmodern artistic production was not only a feature of the more general decline in the hegemony of formalist modernism, but that it contributed significantly to the destabilizing of modernist aesthetics. Questions raised by the coincidence of feminist and avant-gardist artistic interventions will be pursued in the next chapter through an evaluation of the concurrent convergence of poststructuralist reformulations of the subject and the historical specificity of feminist theories of subjectivity.

The first part of the present chapter, "Absolute Bodies," examines women's body art in the context of postminimalism. Based on two emblematic positions, those exemplified in the work of Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly, the second part of this chapter, "Deconstructing Histories/Reconstructing Bodies," traces aesthetic and ideological oppositions in the figuration of the female body

in feminist art practice. The shift which takes place from an essentializing discourse of the body to a deconstructive, anti-essentialist position regarding the body and sexuality is contextualized, on one hand, by contemporary theoretical developments and critical assessments of feminist work and, on the other hand, by concurrent revisionist feminist art histories.

The concluding parts of this chapter, "Feminine or Feminist Aesthetics?," and "Re-writing the Body," are devoted to an analysis of formulations of feminine and feminist aesthetics by feminist art critics, artists, and theorists alike. The dispersal of these debates during the eighties and the appearance of a body neither literal nor absent in the work of several feminist artists prepares the ground for consideration of the relationship between poststructuralist theories of the subject and conceptions of the body as they have influenced feminist theorists and artists.

* * * * *

I : Absolute Bodies

"Faced with the dissolution of the artistic sign, some artists sought to reground it - first fetishistically in various new materials and processes (as in minimalism,

process art, "post-minimalism,") then, literally, in the presence of the body, of the site, of actual space - time (as in body art, site specific art, performance)." ¹

Michael Fried's renowned dictum "Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre" sums up the tone of his extended invective against Minimalist art, **"Art and Objecthood,"** published in Artforum in 1967. ² It seems curious today, when minimalism is more often than not lumped together with the self-referential and purportedly elitist qualities of high formalist Modernism, that Fried should have charged the minimalist aesthetic with threatening the essence of the art object, its timeless "presence." His claim that Minimalism inherently assumed an ideological position opposed to pictorial illusion, was based on its particular engagement with the circumstances of the viewer's encounter with the work of art. These conditions are what he disparagingly referred to as the "literal": real time, real space, an awareness of the perceptual body - lived conditions that inevitably implied a new sort of complicity between the art object, the spectator and the institutional setting, ultimately resulting in the conception of the ideal exhibition space as, in Brian O'Doherty's words, a "white cube." ³ Stripped of all extraneous decoration and discretely revealing its own structural elements, this space was designed to create an appropriately "neutral" atmosphere

for the dynamic interaction of art object and spectator, a gallery aesthetic still prevalent today.

Minimalism dispensed with the notion that the meaning of the work of art was located exclusively within the work and opened the way for a resurrection of Duchampian questions about the nature of art. In the years immediately following Fried's prescient observations, a multiplicity of artistic gestures confirmed his fears and signalled the spilling of the theatre of life into the content of art. Minimalism had perhaps acted as a kind of flood gate, rigid in its order and rationale, and virtually devoid of conventional authorial material traces, but porous in its assumption that art existed by way of its relation to the viewer, and ultimately in its reception as much as its production.

A decade after Fried's article, Susan Sontag made an equally memorable statement when, paraphrasing Walter Pater, she wrote: "...all art aspires to the condition of photography." ⁴ In part she was referring to the inextricable relation between the fact that most works of art are now "known" through photographic reproductions, and that the photographic aesthetic had itself transformed art. Moreover, writing in 1977, she recognized that the existence beyond the moment of execution of so much of the conceptual, process, land, body and performance art then occurring, was only assured by its photographic documentation. And these

photographs were, in turn, almost instantaneously conferred the status of art by an object-deprived market.

In retrospect, Fried's defensive manifesto and Sontag's meditations on the ubiquitous presence of photography in contemporary culture provide a fitting parenthesis to a decade that witnessed a plethora of artistic strategies, all engaged to some extent in questioning the social, ideological, institutional, political and aesthetic status of art. These divergent practices have been variously described as "postminimalist" ⁵ or "dematerialized." ⁶ In this proto-postmodern moment, the body, that of the artist and the spectator, was fundamentally implicated in much of the art being made. But what exactly was this body's claim to art and what could art claim from it for itself?

For the sake of making some simple distinctions amongst a great variety of artistic intentions and productions, Robert Pincus Witten has suggested that there are three general modes of postminimalist practice, the "pictorial/sculptural, the "epistemological" and the "ontological." ⁷ The first describes a new materiality in sculpture, the use of obsessive or ritualized processes and the introduction of "painterly" media such as resins. The second would include conceptual work such as Joseph Kosuth's and that of the Art and Language collective, art that in many ways aspired to the condition of philosophical propositions. The third refers to work in which the body

itself becomes a medium, but in ways often as distant from one another as the challenges that Chris Burden posed to both the institution and his audience in performances in which his own life or that of the spectator was threatened ⁸, or the organic record of duration and process which Dennis Oppenheim's sun-burnt skin registered in Reading Position for Second Degree Burn (1970) ⁹ and, rather differently, that which Richard Long's footprints witness in England (1966). ¹⁰ In all these instances the photograph is integral to the existence of work of art as it is now known and understood. But as much as the photograph, the body of the artist was witness to the authenticity of the work.

In the many texts, both artistic and critical, that began to grapple with this new art, the diverse range of theoretical sources included the logical positivism of Wittgenstein, the phenomenology of Merleau Ponty and references to psychoanalysis less interested in the construction of the gendered subject than in Reichian cathartic dynamics or the chaotic but untrammelled desires of the Freudian unconscious. The body in question at this time was absolute - a more reliable proof of existence than the *cogito*. As such it was understood as a source of truth and inevitably became the new "presence" in art. Conceived of as primordial, this body remained largely pre-textual, although feminists in particular quickly became engaged in

its status as a powerful cultural signifier. Still, in much of this work there was initially little reason to believe that the apparent autobiographical impulses or the body in question had much to do with the gender of the artist. If there were differences, these were considered natural rather than cultural.

Vito Acconci's Seedbed (1971) in which he lay under a ramp covering the gallery floor and masturbated as his orgasmic sounds and muttered fantasies were simultaneously amplified into the spectator's space, may be read in an art historical vein (as indeed it has been) ¹¹, as a reference to the "Bachelor Machines" of Marcel Duchamp's Large Glass. However, it was also experienced and interpreted as an activation of the visitor's private sexual fantasies (as Acconci's fantasies, too, were stimulated by their invisible presence above him). The work operated at the level of the physical and psychical body, subversively sexualizing a public site usually reserved for more cerebral forms of contemplation. There was something of the therapeutic in Acconci's work, as he himself admitted. ¹²

Perhaps most memorable of the women's performances during this period was Carolee Schneeman's Interior Scroll (1975). This work, too, had a therapeutic bent, in this case concerning the healing of the artist's diminished sense of artistic agency and the empowering of her fellow women artists. ¹³ Flamboyantly posing her nude body (and

celebrating a liberated sexuality) against restrictive formalist aesthetics that separated art from life, Schneeman (who is also a filmmaker) removed a scrolled text from her vagina, reading it as it emerged. The text addressed the comments of a male structuralist filmmaker about the "personal clutter, the persistence of feelings, the hand-touched sensibility, the diaristic indulgence, the painterly mess, the dense gestalt, the primitive techniques..." in her work.¹⁴ (These are words that could well describe the celebrated films of Canadian artist Joyce Wieland. However while Wieland lived in New York in the sixties with her husband Michael Snow she failed to gain entry into the Anthology Film Archives with whose male members she carried on an extended collegial dialogue.)

The most frequently published image of Interior Scroll [fig. 1] shows Schneeman as if she were looking at a part of herself dredged from deep within, a kind of umbilical cord, but one that emerges from the vagina rather than the navel. The work can be read on several levels: in the feminist spirit of the times, Schneeman depicted a proud re-birth of the self through re-possession of the female body and female sexuality; against censorious male-dominated aesthetics she proclaimed the validity and singularity of a female perspective; finally, by amalgamating the narrative and the biological in an image that may recall either the removal of a tampon or the process of birth, she unashamedly exposed

the taboo of female reproductive life, the invisible base upon which so many restrictive representations of femininity, and female creativity, have been constructed. Schneeman was clearly walking a difficult path, one that few feminist artist's since have ventured upon, unless one were to consider aspects of the work of recent performers as different as Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley.

Something different was happening, however, when Linda Benglis attached a giant latex dildo to her liberally-oiled naked body, striking a provocatively aggressive pose for an exhibition announcement later published as a full-colour fold-out in the November 1974 issue of Artforum. Letters poured in decrying her shameless self-promotion and the magazine's lack of aesthetic judgement. Hers was perceived as a purely narcissistic act rather than a political one. Nevertheless the editorial collective of Artforum was eventually split asunder over the ensuing controversy and of course it is difficult today to find a copy of the magazine from which this infamous image has not been torn out. Somehow the irony of Robert Morris's exhibition announcement of only a few months before, in which the artist posed in full S & M regalia, complete with chains, Nazi helmet, dog collar and flexed biceps, was lost for many when confronted with Benglis's photo-performance. [fig. 2] It was in fact well known that Morris and Benglis had collaborated on other photo-performances. However the issue of the collusion of

myths of creativity and the macho male persona in the market fetishizing of the artist could be laughed off in the one instance, but became deeply transgressive in the other as gender lines were mockingly crossed while putting to service the tradition of the pin-up in a "high" art context. Among other things, Benglis's gesture was rich with commentary about the trivialized position of the female artist. Her outrageous gender-blending only served to make more evident the traditionally passive encoding of the female body in both fine art and popular imagery.

Swiss artist Urs Luthi and American Vito Acconci were not alone among male artists in the seventies to feature androgyny in their performances - work that might be re-read today in the light of gay identity politics and their artistic expression. For example, Acconci feminized his naked body in a performance by hiding his penis between his legs and Luthi used make-up and accessories to materially accentuate the bisexuality within us all. In these cases it is, however, a claiming of the feminine within rather than an interrogation of masculinity, that appears to take place - a sort of having it both ways. [fig. 3]

In her early photographic series, the Canadian artist Suzy Lake recorded the transformation of her own portrait into those of various male and female friends through cosmetic applications during the shooting, then retouching of the printed photographs afterwards. As if applying make-

up, she erased her own face and progressively traded her features for those of another. The work seems to imply a desire to remake the self in a different image, to move out of reified gender positions rather than to incorporate new, improved ones. Unlike the standard make-over, there was no idealized femininity at the end of the process.

Suzy Lake's early work can be linked to many other pieces of the period in which the female artist takes on multiple personalities and roles: for example, Eleanor Antin's inhabitation of different characters - the ballerina, the king, the black movie star and the nurse - assumed a freedom to transgress the limits of age, sex and race in the creation of new narratives of the self which seems hopelessly optimistic today. While a visiting artist at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, Halifax, Martha Wilson, like Lake, photographed herself in Posturing: Drag (1972), becoming first a man, then a man dressed as a woman. This work, too, involved most of the existing female rituals of self-presentation: hair dyeing, glamorous make-up and the changing of costumes.

Socially sanctioned sex roles and their necessity in the maintenance of power relations of course proved not to be so easily redefined in life as in art. An angrier, more strident note was to enter this genre of work. One thinks again of Suzy Lake in a series of works entitled "Are you talking to me," made in 1979. Here the artist's portrait is

enlarged and manipulated by heating and stretching the negative. Placed in relentless succession around the perimeter of the exhibition space, Lake's distorted image accosted the viewer both with its frank admission of psychological pain and its open plea to be acknowledged, spoken and listened to. [fig. 4]

Laurie Anderson's Object, Objection, Objectivity (1973) in which she photographed the men she passed on the streets and recounted in accompanying text their invasive comments about her appearance, as well as their aggressive reactions to her photographing them, was an ingenious way of "talking back." In effect, through her artistic intervention she succeeded in exposing them to the same public scrutiny she had endured as part of her everyday existence. Using video, Martha Rosler made work on a similar theme, though her interpretive models were the objectifying discourses of science and medicine. Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained (1977) [fig. 5] proceeds from her verbal interrogation to the physical stripping of Rosler's clothes to expose her body. She is measured and scrutinized by two male officials in white coats while three female assistants keep score by sounding bells when she measures up to set standards.

While mimicking familiar cultural systems of knowledge and power, Rosler used the female assistants to point toward the way that women are socialized into self-surveillance and

an incorporation of the same oppressive standards. In a very different way Adrian Piper protested constricting expectations of femininity when she rode the New York subway dressed in clothes that had been soaked in various substances to produce a repellent odour and when she strode through the Metropolitan Museum of Art blowing bubble gum and leaving the sticky traces of burst bubbles on her face. Piper's defiant guerilla performances were also a way of breaking out of the limited sphere of art in order to make a more public statement, and in this sense her work shared the current movement away from the over-determined context of the museum in order to preserve the revolutionary potential of art.

Writing about the transformative impulse in women's body and performance art in 1974, Lucy Lippard commented: "The turn of Conceptual Art toward behaviorism (sic.) and narrative about 1970 coincided with the entrance of more women into its ranks, and with the turn of women's minds toward questions of identity raised by the feminist movement: What am I? What Do I Want to Be? I Can Be Anything I Like but First I Have to Know What I Have Been and What I Am." ¹⁵ Here Lippard posits causality beyond the reflexive responses of art to its own historical condition. Instead she ascribes changes in art practice to the presence of women artists and the permission they had been granted by the women's movement to express their particular concerns

against the grain of art's traditional measures of aesthetic worth. In so doing, Lippard makes an important distinction between a more general engagement of art in its own socio-political conditions which became evident toward the end of the sixties, and the introduction of the specific issues of sexual difference and gendered experience by women artists in the seventies.

* * * * *

II : Deconstructing Histories/Reconstructing Bodies

Summarizing the state of the "body politic" in 1978, after a decade of feminist art activity, the British art historian Lisa Tickner wrote: "The most significant area for women and erotic art today is that of the de-eroticizing and de-colonizing of the female body..." ¹⁶ In the same article, however, she signals the complexity of this activity:

"Women's social and cultural relations have been located within patriarchal culture, and their identities have been moulded in accordance with the roles and images which that ideology has sanctioned." She continues: "The question is how, against this inherited framework, women are to construct new meanings which can also be understood." ¹⁷

Tickner analyses four strategies used by women artists who worked with the body in the seventies. One of these is

the political rather than erotic act of depicting the female genitalia. Examples range from Judy Chicago's "central core imagery," to explicit photographic imagery in American artist Suzanna Santoro's book work entitled Toward New Expression (1976). Today one might include a recent performance work by Canadian artist Shawna Dempsy entitled Talking Vulva (1990) - a rap song about the continuing taboo on female genitalia in which the performer wears a pink, fleshy and folded sponge latex costume of undulating labia. The overt humour of this latter work and its play on popular culture make it differ sharply from earlier feminist work and allow it to resist the aesthetic stereotyping to which that work became subject.

Tickner's second example is the use of the male nude figure as motif - a reversal of the history of offering women to the male gaze, best exemplified by American artist Sylvia Sleigh's compositions after well-known classical female nudes. She also cites Canadian artist Colette Whiten's early plaster mould sculptures (1975-78) in which primarily male bodies were held in structures resembling bondage apparatus, passively offered to the artist and her female team of assistants who carried out elaborate rituals of shaving and covering the body with vaseline in readiness for the application of plaster. [fig. 6] The documentation of this preliminary process then became part of the final presentation of the sculpture.

A more recent Canadian example might include Sorel Cohen's After Bacon After Muybridge (1980) [fig. 7], a photographic series in which the female artist captures the intimate encounter of male bodies, at once making reference to the inherently voyeuristic activity of photography, to the eroticism of British painter Francis Bacon's entwined male nudes on a bed, and finally, to 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge's time and motion studies, purportedly a scientific study in which some of the most renowned images feature Victorian women in various states of undress. Once again, the use of appropriative and deconstructive methods in this work from the eighties attempts to circumvent the problems which Tickner finds in the earlier work. Tickner concludes that the strategies of vaginal imagery and the male as motif, as they were used in the seventies, were hampered by their tendency to assume that reversing or substituting signifiers would produce new readings. They failed to take into account the complexity of representational codes and their dependency on a culturally constructed reader for intelligibility.

Two other strategies she discusses (mentioned in specific examples in the preceding section) are related to women's body and performance art of the seventies. These include "transformation and process," work done directly with or upon the artist's body to evoke a concern with women as objects in both life and art, and a closely related

strategy, that of parody, where behavioural and physical attributes of femininity are exaggerated in order to emphasize the impossibility for women to assert their identity directly through appearances. Clearly the strategies used by women artists in the seventies to represent and affirm sexual identity by posing the female body in deconstructive opposition to the historical canons of art were fraught with pitfalls. As she surveys and critiques these approaches to the body, however, Tickner is motivated by a double revisionist impulse: that of recognizing women's art activity and writing its history, and that of exposing the connection between gender and cultural authority as it is forged with the body.

Undoubtedly, the best-known feminist production in the visual arts of this period is Judy Chicago's 1979 Dinner Party, [fig. 8] a work that literally uncovered the negated female genitalia, raising them to the status of an alternative, non-hierarchical symbol through which an absent female genealogy was traced and made present. Building upon a powerful anatomical image of female sexuality, the work addresses a twofold feminist project: the affirmation of women's contribution to history and the resurrection and legitimation of forms of material expression relegated to the feminine underclass of craft. The project has remained controversial to this day, but perhaps less so for the wider public than for other feminists. Beyond the celebratory

energy and material richness of Chicago's Dinner Party was a problematic use of Christian symbolism (The Last Supper) and the reductive use of an anatomical site of sexuality to represent women's lives - a kind of double collapsing of woman as body to woman as body part. In addition, the lack of acknowledgement of the legions of women who contributed to the project became patently obvious in subsequent documentation which proclaimed Chicago's authorship. Disagreements about the work were numerous and vociferous, as they remain today. ¹⁸

Because of its scale and ambition, its use of vaginal imagery, the feminist community which was built around its production, and its popular success, the Dinner Party has become a work which is both emblematic of feminist art and at the same time frequently criticized for its unwitting essentialism. As such, it is cited both in the context of a unique feminine aesthetic and in arguments for the necessity to move beyond strategies of affirmation and reclamation, precisely to eschew the notion of generic qualities in women's art production. In retrospect, it is a work that both made a revisionist claim for equal representation in art and history, and a work that celebrates difference, the uniquely feminine. That such differing positions have been taken up around the same work indicates not only its provocative nature but the heterogeneity of feminist

politics and a growing uneasiness with the ever-present spectre of essentialism whenever the body was used as a metaphor.

The Los Angeles Womanhouse project of 1971, on which Chicago collaborated with fellow artists and students at California Institute of the Arts (Valencia), reclaimed the domestic site as an artistic one in a collision of separate spheres and their distinct signifying systems. The home, a private site, became a public one for debunking myths and taboos surrounding women and creativity. Body imagery, in both the metaphorical and the literal sense, predominated, underscoring the home's function as a sanctuary for eating, sleeping, grooming and sexuality largely maintained by women. The elision of the female body with female labour, that is, with "natural" sex roles and with the home as "a woman's place" - was transformed into an ironic send-up of the fictions that had ruled women's reality.

The humour of latex breasts punctuating the walls and ceiling of an entirely pink kitchen and the preponderance of "feminine hygiene" products, or their bloody detritus, in the decidedly messy "Menstruation Bathroom" (unforgettable for its blasphemous frankness), are only two examples of how Womanhouse became a room-by-room artistic exorcism. Womanhouse was a vehicle for affirming the disqualified and invisible in women's lives, while transforming restrictive

images of women into a creative collaboration that signalled a commitment to change by, and for, women.

During the same period, feminist art historians, too, were questioning an artistic hierarchy whose lines were drawn along sexual difference, delineating the limitations of the reproductive subject with increasing conviction and motivation throughout modern history. They demonstrated how, by the 19th century, both femininity and craft had obtained cultural definitions shaped by the organization of labour demanded by industrial capitalism.¹⁹ Art and its counterpart, genius, emerged redefined in exclusively male terms, while craft - a plethora of "minor" arts - became firmly fixed within the domestic sphere and its nurturing, feminine connotations.

John Berger's influential 1972 B.B.C. television series Ways of Seeing, introduced an art historical perspective which took such historical, political, and socio-economic questions into account. His questioning of the ideal of authenticity in art, following Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura," and his analysis of the tradition of the female nude in Western painting, exposed the workings of capitalism in art and the attendant commodification of femininity. Berger linked the production of art to the political economy, gender and mass culture - the very things that the institution of art history deemed beyond its purview and the

issues that postmodernist art practices took up a decade later.

At the same time, the renowned essay "**Why are there no great women artists**"? by American art historian Linda Nochlin, appeared in Art News,²⁰ initiating a similar process of questioning and inspiring numerous exhibitions which attempted to restore the place of women artists in the history of art. And a decade later, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker published their book Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology, in which they used the combination of Marxist economic and class analysis and feminist attention to gender differences. In so doing they set a feminist agenda for the rehabilitation of art history that went beyond earlier revisionist tactics of merely discovering and adding women artists to the canon. Instead they questioned the very mechanisms of power, their role in the gendering of fine art and their expression through a value system of connoisseurship and mastery so central to the rhetoric of art history.

In North America, and to some extent in Europe, body and performance art by women continued throughout the seventies and has been recognized as some of the strongest work of that decade. In Britain a tradition of neo-Marxist politics provided a theoretical edge to feminist activity less apparent in American liberal feminism at the time. This resulted in more analytical work which was also inspired by

a growing awareness of new theoretical texts from France. In 1977 British feminist critic and theorist Rosetta Brooks stated: "Incorporated into the context of perception is the woman's lack of presence - her invisibility as observer is countered by her visibility as perception. The effect of this is to deny her own reality and reinforce the reality of her appearance as reflected in the man-made image. The reflection is more real than what is reflected."²¹ Brook's words indicate a shift toward the analysis of images of women, exposing the problem of eliding images and symbols for woman with images and symbols of woman, and emphasizing that the representation of female sexuality conditions how it comes into play. But it was in film theory that the concept of the "gaze," the male subject and female object of the look, was pursued in depth. Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "**Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema**" became pivotal to a generation of critics.²² Mulvey's call for an embargo on "visual pleasure" in film had parallels in the visual arts as feminist artists found it necessary to move away from depictions of the female body.

The recognition of an historical legacy of woman's position in representation from the classical nude to the Hollywood **femme fatale**, coupled with the theoretical account that psychoanalytic theory provided, was summed up by artist Mary Kelly as constituting a "crisis of positionality" for the female practitioner in the visual arts.²³ In her 1984

article "Desiring Images/Imaging Desire" she stated that the female artist "sees her experience particularly in terms of the "feminine Position," as object of the look, but she must also account for the "feeling" she experiences as the artist, occupying the "masculine" position of "subject to the look." ²⁴ In an earlier article "Re-viewing Modernist Criticism" (1981), she recognized the importance of women's body art in the preceding decade, stating: "the specific contribution of feminists in the field of performance has been to pose the question of sexual difference across the discourse of the body in a way which focuses on the construction not of the individual but of the sexed subject."

For Kelly, as for postmodern theorists, the image must be seen in terms of its textuality, that is, as a representation of cultural codes and their conditions of production. Given this premise, one which is in contrast to an expressive or celebratory impulse, Kelly's best known work, Post-Partum Document (1972-1979), can be seen as diametrically opposed to Chicago's Dinner Party, though of similar scale and equally emblematic in the history of a feminist art practice. It was produced over the same extended period, and has also been subject to debate, though for its preponderance of theoretical text more than for its imagery. Coincidentally, Kelly, like Chicago, is one of the most influential artist-pedagogues of her generation.

In Post-Partum Document [figs. 9, 10, 11, 12] the body is embedded in text, the corporeal image entirely evacuated and historical experience subsumed in the categories of subjectivity and sexual identity. Reversing the psychoanalytic developmental trajectory of the child's journey from the dyad to entry into society, Kelly's documentation in Post-Partum Document of her son's first five years becomes, instead, an exploration of the formation of the mother's identity. The work reveals the mother's loss of the child's body through which she relives a primary plenitude. Maternal sentimentality does not enter into the most moving parts of the work, yet Kelly creates an image of the mother's desire, of her fetishistic activity of saving articles of clothing or her toddler's gifts. Consisting of six sections and over one hundred individual elements, Post-Partum Document traces the dissolution of the mother-child dyad marked by the child's entry into language. This entry into the symbolic order is concurrent with the return of the mother to the realm of the unspeakable.

The form of Post-Partum Document mimics the intellectual and documentary approach characteristic of the conceptual art then in the mainstream. Its pseudo-scientific format includes parodies of Lacan's arcane diagrams and medical constructions of the reproductive body. It nevertheless reveals a disruptive intimacy: Kelly's use of stained diaper liners caused a scandal at the first

exhibition of the work by exposing the domestic and profoundly corporeal, and by claiming these as artistic territory. In itself this was not new, but the fact that Kelly did so in a manner that emphasized the social and cultural construction of female subjectivity without reiterating naturalizing images of femininity, was.

What, in effect, Kelly did in Post-Partum Document was to aesthetically turn around psychoanalytic theories of desire founded in loss of the mother as first object, in order to speak of the mother's own experience of loss. The importance of Lacan's concept of desire founded on loss and the comparison of the construction of the unconscious to the signifying chain of language for Kelly and many other feminists, was that desire could then be understood as the source of signification, and sexuality and its representations as firmly rooted in culture rather than nature.

In speaking of the Post-Partum Document several years after its completion, Kelly described her purpose this way: "It seemed crucial, not in the sense of a moral imperative, but as a **historical strategy**, to avoid the literal figuration of the mother and child, that is, to avoid any means of representation which risked recuperation as "a slice of life'... Above all I am trying to picture woman as subject of her own desire. This is not a new form of iconoclasm but an aspiration I share not only with

feminists, but with certain "post-modernists" (sic.) who are making a critique of the kind of creative essentialism that predominates in much current art and criticism." ²⁵ With this statement Kelly refers to the problematic figuration of the female body in much of the feminist art of the preceding decade while linking the essentialism that has accompanied cultural representations of woman to an essentialism at the heart of modernist notions of artistic authorship which are unequivocally male and uncritically accept the concept of genius. In effect, Kelly justifies her refusal of figuration of the body as a strategy for bringing the unrepresentable, female desire, into full play.

The Freudian and, in turn, Lacanian psychoanalytic theories adopted by Kelly and other feminists, which repeatedly articulate male desire and subjectivity in relation to a feminine other, are also precisely what motivated an investigation of female desire and an insistence on all that is not body. Alice Jardine describes this paradoxical attraction this way: "Within the strange gap between the female bodies at the inception of psychoanalysis and the male subject taken as its norm, and especially within the resultant syntax, lies the power (and, for some, the faults) of psychoanalysis itself ...it is almost as if, through his relentless return to Freud, Lacan was himself forced to incarnate the gaps in the immaculate conception of the foundations of psychoanalytic theory

itself: female body, male subject, oscillating name." ²⁶ In this sense, the very aspects of psychoanalysis that would appear to condemn women to biological destiny are those which may provide an explanation for a symbolic order in which she comes to represent body and the male subject appears to have greater claim to subjectivity.

Intrinsically Post-Partum Document is also a document of a historical and theoretical moment in feminism, a different but simultaneous one than had inspired Judy Chicago. Indeed, it "embodies" histories and discourses that are at once parallel and inseparable: that of psychoanalysis and feminism as well as that of feminist art and the body. At the same time, materially it recapitulates another history, that of the expanding field of the visual arts in the pluralist seventies and the contribution of women artists to those changes. And in so doing, it prefigured the emphasis typical of postmodernist theory on representational practices as constitutive of culture.

As Kelly brought this work to completion, a number of texts appeared which grappled with the contentious question of feminist aesthetics. Sandy Flitterman and Judith Barry's influential 1980 article **"Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making"** almost reads like a manifesto, though they disclaim any prescriptive intention. ²⁷ It ends with Kelly's Post-Partum Document as the example, if not the formula, for a new feminist art. Much of the work of the

seventies - body and performance art, domestic imagery and the ritual, obsessive characteristics positively claimed by cultural feminists in search of a unique feminine aesthetic - is dismissed without Tickner's sympathetic recognition of their historical importance. Instead Barry and Flitterman call for a new order, proposing that the body be kept in the background (preferably absent) in order to first disturb and question the ideology in which the female subject, and hence her body, has been constructed. Feminist art is seen as one that goes beyond recognition of female experience, rejects the ghetto of female culture and insists upon a clearly articulated ideological and political project: art whose "text" often becomes literal quotation; art that understands and makes manifest the textual nature of all representations and in so doing challenges not only the premises of artistic production but of its reception. Their final statement advocates a thoroughly postmodern stance: "a theoretical approach implies a break with the dominant notion of art as a personal expression, resituating it along the continuum connecting the social with the political and placing the artist as producer in a new situation of responsibility for her images." ²⁸

* * * * *

III : Feminine or Feminist Aesthetics?

"Rather than coding language as masculine or feminine and defining forms as gender specific, a feminist cultural politics should be engaged in questioning the value of such categories in textual analysis and opening up the range and richness of existing cultural traditions as potentially accessible and adaptable to the specific political and aesthetic interests of women." ²⁹

It is hardly surprising that the body was central to so many of the debates regarding the contribution by women artists in the seventies to a new aesthetics. After all, the historical antithesis of woman and creativity had been constructed upon biologicistic arguments in which the body was the source of feminine "nature." As women artists searched for a language suitable to their experience and faltered upon the limitations of their "vocabulary," so did feminist critics. German critic Gisela Ecker deplored the underlying essentialism that characterized so many earlier attempts to theorize women's art. For her, as for Barry and Flitterman, it is more useful to talk about a feminist, rather than a feminine, aesthetic as one which is developed consciously in the context of particular cultural politics and not simply "given" by virtue of being a woman. ³⁰

Teresa de Lauretis responded, ten years later, to the frustration with the available terms which Silvia Bovenshen expressed in her 1976 article "Is there a Feminine Aesthetic?" ³¹ de Lauretis dispels the universalizing object of the debate as a restrictive and futile category that overlooks differences amongst women and repeats modernist conceptions of aesthetics. ³² Finally, analyzing the question of feminist aesthetics from a different historical perspective, Christine Battersby adds a cautionary note regarding any easy disentanglement from the issue of aesthetics: "As industrial society was born during the closing years of the eighteenth century, aspects of mind previously downgraded as "feminine" were revalued and re-assigned to the psyche of the genius-male. A similar process is occurring now as the industrial fades into the post-industrial age. "Otherness," "fragmentation," "babble," "marginality" have been revalued. The term "feminist" itself has been depoliticized and appropriated within male (and female) fantasies that privilege the male even as the way forward is described in terms of a post-patriarchal (and, one might add, a post-feminist - my addition) culture." ³³

* * * * *

Mayo Graham's introduction to the catalogue "Some Canadian Women Artists" ³⁴, an exhibition organized by her

in 1975 for the National Gallery of Canada in recognition of International Women's Year, is exemplary of the circular arguments that the claim for a "feminine" aesthetic engendered. One reads Graham's text today with discomfort, for her difficulty in defending a women-only exhibition and the evident lack of theoretical tools at the moment of writing are painfully exposed in multiple contradictions and a backfiring of intentions as she attempts to delineate specifically female characteristics in the work while denying naturalizing categories of woman.

Graham groups the seven artists she selected under two shared aesthetic characteristics: the prominence of texture or a "sense of touch," which she attributes to women's historical role in home-making skills, and the use of seriality, repetition or cumulation, a feature which she also relates to domestic tasks as well as to the cyclical rhythms of the female body. In conclusion, she writes: "At the same time as affirming common characteristics in women's art, I feel that this phenomenon is temporal, for things may change radically. When more and more work by women artists is seen and exhibited, when the roles of women and men are virtually interchangeable, then I think that art will be androgynous." ³⁵ Paradoxically, this statement follows a discussion of the different biological and social factors that condition men's and women's lives and how these in turn affect their creations. Finally, the predicted disappearance

of common characteristics in women's art does not suggest a recognition of differences amongst women, rather it implies women's success in becoming more like men.

The ideal of androgyny promoted by Graham hardly seems a solution to the problematics of difference recognized in the deconstructive work that emerged by the late-seventies. Her statement reflects a liberal feminism of equality as yet uncomplicated by a recognition of the deeply inscribed symbolic systems which maintain difference despite changing roles and opportunities. Writing a decade later about the 1986 group exhibition "In a Different Voice" (titled after Carol Gilligan's landmark study of feminine concepts of self and morality), Canadian critic Dot Tuer articulates both the equality/difference dichotomy and the dilemma of feminist/feminine aesthetics in terms of feminism's important contribution to the critique of institutional structures and how the symbolic order in which women participate further complicates the representation of difference by feminist artists. She writes: "These contradictions, however, are not negative ones. Rather they offer valuable insights for all those who are currently negotiating their position within the symbolic realm which divides and demoralizes their efforts to reclaim a place for the "other" within the structure of the social contract. For as women artists working within the institution of "fine art" they place themselves within a structure that denies

difference and privileges the phallus. Yet at the same time, they desire an aesthetic and a representation which explores the feminine as a site which functions outside of this structure." ³⁶ Tuer's observation is shared in Ecker's insistence that feminist aesthetics necessarily entail reflecting on feminine aesthetics while taking the complications of subjectivity into account.

As the title of her book suggests, Rita Felski's account of American and European feminist literary theory, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, assesses the search for definitive feminist aesthetics as misguided. Not only has the poststructuralist rewriting of the gendered subject as a relational identity challenged any underlying urge to repeat the humanist search for universals that such an aesthetic implies, but Felski sees a further problem in the isolation of aesthetic questions from those of the social conditions of their production and reception. One could very well read the following quotation in reference to the sorts of aesthetic claims which were initially made for women's visual art: "...feminist fiction that served important purposes at the time of publication by articulating women's discovery of their oppression may appear aesthetically naive or excessively didactic at a historical distance." ³⁷ At the same time, the deconstructionist aesthetic which many artists and critics began to advocate by the late-seventies does not, in Felski's opinion, necessarily amount to a

feminist politics. She states: "The notion of a feminist aesthetic presupposes that these two dimensions of textual reception can be unproblematically harmonized, assuring either that an aesthetically self-conscious literature which subverts conventions of representation forms a sufficient basis for a feminist politics of culture (a position that can be regarded as both elitist and politically naive), or that texts which have been politically important to the women's movement are automatically of aesthetic significance ...a dialectical interaction between politics and aesthetics is compressed into an identity which attempts to construct a normative aesthetic on the basis of feminist interests." ³⁸

Felski's elucidation of this historical problematic aptly describes the circular, if not futile, character of critical feminist texts in the visual arts which attempted to grasp and fix an aesthetic. Where Felski's approach differs is that she does not differentiate feminine and feminist aesthetics, ignoring the artistic intentionality that such a distinction implies, perhaps because, like Ecker and others, she sees the two as ultimately inseparable, indebted as they are to the same political project. Felski is acutely aware that the iconoclastic gestures of the historical avant garde were not effective in dismantling the category of the aesthetic, rather they were assimilated into the institution of art and venerated for their innovation. It is this fate which feminist interventions in art and

literature must avoid if they are to disrupt not only the field of production, but that of reception.

By the late eighties American critic Arlene Raven was able to write: "Artists who address gender and society today are no longer compelled by the perfect feminine fit. A large body of work examines the construction of the small shoe (social body) on the one hand, and the dismembered foot (the physical body) on the other. This work exemplifies the plurality of feminisms which exist in 1988."³⁹ Raven reacts against any "correct" program for feminist art, objecting to the stereotyping of feminist artistic production and criticism of the seventies as essentialist by the anti-essentialist "post-modern (sic.) deconstructionists and appropriationists." According to Raven this polarization of positions is a fiction. Instead she claims: "Even biologically oriented "female imagery" was introduced as a self-conscious antithesis into the historical environment of phallic imagery, challenging human-made, value-laden signs, in which the social "essence" of one gender dominated the other."⁴⁰ Indeed this is so, but Raven seems unwilling to acknowledge that despite its intentions, the easy recuperation into existing cultural codes of this "realist" aesthetic based on an assertion of a universal experience, and its ostracization by the mainstream, necessitated the more complex and theoretically informed solutions of another generation of feminist artists if the motivating political

project was to be effective. Where her comments are of value is in their highlighting of the historical blindness of a prescriptive aesthetics, and a binary opposition, that unwittingly emerged as feminist artists and critics attempted to distance themselves from the limits of the approaches used by their predecessors.

In response to the claims made for deconstructive and "scripto-visual" approaches to art-making that consciously avoided the risk of reiterating biological essence and instead promoted cultural conceptions of the body, critics of Raven's ilk feared that the continued development of a female voice might be sacrificed in the process. To put it differently: an erasure of the specificity of feminine bodily subjectivity might amount to the denial of certain immutable aspects of feminine experience, and thus of the self. The fact that so much work had already been done to demonstrate how subjectivities are culturally formed above and beyond any biological imperative does not seem to have completely dispensed with the problematics of what Rosi Braidotti has called "the politics of ontological difference." ⁴¹ In an article of the same title, Braidotti suggests the consideration of a third corporeal territory, one that exceeds the dualistic models of an essentializing "experiential" body and the anti-essentialist culturally inscribed body, posing the challenge as one of "how to rethink the body in terms that are neither biological nor

sociological. How to reformulate the bodily roots of subjectivity in such a way as to incorporate the insight of the body as libidinal surface, field of forces, threshold of transcendence." ⁴² She continues: "Sexual difference is a **fact**, it is also a **sign** of a long history that conceptualized difference as pejection or lack. What is at stake in the debate is not the causality, the chicken-and-the-egg argument, but rather the positive project of turning difference into a strength, of affirming its positivity." ⁴³

* * * * *

Re-writing the Body

At this juncture one might consider "**écriture féminine**" or the "writing the body" proposed by some French feminists as a possible means for the disruption of dualistic models in that it calls for a radical rewriting of language itself - a utopian project perhaps, but one that emphasizes the inherent constraints and biases of the tools of representation at hand and how these too must be "remodelled" if the social order is to change in any radical sense. In noting that this particular area of French feminism has much in common with the poststructuralist project, Brenda Longfellow has said: "What marks French

feminism is the insistence that the transformation of social relations is primordially dependent on a profound re-thinking and re-working of existing relations of representation and language." "How might such an approach operate in the sphere of visual art, in the work of women artists that employ more disruptive and less easily fixed concepts of the body?

Any direct correlation of specific works to these theoretical propositions (which began to reach North America sporadically in the early eighties) is less easily traced than the deconstructive refiguring of images of women is in work as different as, for example, Mary Kelly's and Barbara Kruger's. Moreover the charge of essentialism has weighed heavily upon the reception of French feminisms in North America, no doubt preventing their easy adoption as an alternative conception of feminine corporeality. In defense of this current in French feminist thought, Longfellow calls attention to their "trenchant criticism of the mind/body dualism of western philosophy (and the post-structuralist (sic.) enterprise) which results in a massive repression of the body, and, in particular, the maternal body." ⁴⁵

In Longfellow's mind, and those of many others, the anti-essentialist British and North American resistance to "**écriture féminine**" is blind to the ambiguity, multiplicity and constant questioning of concepts such as "truth" and "identity" in which the body becomes a poetic figure above

and beyond its place in "realist," experiential histories. Arleen Dallery describes this "Franco-American disconnection" ⁴⁶ this way: "one emphasizes the empirical, the irreducible reality of woman's experience; the other emphasizes the primacy of discourse, of women's discourse, without which there is no experience - to speak of." ⁴⁷ She continues: "Writing the body is writing a new text - not with the phallic pen - new inscriptions of woman's body, separate from and undermining the phallocratic coding of woman's body that produces the censure, erasure, repression of women's libidinal economy, her *altérité*. Writing the body, then, is not access to a precultural body or precultural sexuality as some critics of *écriture féminine* assume." ⁴⁸

Mary Scott is a Canadian artist whose work is directly inspired by French feminist theorists Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva (the three who are generally credited, in their differing and often opposed ways, for mapping the territory for a writing of the body). Scott began her career in the late-seventies as a painter and was head of the fibre program at the Banff Centre in the late-eighties. As this shift in artistic categories suggests, her work has consciously and progressively eluded classification. Her early paintings were virtually anti-paintings in that they appeared to deny all that was intrinsic to modernist painting: the two-dimensional

surface, the gesture and the authenticity of the image. Rather than applying paint with a brush or knife, Scott made a mockery of the ultra-expressionist act of squeezing paint directly out of the tube onto the canvas, instead meticulously and painstakingly "ejecting" it from a hypodermic needle to "write" texts that defied legibility. Images were present, however they were buried beneath these thick, mutated quotations from her theoretical reading and they were appropriated, often drawn from pornographic magazines and other popular sources. The female body was not so much written, as written across - a libidinal surface obscured by language.

By the early eighties Scott had dispensed with the stretcher and had begun to further violate the painterly surface by slashing the canvas and introducing alien materials such as the metallic self-adhesive lettering used in office signage. Quotations from theoretical, literary and psychoanalytic sources were run together in an irreverent blending of voices that amounted to a flouting of textual authority. These quotations were spray-painted onto the canvas like graffiti in what Scott has called a "quoting-in-excess."⁴⁹ She has continued to draw on diverse image sources from soft-porn to Leonardo da Vinci's studies of musculature and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs.

The body is a constant ground for Scott's work in more senses than one. Inspired by the Lacanian concept of the

Imago, the unconscious image located in the bodily plenitude of the Imaginary, Scott has used this concept more recently as a potential site for the process of her work which she describes as a "going toward," not a capturing/explaining/enunciating."⁵⁰ In these works the painterly surface is physically degraded until totally transformed into a fragile web, the remnants of de-threading, shredding and cutting materials associated with feminine apparel such as silk, organza, taffeta and satin. Text virtually disappears, except in her lengthy titles, and the image survives only in its most diagrammatic outline [fig. 13]. The surface itself is laboriously reworked but paint is virtually dispensed with, having become superfluous to the process of making an image through the internalized "marking" of the traditional support, the "body" of the painting. In literally deconstructing the "body" of painting Scott created a new body, a sensual material richness, an excess of brilliant, luxurious silk and gold, an overflowing of the unified surface into errant threads that trail along the floor - an aesthetic which approximates a kind of Kristevan "semiotic" disturbance at the most primary material level. Finally, she literally reduces to ruin the scientific pretence of the Lacanian diagrams she has used in many of her works.

In her most recent work Scott has re-cycled her earlier paintings in an act that both undermines the time-honoured

value of the unique object and transgressively annihilates the original work in the service of new work, thus erasing the historical legacy of her own oeuvre. The resulting objects, tightly bound with thread as if to contain their unruly internal content, have an uncanny resemblance to body parts. Scott's is a conscious decision to work "in the in-between," deconstructing and destabilizing painting, the traditional language of art. She has said: "Interpretation, be it psychoanalytic or otherwise, hungers for meaning and the slippages between are of keen interest. Painting - the discipline and tradition - is ripe territory. Territory in which to argue, provoke, interrogate, agitate." ⁵¹ Meaning in Scott's work is elusive, never readily available, never singular, always multiple.

The call for a deconstructive feminist aesthetic, the "textual strategies" advocated by Barry and Flitterman and most evident in the work of Mary Kelly, is generally seen as having contributed to a banishing of women artists from painting before they were able to make any significant incursion into this male bastion. In his essay "**Painting and Difference**," British critic John Roberts describes the relationship of the resultant "embargo on painting" to the emergence of a prescriptive feminist aesthetic this way: "The reduction of painting to the fixed categories of a self-present pictorialism or gender-less abstraction only confirmed women's "lack" of speech and absence within the

Western fine art tradition by conferring characteristics on women's art. In the necessary process of divesting women's practice from the containments of this tradition, women saw their practices becoming overly identified with the area of **not painting.**" ⁵²

As Canadian critic Carol Laing has remarked, a double censure occurred for women artists: the death of painting had been declared in the anti-formalist pluralism of the seventies, just as women artists were becoming more visible. Of course by the close of that decade painting had been resurrected, enthusiastically endorsed by the market, and fully reinvested with a brash, expressionistic virility. By then, as Laing points out, it was said to be "too contaminated and still too much at one with its patriarchal, high art history to be a viable medium... so painting became quite simply, politically incorrect: a chauvinist theatre intolerant of women who could not identify with Renoir's conflation of painting tools with his own sexual organ in his much-quoted statement that he painted with his prick." ⁵³ As Laing remarks, quoting Barthes' essay **"Is Painting a Language?,"** there is a curious history of painting being closely and rather unproblematically linked to male anatomical attributes - an almost preposterous insistence on the "seminal" importance of the painterly gesture, a gesture that Scott effectively overthrows in her work. In response to the question which introduces her

article, "How can **We** speak to painting?," Laing concludes: With all the means at our disposal. And with language. Against our long history of an enforced silence, in order, out of **difference**, to make a difference. To make painting different." ⁵⁴

The recent debates around women and painting mark another stage in the movement away from definitive feminist aesthetics, whether textually or materially-based, toward a widening of the field, a rebellion from within rather than an oppositional stance in relation to the mainstream. The subversive use of traditional media and their contamination with appropriated popular imagery and archival material can, of course, be seen as typically postmodern rather than specifically feminist. However the body, whether re-written or lurking on the margins, nevertheless remains very present in much of this work by women artists. This body is more elusive, conceived as fluid and multiple.

Consider for example, Toronto artist Shelagh Alexander, whose photo-compilations consist of a dream-like encounter between re-cut scenes from old movies and snapshots from the family album in which she appears as a child and as an adolescent. Together these are then re-manipulated onto a single negative through masking and appliqué techniques such that there is a constant merging of private and public, of heroic and quotidian, and of mythic and ordinary bodies.

In his 1984 essay "**Axes of Difference**" ⁵⁵, Toronto critic Philip Monk addressed local women's art practice claiming that its ascendancy was accompanied by a concurrent sense of loss of power by male artists. He delineates a difference in the more general return to imagery and content in the early eighties that caught the attention of critics, and this work by women. His thesis is that the return to painting experienced at the time primarily in the work of male artists constituted a reaction to a loss of power marked by a retreat to art history and tradition. Thus, he states "the referents for subject matter and practice are located in the real for women and in the gallery and art world for men." ⁵⁶ Despite the persistence of an unsatisfactorily dualistic model in his argument, he makes an interesting claim: "the work by women... has a more intimate knowledge of and care for the conditions of representation. To have the conditions of representation inscribed within one socially, not essentially or biologically, is to be aware of the conditions of representation in every aspect of one's own representational practice." ⁵⁷ This "knowledge" and "care" could also be described as an attempt to articulate the unspoken terrain of female desire, a subjectivity uncharted by a sign system in which woman can only represent lack.

Monk considers Shelagh Alexander's work not as "a critique of representation from without, but a complex

registering within, where family and film merge in the authority of their images." ⁵⁸ In freely associating and re-editing the very genre of images which construct the subject of woman in the male gaze (she uses 1940s and film noir material), Alexander performs not so much an appropriation but a re-appropriation. [fig. 14] Her work becomes re-presentational and expressive in its picturing of the vicissitudes of subjectivity. The body in Shelagh Alexander's work moves through and is doubly inscribed by both experience and representation, and as it moves it undergoes the desiring and utopian transformations that The Somnambulist, a 1984 work, suggests: a dream-walker traverses transparent, fractured images from the Second World War era, looking at herself through other bodies while she is propelled forward through history by her own, and the authority figure of the heroic male retreats into the shadows.

The effect of Alexander's images is one of shattering, splitting, mutating and infinite receding into a mirror-like plane. In this sense her work takes up the Lacanian theme of identity as a dialectic of reflection, but one which is pursued in the interstices of popular imagery and its representational codes. In Alexander's own words: "The work I make is a retelling - a making-strange of those stories which we as spectators are all too familiar with. The individual images that comprise the works can be traced to

the most sophisticated of story forms - mainstream film... they are the frames we don't recognize: the frames from the ends of sequences; the frames of intense motion or emotion that pass too quickly through the gate of the projector to impress themselves upon the conscious mind. They belong to the realm of the unconscious... It is these haunted, evocative images that I deliberately hunt down, hidden as they are in the dense fabric of a film, and through the layering capacity of montage, coax into delivering over their silent tales. Women, too, haunt the periphery. As such, these images are our images, they tell our stories which have too long been confined to the edges of the frame." ⁵⁹

Writing in 1985 about women's cinema, Teresa de Lauretis noted that the attention and ambivalence which surrounded the question of a feminine aesthetic is characteristic of "a two fold pressure, a simultaneous pull in opposite directions, a tension toward the positivity of politics, or affirmative action on behalf of women as social subjects, on one front, and the negativity inherent in the radical critique of patriarchal, bourgeois culture, on the other." ⁶⁰ To even pose the question of a feminine aesthetic, de Lauretis claims, presupposes an acceptance of traditional definitions of art proposed by modernist aesthetics. That is, a raising of representational practices to the status of art through the specificity of their form.

As de Lauretis notes in the feminist critiques of film which she discusses, most of the terms used in relation to construction of the female social subject, as in the visual arts, are by the eighties characterized by the prefix "**de**" for deconstruction or even destruction of representational codes. Her conclusion that we might then consider dispensing with the problem of a "feminine aesthetic" in favour of a "feminist **de** aesthetic" rather than a feminist aesthetic, perhaps best describes that of the artists mentioned here (as well as many others), and the body that was beginning to be "written" by the mid-eighties.

NOTES

1. Hal Foster, "Wild Signs: The Break-up of the Sign in Seventies Art," Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 257.
2. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968) 116-147 (originally appeared in Artforum June 1967).
3. In 1976 O'Doherty published a three-part article in Artforum entitled "Inside the White Cube," later published as a book.
4. Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 149.
5. For a comprehensive discussion of the multiple and varied forms of conceptual, land, body and process art that are grouped under the term "postminimalism" see Robert Pincus-Witten, Postminimalism (New York: Out of London Press, Inc., 1977).

6. Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973).
7. Robert Pincus-Witten, Postminimalism (New York: Out of London Press, Inc., 1977) 13-18.
8. The most sensational of these included having himself shot in the arm (Shooting Piece, 1972) and lying in a busy Los Angeles street wrapped in a canvas bag (Deadman 1972). In both cases he escaped mortal injury, and in the latter the performance was stopped by the police on charges of falsely creating a public emergency. Rosalee Goldberg has said of this series of work: "Burden's painful exercises were meant to 're-enact certain American classics - like shooting people,' Presented in semi-controlled conditions he hoped that they would alter people's perception of violence. Certainly such danger had been portrayed on canvas or simulated in theatre scenes; Burden's performances, involving real danger, had a grandiose aim: to alter the history of representation of such themes for all time." Rosalee Goldberg. Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present, (New York: Abrams, 1979) 103.
9. In Oppenheim's words: "This piece incorporates an inversion or reversal of energy expenditure. The body was placed in the position of recipient... an exposed plane, a captive surface. The piece has its roots in a notion of color (sic.) change. Painters have always artificially instigated color activity. I allowed myself to be painted - my skin became pigment. I could regulate its intensity through control of the exposure time. Not only would my skin tones change, but its change registered on a sensory level as well - I could feel the act of becoming red. I was tattooed by the sun." Dennis Oppenheim: Retrospective - Works 1967-1977 (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1978) 53.
10. The work consisted of a circular pattern on the grass made through Long's repeated walking over the same area until the grass was flattened.
11. Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," Postminimalism, 43-147.
12. Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci," Postminimalism, 144.
13. Schneeman is quoted as saying in defense of her use of the naked body in 1974 that she intended "to break into the taboos against the vitality of the naked body in movement, to eroticize my guilt-ridden culture and

further to confound this culture's sexual rigidities." in Henry Sayer, The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 170.

14. Moira Roth, The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983) 14.
15. Lippard, "Making Up: Role-Playing," From the Centre, 102.
16. Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," Framing Feminism, eds. Parker and Pollock (New York & London: Pandora, 1987) 266.
17. Tickner, "Body Politic," Framing Feminism, 266.
18. Lisa Steel, "The Judy Chicago Paradox: After the Party's Over," Fuse September 1982: 93-95.
19. Griselda Pollock & Roszika Parker. "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts," Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology (London: Pandora Press, 1981) 50-81.
20. Linda Nochlin, "Why Are There No Great Women Artist'?", Art News vol. 69, n. 9, 1971: 23-39 & 67-71.
21. Rosetta Brooks, "Woman Visible, Women Invisible", Studio International, vol. 193, 1977: 208-212.
22. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, no. 3, Autumn 1975: 6-18.
23. Mary Kelly, "Re-viewing Modernist Criticism," Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985) 97.
24. Mary Kelly, "Desiring Images/Imaging Desire," Wedge, no. 6, 1984: 6.
25. Mary Kelly, "Woman-Desire-Image," Desire (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1984) 30.
26. Alice Jardine, Gynesis: Woman and Configurations of Modernity (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 160.
27. Judith Barry & Sandy Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making," Screen, vol. 1, no. 2, 1981.

28. Barry & Flitterman, Visibly Female: Feminism and Art-an Anthology, ed. Hillary Robinson (London, Camden Press, 1987) 177.
29. Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 43.
30. Gisela Ecker, ed. and Harriet Anderson trans., Feminist Aesthetics (London: The Women's Press, 1985).
31. Silvia Bovenshen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?," Feminist Aesthetics, Ecker, 23-50.
32. Teresa de Lauretis, "Re-thinking Women's Cinema," Technologies of Gender (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 127-148.
33. Christine Battersby, Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 147.
34. The artists were: Gathie Falk, Sherry Grauer, Leslie Reid, Mary Pratt, Ann Whitlock, Colette Whiten and Shirley Wiitasalo.
35. Mayo Graham, Some Canadian Women Artists (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975) 21.
36. Dot Tuer, "To Speak of Difference," Parachute no. 43, June, July, August 1986: 41.
37. Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, 180.
38. Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, 180-181.
39. Arlene Raven, "The Last Essay on Feminist Criticism," Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology, eds. Arlene Raven, C. Langer, & J. Frueh (Ann Arbor/London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988) 227.
40. Raven, "The Last Essay," Feminist Art Criticism, 227-228.
41. Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, ed. Teresa Brennan (London & New York: Routledge, 1989) 89-105.
42. Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological," Between Feminism, 98-99.

43. Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological," Between Feminism, 101.
44. Brenda Longfellow, "When these Lips Speak Together," Borderlines, Winter 1986-1987: 26.
45. Longfellow, "When these Lips," 27.
46. This phrase is the title of an article by Domna Stanton in which she lucidly articulates this impasse: Alice Jardine & Hester Eisenstein, "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-connection," The Future of Difference (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 1980) 73-87.
47. Arleen B. Dallery, "The Politics of Writing (the Body): Ecriture Feminine," Gender/Body/Knowledge, eds. Alison M. Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 52.
48. Dallery, "The Politics of Writing," 59.
49. Artist's statement, The Embodied Viewer, by Vera Lemecha (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1991) 32.
50. Lemecha, Embodied Viewer, 32.
51. Lemecha, Embodied Viewer, 32.
52. John Roberts, "Painting and Difference," Parachute 55, July, August, September 1989: 28.
53. Carol Laing, "How can **We** speak to Painting?," C Magazine 25, Spring 1990: 18-24.
54. Laing, "How can **We** Speak," 24.
55. Philip Monk, "Axes of Difference: Representation Versus Expression in Toronto Art," Vanguard, vol. 13, no.4, May 1984: 10-14.
56. Philip Monk, Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988) 191.
57. Monk, Struggles with the Image, 191-192.
58. Monk, Struggles with the Image, 200.
59. Excerpt from artist's statement: Shirley Madill, Identity/identities (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1988) 17.

60. de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender, 127.

CHAPTER TWO

LOCATING A FEMINIST POSTMODERN BODY

"As long as we do not explore the boundaries of and possible common spaces between modernity and feminism; as long as we do not recognize new kinds of artificial, symbolic constructions of the subject, representation, and (especially) experience, we will be engaging in what are ultimately conservative and dated polemics, not radical theory and practice." ¹

During a series of discussions on contemporary culture hosted in 1987 by the DIA Art Foundation in New York, Hal Foster commented in reference to feminist artistic production, that recently the critique of essentialism had reached an extreme where women were "treated as so many signs to fetishize." Having supported the work of a new breed of postmodernist artists represented by women such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman (artists whose work looks at gender construction and social oppression through the use of re-constructed popular imagery and/or texts reminiscent of advertising copy or bearing the cadence of political slogans), Foster mused whether it might be possible in this radically "postnatural" moment to

critically resurrect the "natural." There is a whiff of the nostalgic in Foster's rhetorical question even as it hints at the difficulty of the adjective "natural," nature itself being exposed as a cultural concept by so much of the semiotically inclined art he was referring to. In effect, Foster appears to have been asking a question of more general pertinence: "where can feminist art go now?, or "after deconstruction, what next?." Alice Jardine responded in the following manner: "In terms of a feminist practice which wants to invent some new kind of female subjectivity - a complex subjectivity, not a humanistic one - that project may involve, interestingly enough, a reradicalization of what patriarchy has called "nature" as opposed to "culture." Not to go back to nature, but to play with it somehow - to reradicalize it through a complex female subjectivity that is partly recovered from the oblivion of history and partly invented out of practices in the present." ²

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I : Theoretical Frameworks

Behind questions of "nature" and "culture," questions emblematic of the sort of self-generating binary systems of meaning that both feminist and postmodernist thought aspire to dismantle, the body looms large as a battleground, a

charged territory whose constantly shifting borders put into question the very categories of nature and culture. Images of strife, of the urge to conquer and divide the subject into mutually exclusive categories, abound as a reminder of our Cartesian heritage even as this body is reformulated in fulfilment of its new theoretical role. The Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti describes the body in the Enlightenment scheme of subjectivity as "being the sign of animal-like, pre-rational susceptibility..." Thus the body becomes this embattled site for the "combat between reason and its Others." The stake of this combat, as she says, "is the mastery of the territory that is body."³ Not surprisingly, women have been eager to escape this territory to which they have been traditionally condemned and have come to represent. For if they remain in the realm of body they are without reason, and thus they are without voice in a system that equates reason with knowledge - or at least their voices will not be understood, or, worse still, like Cassandra's, they will not be heard at all.

In her article entitled, "**Corpus delicti: The Body at the Scene of Writing**," Nicki Kirby suggests that feminism has refused the anatomical body, this "natural" body, for fear that its "ineluctable immediacy will leave us no space for change, no chance to be otherwise, no place from which to engender a different future."⁴ Nevertheless, she pictures the border between the mind/body or nature/culture

split as one that can no longer be secured. Kirby suggests that it is this instability of categories which offers a positive space where new conceptions of the body might be negotiated. Perhaps this is the field of negotiation symbolized by Donna Haraway's cyborg who "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities." ⁵ However, because this border remains not only intact symbolically, but heavily defended through its cultural and discursive representations, it presents a significant challenge. Thus Kirby states: "Feminism needs courage to mount even quite small and futile reconnaissance missions across that border. And any exchange between the mind and body will demand explanation, a minimal reassurance that incursions into the body's foreign spaces will be temporary and provisional, a "tactical" or "strategic" necessity that justifies the risks." ⁶

Recalling Jane Gallop's invocation of "thinking through the body" which introduced this thesis, this chapter is devoted to considering the recent work of two feminist theorists who evaluate from divergent positions the French poststructuralist thought which has been so influential to both feminism and postmodernism. There are of course numerous responses from feminist theorists to the alliance of feminism and postmodernism. Because in both texts to be discussed the authors have embarked on book-length studies of the significance and use of poststructuralist theory for

feminists, they are presented here by way of introducing debates surrounding feminism and postmodernism as they are implicated in new formulations of the body by feminist artists and theorists alike.

In her book Patterns of Dissonance, Rosi Braidotti examines the crisis of the modern subject as one that creates a space for re-thinking the corporeal roots of subjectivity and (sharing Alice Jardine's concept of "gynesis") for the recasting of Western metaphysics in a manner that allows for the recovery of a "complex female subjectivity from the oblivion of history and partly invented out of the practices of the present." ⁷ As she traces their paths, Braidotti locates a "positivity of difference" in feminist theory and contemporary French philosophy.

In contrast, in her recent book Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism, Canadian Political Scientist and feminist theorist Somer Brodribb claims that rather than breaking with deeply entrenched Cartesian principles, the trope of the feminine in postmodernist thought only thinly covers the deep roots of a rationalist, masculinist bias lurking beneath the surface. Rephrasing Frederic Jameson, she describes postmodernism as the "cultural capital of late patriarchy." ⁸ Brodribb is thus profoundly sceptical of its amenability to an embodied feminism. Given the centrality of the body in recent art and

theory, and its vexed position in feminist art practice as outlined thus far, the object of this chapter will be to locate a postmodernist body in terms of what it might or might not have to offer for a "third wave" of feminist practice.

* * * * * * *

II : Negotiating the Void: Patterns of Dissonance

"The epoch of modernity, seen in terms of the crisis of the paternal metaphor, also implies that a new emphasis is placed on the structure of female sexuality, on the woman's body as the maternal site of origin. The revolution of the feminine thus defined is an effect of the malaise which affects the paternal metaphor, the law of the father. The proliferation of discourses about the mother's body and female sexuality is symptomatic of the crisis of the masculine social contract and its self-legitimizing discourses. The feminine body is the subtext of the major theoretical confrontations in modern discourse." ⁹

Rosi Braidotti uses "dissonance" as a metaphor for the parallel but never quite "in tune" discourses of crisis in philosophical modernity and feminist theories of subjectivity: in other words, without collapsing one into

the other, a simplification which inevitably subsumes feminist theory, enfolding it in the discourses of poststructuralist postmodernism, Braidotti attempts to articulate the development of feminist theory in terms of woman's emergence as a subject of enunciation.¹⁰ In her view, this process has complex political and historical origins not entirely dependent on the opportunities presented by the recent decline - or void, as Braidotti pictures it - of the classical masculine subject in discourse. Rather than being wholly bound to one another, the two are contingent; together they produce a pattern, a contrapuntal relationship rather than one of harmonized voices. Thus Braidotti recognizes not only that in times of crisis "every culture tends to turn to its "others'," but also that those "others," in this case feminist theory and practice, may instigate the crisis.¹¹ Or, as she says: "The gender specific analysis of the feminists splits open the complicity between the dominant notion of "subjectivity" and the image of triumphant masculinity."¹² The same might be said of the surge of feminist art activity in the seventies and eighties, and the increasing, sometimes militant, presence of women in the art scene.

Like Gallop, Braidotti resurrects Rich's phrase, "thinking through the body," noting the corporeal origins of all knowledge and the emphasis that psychoanalysis has traditionally put on the significance of bodily pleasures

and prohibitions to formations of the self. Acknowledging the corporeal origins of knowledge results, axiomatically, in an acknowledgement of the limits of rational thought. By insisting on the subject of the unconscious, Braidotti claims that psychoanalysis recognizes "the libidinal, bodily roots of intelligence and accepts the partiality of (his/her) modes of thinking." ¹³ In her opinion this is the contribution of psychoanalysis to the crisis of the theoretical, intellectual and cultural role of western philosophy in constructing and supporting the concept of the rational subject. And this crisis, according to Braidotti, is what accounts for a resurgence of interest in the body and the feminine.

This new emphasis on the corporeal is assessed by her, firstly, in poststructuralist texts by male authors. One may of course be suspicious of, for example, Deleuze's "becoming woman" or "body without organs" (indeed Braidotti is), even though these are figurative rather than literal terms. The point is that if, as Braidotti claims, theory is itself creative, a way of conceptualizing experience, then the "void" left by the disintegration of the rational subject in philosophy, a void being actively filled by the body and the feminine, is a place where women, too, may have some creative play. And a re-reading of Derrida and Deleuze has value precisely because as Alice Jardine has pointed out in • her study of them: "Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze...

launched their very different subversions of both the Dialectic and Oedipus by taking Nature and Culture, Identity and Difference, out of contradiction." ¹⁴

It is almost as if Braidotti is calling (like Carol Laing did in terms of the tradition of painting) for women to take their place in philosophy, to make it different even as it looks toward the feminine in order to revitalize itself and claim a new place for the masculine. ¹⁵ The question which Braidotti poses - "what for women are the implications of the fact that the corporeality of being has been put onto the theoretical agenda?" ¹⁶ - is also, intrinsically, a call to break the essentialist/anti-essentialist knot (and its insidious dualism) at the centre of feminist theories of subjectivity and the body.

Braidotti concentrates on the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze which together, but in different ways, constitutes a decisive shift away from the psychoanalytic model of the subject, a model that, as we have seen, dominated feminist theories of subjectivity well into the eighties. In analyzing sexuality as a product of a complex web of social and institutional systems into which the bodily subject enters as an object of knowledge and in which the body itself becomes the locus for the exercise of control, Foucault replaces a concept of the subject as split between conscious and unconscious with one of the "micro-physics" of power operating multiply on the body and in

discourse to produce knowledge. Thus, using the "repressive hypothesis," he mounts his critique of psychoanalysis to expose this "science" as yet another example of the confessional impulse and its institutionalization of essentially normative motives.¹⁷

The major problem in Foucault's work from a feminist perspective is, as many others have noted, the lack of recognition of gender differences. As Braidotti comments: "the fact that the notion of power which Foucault develops rests on a masculine view of the body (and its power effects), constitutes not so much a temporary amnesia as a flaw in his articulation of politics with the materiality of the body."¹⁸ Of the "docile bodies" produced in an epistemic shift traced by Foucault through transformations in the political, social and economic systems of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the female body is surely prominent among them. The "state of consciousness and permanent visibility"¹⁹ which Foucault describes as being achieved in the panopticon, might just as easily describe how woman conceives of her femininity in a patriarchal society. Maintaining this femininity becomes a form of self-surveillance - the production of one gender in the interests of another, as theories of the male-invested scopophilic gaze would have it - and precisely the sort of internalization of disciplinary power that Foucault (...and

Martha Rosler's videotape Statistics of a Citizen, etc.) speaks of. ²⁰

In her discussion of Jacques Derrida's work, Braidotti emphasizes how he has turned the symbolic absence of the feminine in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory into a strength, a subversive presence. Thus Derrida's concept of "*écriture*" in fact uses woman as a philosophical figure for working against the "truth" of the unitary subject. Working to reveal what has been suppressed in the text, Derrida's deconstruction exposes the humanist concept of subjectivity as a masculine fantasy. But Braidotti points out that while Derrida "sexualizes" the practice of philosophy, the importance of the feminine as a place of philosophical enunciation still issues from the feminine conceived as "indeterminacy, oscillation, play of veils and simulacrum... given as no-where, the creative void at the heart of the will-to-know, the drive to theorize." ²¹ Hence there is a double bind: the feminine as a positive figure, a philosophical tool for reviving the lost power of philosophy as a discipline, yet the metaphors remain those of absence, of void - even if they clear a space for re-thinking our relation to language and truth.

Braidotti is not alone in pointing out Derrida's self-declared anti-feminism, the change of heart which occurs for him when faced with the material reality of real women - woman "writing herself" in feminist theory and practice.

Derrida begins by attacking male phallogocentrism, but when women attack this same problem they become his problem and he relegates them to the "place of phallocracy." For Braidotti, the outcome of this later work is to free "the philosopher, which he is, to a creative and phallus-free position, a "becoming-woman" of philosophy." ²² She continues: "The zero value of the feminine in the system of representation is confirmed; but in this instance, the feminine is used by the (male) thinker so as to avoid confronting the problem of women and their relation to truth, both of which have been declared fluid and indefinable." ²³ As she does throughout her book, Braidotti attempts to salvage what might be useful to feminists in the work of Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze (who, unlike the other two, has yet to inspire a veritable feminist industry around his work) while underscoring the gulf that remains between theory and practice or between the production of knowledge and its incorporation of the material circumstances of femininity.

Deleuze concentrates on the "other," on difference as a structural necessity of logocentrism. For Deleuze, women are one of several minorities essential to a critique of dialectical dualism. What, then, can one make of Deleuze's "body without organs"? Emptied of its insides, the body becomes surface, an exteriority which is a cultural rather than a "natural" material condition. If, as Braidotti

states, Deleuze's bodies "conceal no secret sign of representation, they are rather outward-looking and mobile, multi-functional and not coded by one transcendental signifier (the phallus)," they offer a new way of theoretically conceiving the body that reaches beyond, for example, the work feminists have done on "images of women," work based on the psychoanalytic model of the fetishized female body and its role in masculine disavowal of loss (castration). Deleuze's "body without organs" is, then, the opposite of the anatomically encoded body of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is, instead, an imageless body, a body in flux and without borders, thus a body which is not defined by its position as "other" to mind... "The BWO (sic.) is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the fantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole. Psychoanalysis does the opposite: it translates everything into phantasies, it converts everything into phantasy. It royally botches the real, because it botches the BWO." ²⁴

The transparent Deleuzian body is a "desiring machine" caught up in dynamic interaction between libidinal forces and social relations which, taking up from Foucault, is both receptive and productive of power. These are heady thoughts for, as Braidotti states, "If they became desiring machines, women would be subversive, for these machines, although as yet undefined, nonetheless already open up the possibility

of a new humanity which would function according to the model of free, positive desire." ²⁵

The problem with the Deleuzian model of the body is that it suggests (as does the early work of Foucault) a gender-free sexuality. Braidotti is again concerned about the implications of this sort of disembodiment for women, asking ... "to the extent that it bears no connection to the struggles, the experience, the discursivity of real-life women, what good is it for feminist practice?" She continues: "Can feminists at this point in their history of collective struggles aimed at redefining subjectivity, actually afford to let go of their sex-specific forms of political agency?" ²⁶ Nevertheless Braidotti makes it clear that both Foucault and Deleuze posit the body as the field of politics and power. Despite the insouciance of these male authors with regard to the issue of gender, the recognition of power relations at the base of the institution of sexuality and therefore of the far-from-natural social order of the sexes, has been indispensable to feminist theory and politics. Thus, in Braidotti's reading, feminists can use the poststructuralist philosophers to re-think feminist theory despite the fact that in many respects the recurrent figure of woman points to femininity becoming the cure for a besieged masculine subjectivity.

Braidotti's book is punctuated at mid-point by a reassessment of second-wave feminism in which she reminds

the reader of the passion and rage that typified the women's movement of the seventies, motivated as it was by a deep sense of social injustice. In her analysis of a feminist genealogy, Braidotti is attentive to the origins of the essentialist/anti-essentialist struggle in feminist theory, noting that "this phase of feminism underlined that women's difference is constructed on the basis of the signifying position that man has monopolized."²⁷ The perpetuation of a binary logic in this approach emerges as a major problematic for the next decade of feminist theory because, in Braidotti's words, "The split between nature and culture is therefore interpreted by feminists in terms of a veritable dichotomy between the social and the biological. Clearly, in this sort of framework, any reference to biology or anatomy, or to the body as site of differences, cannot be accepted as a political feminist stance."²⁸ This statement seems to express rather succinctly a similar dead-lock in feminist art practice which was illustrated by the polarized positions of Judy Chicago's and Mary Kelly's work in chapter 1. Moreover, it makes clear the reasons for initial difficulties in the reception of the concept of "**écriture féminine**" when a "positivity of difference" was of little interest to North American feminists who had been campaigning on the equality front or, for that matter, to psychoanalytic feminism for which the female body was too

culturally encoded to risk its re-entry into theory as a pervasive and disruptive figure.

The remainder of Braidotti's book is devoted to exploring the concept of the subject as a bio-cultural being, as introduced in Foucault and Deleuze. She does this, however, by turning to French feminisms, in particular the work of Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, dismissing charges of essentialism against them, stating: "I think it crucial to see that the "body" in question in the "**écriture féminine**" movement is not a natural, biologically determined body, but rather a cultural artifact that carries a whole history, a memory of coding and conditioning." ²⁹ She also reads them for their radical, passionate, ethical and often irreverent refusal of the "master's texts." Indeed, a tone typical of the late sixties is in some ways reincarnated in utopian texts such as Cixous's "**The Laugh of the Medusa**" or in the complex and massive dismantling of the premises of Western thought that Irigaray undertakes in Speculum of the Other Woman, but with an essential difference: these writers are not emitting pre-theoretical whimpers, instead their cry is amplified in an energetic discharging of well-learned theoretical lessons and their transformation into a means of becoming that attempts to circumvent the dualisms of a phallic economy by proposing multiplicity as a conceptual framework for a bodily subjectivity.

The contribution that Braidotti's book makes is that without advocating a wholesale refusal of the theoretical work that has been done by feminists employing the tools provided by poststructuralist (male) philosophers, she insists on the differences - the dissonances - between a crisis in legitimation of the rational subject and concurrent work by feminists on subjectivity borne not of their sense of loss, but of what there was to be gained. Her treatment of Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze however acknowledges the fact that rather than lamenting the disintegration of the rational subject, they seem eager to take the opportunity to formulate new concepts of subjectivity, and it is in this spirit that their use for feminist theory is understood. Braidotti's position, then, is neither a rejection of the "master" discourses nor an unqualified embracing of them. Rather she is concerned that feminist theory remain conscious of its own particular history and of what has in the past been forfeited for political reasons (an incorporated feminine subjectivity) as an urgent theoretical project with political implications for future feminisms.

* * * * *

Confronting the Abyss: Nothing Mat(t)ers

Somer Brodribb prefaces her book Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism with a letter to her mentor, feminist political theorist Mary O'Brien, a gesture which seals her filial association to a theoretical mother rather than a father. The following is an excerpt from that letter which describes her reaction to the 1985 exhibition "**Les Immatériaux**," organized by Jean-François Lyotard for the Centre Georges Pompidou (Beaubourg) in Paris:

"Just saw an exhibition showing in Paris right now called "**Les Immatériaux**" (the immaterials): appropriate name for its abstract tyranny: the talking heads of Lacanian structuralism are finally disembodied. In fact, the exhibition leads through a birth tunnel and then spills you into a theatre of the non-body for a period of Sartrean anguish and nothingness, and the appropriation of the birth process for death by means of slides and voices from genetic experimentation. A screen shows a huge pregnant belly (no other parts of the woman are visible) and a wall traces the various kinds of paternal, nuclear affiliation the new reproductive materials afford..." ³⁰

While Brodribb has more sympathy for Braidotti's complex analysis of the relations between poststructuralist philosophy and feminist theory than, for example, the work of Jane Flax or Nancy Fraser, she is generally highly

critical of what she calls the "Adam's rib approach," in which male philosophers are tacitly accepted as authoritative. She states: "There is an identity politics to feminist poststructuralism: an identification with the (white) male text." ³¹ Significantly, she asks: "Are not the works of women and feminists: Black, lesbian, Jewish, working-class, Third World, Native - a more significant source for understanding difference and otherness than the writings of white, western men?" ³² Thus Brodribb eschews any facile absorption of feminism in postmodernism and condemns the appearance of the feminine in the work of authors such as Derrida and Deleuze as a mere ruse for maintaining a mind (and a concept of the body) which is thoroughly masculine. Jane Gallop's often quoted and witty image of cross-dressing describes this predicament for the feminist theorist rather aptly: "The female postmodernist thinker finds herself in the dilemma of trying to be like Daddy who is trying to be a woman. The double-cross is intriguing and even fun, but also troubling if one suspects that it is the father's last ruse to seduce the daughter and retain her respect, the very respect that legitimized the father's rule." ³³

Like Braidotti, Brodribb draws attention to the coincidence of the death of meaning and the subject proclaimed by postmodernism with that of feminist critiques of the ideological and material control of women. While

giving ample treatment to the work of Foucault and Derrida, Brodribb traces the roots of poststructuralist thought to Levi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology and Sartrean existentialism. Claiming that these latter, writing in the post-World War II period, differ in their mood before the "void" in that for Sartre death is the absurdity against which life is caught up in an anguished resistance and for Levi-Strauss the universal systems of "life," mythology and kinship, are scientifically analyzable but immutable, she maintains that both promote nihilist philosophies.

Her criticism of Foucault, too, is grounded in the inherent nihilism of power/knowledge: "discourse becomes reified power which is also anonymous, absent, total, omnipresent, and supreme, and something which is irresistible" ³⁴ Her argument centres on the incompatibility of such a theory with feminism understood as resistance, and thus she shares Edward Said's critique of the virtual occlusion of resistance within the self-generating nature of power delineated by Foucault. ³⁵ As we shall see in the next chapter, other feminists, most notably Jana Sawicki, are less convinced of this closure in Foucault's project.

As for Lyotard, Brodribb's opening critique of Les Immatériaux amply expresses her disdain for the technological optimism that inspired his visions of open data banks and the global "delegitimation" of the grand

narratives of the Enlightenment. (To be fair, Lyotard is also highly aware of the uses of science and technology as tools of epistemic terrorism and social control.)³⁶ From the descriptions that the catalogue affords, the exhibition was perhaps typical of its genre, a genre explored by the international collective "Experiments in Art and Technology" (E.A.T., 1967) almost twenty years earlier: new technologies are seen as inspirational tools for artists who, in turn, give us a new vision of ourselves. And because this vision comes from the (mystified) "creative" individual (and one suspects that this includes Lyotard, the curator/theorist) it is somehow more palatable, perhaps because technology is demonstrated to be malleable, and more personal, than its often oppressive quotidian manifestations.

This is Ihab Hassan's description of the exhibition as quoted by Brodribb: "Walking through this (almost) dematerialized electronic environment - a space of invisible codes, artistic concepts, inaudible whispers - the visitor senses himself also disappear into disembodied sensations, states of mind. The semiotic model replaces the model of matter and/or spirit. We are left only with forms of energy and their flux of transactions, with *Les Immatériaux*."³⁷ Similar themes are of course taken up again, almost a decade later, in the work currently being done with virtual reality and computer imaging. But Brodribb is not convinced that body/mind binarism is so easily overcome by dematerializing

the body. Toward the end of her book she states: "In postmodern genesis, the word (sic.) is absolute through **Tekné**. Its matrix is the indeterminacy of life and death, the exchangeability of subjects, the casual commercialization of human material and its rigid scientific control." ³⁸ Thus for Brodribb the condition underlying Lyotard's postmodernism is not just a freedom from the grand narratives, but a freedom from matter - a rather too familiar Cartesian theme. Clearly she is no fan of the cyborg body.

A common thread in the work of both Braidotti and Brodribb is the unrecognized or under-rated importance of gender and the problematic trope of the feminine in the work of the poststructuralist philosophers, and the contradictions that their positions engage if taken up too enthusiastically by feminist theorists at a time when an embodied feminine subjectivity has yet to be satisfactorily articulated. Poststructuralist re-readings of history, politics and culture are seen as significantly flawed by their blindness to these omissions and misrepresentations. Thus they offer potentially poisoned fruit for feminist thought.

In their essay "**Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism**," Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson note how feminist theory of the seventies was caught in its own production of meta-

narratives: mothering, sexuality and reproduction tended to be treated in universalistic, heterosexual terms that failed to take into account changing family arrangements or different cultural interpretations of these aspects of women's lives, not to mention the great variation with which these are experienced depending on race and class. Fraser and Nicholson claim that as the middle class heterosexual values of the white women responsible for the beginnings of the "second wave" have been challenged by lesbians, women of colour and working class women, so has feminist theory moved away from these generalizing tendencies to consider "feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity - treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation." ³⁹

Although less attentive than Brodribb to these important nuances and their displacement of the discourse of sexual difference, Braidotti in the end advocates a more flexible position than Brodribb, one that recognizes that if a new, embodied feminine subjectivity remains to be worked on by feminists, the task must take into account reconstruction as well as deconstruction. It is not by ignoring or condemning the voices of the other half that their discourse will disappear or fail to hold sway. Nevertheless, as Brodribb suggests throughout her book, listening to the voices, and reading the texts, of those

from crucial and subjugated areas of difference other than gender, offers a richer and less dichotomized basis from which to re-think totalizing fictions, whether humanist or feminist.

The danger of a vehemently anti-rationalist position, one that Brodribb tends to fall into more easily, however, is that, as Christine Di Stefano has noted, "Anti-rationalism attempts to revalorize the feminine, with the nasty effect of failing to criticize it."⁴⁰ What a concept of differences within difference (with its refusal to favour any particular form of difference) provides is perhaps that complex subjectivity mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: not a humanistic one, not the split subject of psychoanalysis caught between the unconscious and the conscious, nor a subjectivity devoid of bodily specificity, but an embodied subjectivity "partly recovered from the oblivion of history and partly invented out of practices in the present."⁴¹

NOTES

1. Jardine, Gynesis, 155.
2. Hal Foster, ed., "Of Bodies and Technology," Discussions in Contemporary Culture (Seattle: Bay Press & DIA, 1987) 167-168.
3. Rosi Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1991) 52.

4. Nicki Kirby, "**Corpus delicti: The Body at the Scene of Writing**," Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces, eds. Roslyn Diprose, and Robyn Ferrell (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991) 95.
5. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Simians, Cyborgs, and Women (New York: Routledge, 1991) 149-182.
6. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, 154.
7. Foster, Discussions, 168.
8. Somer Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism (North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1992) 21.
9. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 17.
10. I have used the terms "philosophical modernity," "poststructuralism" and "postmodernism" somewhat interchangeably, for as Alice Jardine points out in her book Gynesis, which covers similar territory to Braidotti's Patterns of Dissonance, the majority of European writers tend to consider the crisis of the humanist subject as modernism in extremis, rather than as a definitive sign of the end of modernism. In North America this crisis is generally referred to as "post"-modernism. Similarly poststructuralism is generally used to refer to theories of the crisis of the rational subject expounded primarily by the french authors, both male and female, that Braidotti discusses.
11. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 11.
12. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 9.
13. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 35.
14. Jardine, Gynesis, 127.
15. Braidotti has vehemently and wittily criticized the lack of inquiry into masculinity, the uses men have made of the work that feminists have done on subjectivity in her article "With my Looks and your Brains," Men in Feminism, eds. Alice Jardine, and Paul Smith.
16. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 40.

17. This is a massively simplified version of the work which Foucault does principally in Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality, Part 1.
18. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 95.
19. Alan Sheridan, trans., Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, by Michel Foucault (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 228.
20. For a more detailed analysis of the disciplined female body in Foucauldian terms see: Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 61-86.
21. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 101.
22. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 105.
23. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 103.
24. Brian Massumi, trans., A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, by Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 151.
25. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 117.
26. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 120.
27. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 128.
28. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 28.
29. Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, 243.
30. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, XIII.
31. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, XXVI.
32. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, XXIII.
33. Gallop, Thinking Through, 100.
34. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, 51.
35. "The disturbing circularity of Foucault's theory of power is a form of theoretical overtotalization superficially more difficult to resist because, unlike many others, it is formulated, re-formulated, and

borrowed for use in what seem to be historically documented situations." Edward Said, "Travelling Theory," The World, the Text and the Critic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 246.

36. For the sake of argument, Brodribb's reading of Lyotard is a necessarily partial one, however other feminists have recognized, for example, his emphasis on the incommensurability of language with experience and his advocacy of local and context-specific criteria that have become so important not only to feminism but to post-colonial discourse. For a detailed feminist discussion of Lyotard's position see Selya Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard," Feminism/Postmodernism, Linda J. Nicholson, 107-132.
37. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, 123, quoting Ihab Hassan The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture (Ohio State University Press, 1987) 228.
38. Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers, 126.
39. Nancy Fraser & Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," Feminism/Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1990) 121.
40. Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism," Feminism/Postmodernism, Nancy Fraser, and Linda J. Nicholson, 72.
41. Foster, Discussions, 168.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

THREE CORPOREAL SITES

"Whether in analytic philosophy, contemporary hermeneutics, or French structuralism, the paradigm of language has replaced the paradigm of consciousness... The subject is replaced by a system of structures, oppositions, and **"differences"** which, to be intelligible, need not be viewed as products of a living subjectivity at all." ¹

The statement by Seyla Benhabib quoted above may be considered not only in relation to changing concepts of subjectivity within postmodernity, but to their impact on the assimilation of the body in discourse. As the body, too, is understood in discursive terms, any claims to "truth" that its ontological status may have become questionable. Over the past decade, feminist theories and practices have shifted attention from the politics of experience and the construction of subjectivity within a psychoanalytic model of sexual difference toward recognition of a multiplicity of differences and an understanding of experience that no longer assumes a gendered universality.

The question of living and thinking in a body that, to paraphrase Benhabib, may not be the product of a living

subjectivity is the challenging theoretical territory that Rosi Braidotti ventures into in Patterns of Dissonance. As the humanist rational subject is deconstructed and the body becomes a discursive figure, feminist theorists are obliged to reconsider the female body in ways that attempt to surmount the essentialist\anti-essentialist dichotomies that have prevented its satisfactory theorization in the past. Jane Gallop alludes to this theoretical challenge in Thinking Through the Body when she claims: "Locating thinking in the body is also, in another vocabulary, locating thinking in a subject in history. To read for and affirm confusion, contradiction (sic.) is to insist on thinking in the body in history. Those confusions mark the sites where thinking is literally knotted to the subject's historical and material place." ²

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Thus far, this thesis has addressed the body in women's art practice in the historical context of feminist and postmodernist theory. This final chapter is devoted to looking more closely at recent work in which the body is a constant presence. The work of three contemporary Canadian artists will be addressed within a hypothetical mapping of three corporeal sites: the socio-cultural, the epistemological and the psycho-sexual. There is little

resemblance, either materially or conceptually, in the art of Jana Sterbak, Nell Tenhaaf and Kati Campbell, yet their practice may generally be considered postmodernist in that they employ several media and their works usually consist of diverse elements, both wall-related and sculptural. One common feature, however, is their reference to or direct use of technology - from remote control units, heat sensors and hardware used in scientific experiments, to photographically produced and interactive computer-based imagery.

In her study of feminist literary style, Helena Michie claims that attempts to either subvert existing cultural codes and taboos or to resurrect a literal, experiential body, have produced "a string of representational corpses." ³ The work to be examined in this chapter moves away from similar impasses in representational strategies employed by feminist artists, proposing a reactivated body that is a field of power, one where conflicting and sometimes confusing desires intersect, where borders erected between mind and matter are irrevocably opened and where the fundamental differences between self and other are played out continuously. In each case, a material language derived from, or employing, technological apparatuses introduces a dispersed and multi-layered corporeal rhetoric. The three corporeal sites proposed in the following analysis - the socio-cultural, the epistemological and the psycho-sexual - each fundamentally imply a reconfiguration of subjectivity

that is, in Rosi Braidotti's words, a "new form of bodily materiality, a sex-specific reading of the bodily self." 4

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Jana Sterbak

Among Jana Sterbak's first works was a series of small sculptures entitled Measuring Tape Cones (1979). [fig. 15] These pieces, made with dressmakers' measuring tapes, incorporated a certain minimalist economy of means and form. And they made use of standardized manufactured materials, but with the important difference that their ephemeral quality and intimate scale recalled a performative corporeal gesture, the rolling of the tape around the finger. They were later reincarnated in her 1988 Standard Lives [fig. 16], where the situation is reversed: the found object in this instance becomes a commercially reproduced replica under the artist's supervision.

This measuring tape does not suggest literal form or palpable bodies, rather it is a measure of social positioning and, more oppressively, of standards of normalcy that obscure the particularities of individual lives. A repertoire of generic images of men and women taken from a standard designer's graphics catalogue indexes neither shape nor volume, but the passage of human lives. Life according

to this standard is a series of precisely delineated stages, a progression in which the distinctions between young and old, domestic and public, and male and female, are rendered absolute. The ideal form inscribed on this measure translates into a rolling cast of stereotypes: woman scrubbing the floor, man with a briefcase, wedding portrait, proud parents contemplating their offspring, smiling senior couple and so on. They mark time, their representations remain immobile, and their images are repeated with greater frequency along the tape which performs as a fantasy of, rather than an instrument for, the perfect fit.

The body in Sterbak's work is fragmentary, implied rather than wholly stated. In fact, one could say the body is only present in her work through a play of absence. The physical reality of the body - its transience, its fragility, its palpable presence - is nevertheless invoked in ways that also intimate less tangible but equally present "states of being" ⁵ - the emotions, the intellect, sexual desire and identity, as well as the powerfully inscribed social values related to gender and age. The body is thus considered as a dense network of physical memories, psychological associations and cultural connotations. For Sterbak it is frequently a violated body and, in turn, one that has the potential to violate.

The shift in focus marked by Sterbak's measuring tapes provides a measure, then, of her development of a material

and conceptual language in which the body begins to figure across the vicissitudes of its gendered historical and cultural construction, as well as through a discourse of desire spoken on the level of involuntary bodily sensations and processes. Sterbak's body alternates between the ontological and the discursive. It is evoked as a palpable, mortal condition but also as a material metaphor for betrayal, transitory desires and involuntary psychological states. And it is always strategically wedged between its socio-cultural status as a sign and an irrepressible capacity to subvert such codification.

The look of the scientific laboratory, one where experiments are carried out on human subjects, recurs in Sterbak's work, often in ways that are profoundly disconcerting, even hostile. For example, Sterbak's first "dress" piece, "I want you to feel the way I do" (1985) [fig. 17], may be considered as both a garment and a cage. It simultaneously embodies desire and surrender, with all the ambivalence that these fundamental states generate. While the viewer is initially confronted at the level of physical sensation, other sorts of pain soon come to mind. As one approaches it through a darkened room, a raw electrical element woven around the torso, and resembling barbed wire, begins to heat up until it glows red hot. This visible process is analogous to the consuming passion, burning desire, wounded pride and flaming rage that fuel the

vengeful sentiments expressed in an accompanying text. The narrative component of "I want you to feel the way I do..." tells of a failed relationship, disillusionment and loss of identity. (The work was inspired by the mythical story of Medea who was jilted by Jason. As a wedding gift, Medea presented his new wife with a dress that burst into flames and consumed her as soon as she donned it.) The electric element, while attracting with its heat and light, becomes a warning signal, ultimately repelling those who come too close.

Similarly, the Seduction Couch (1987-1988) [fig. 18] unites several themes in Sterbak's work: the disturbing displacement of social and visual conventions, the uneasy linking of attraction and repulsion, the historical and cultural status of the female body, and the disjunctive relationship of rational, scientific models and irrational acts. Seduction Couch is one of many works in which Sterbak examines the history of women's roles and social position. She has quoted etymological definitions of the words boudoir and drawing room in several works from embroideries to public billboards.

The **chaise longue** is the centre piece of the boudoir. Now associated with the **frisson** of illicit sexual relations, the boudoir was historically a woman's sanctuary, a place to withdraw from her conjugal relations. It was also a place where she wielded power denied in other contexts. This space

in which she could escape her sexual possession, was, interestingly, a place where the female intellect reigned: the tradition of the salon began with the eighteenth-century French noblewoman holding court in her boudoir. It was an important "behind the scenes" site of power in other ways, too, for extra-marital liaisons were the vehicle through which the noblewoman often exercised control beyond the domestic sphere, both in the affairs she conducted and the ones she arranged.

Sterbak's Seduction Couch evolved in this context of her interest in the history of architectural sites of women's social positioning, their function in curtailing her power and, conversely, her subversive use of them. But the Seduction Couch reproduces a familiar scene: it alludes to the staging of the female body throughout the history of Western painting. Jacques Louis David's Madame Recamier (1748), Ingre's Grand Odalisque, painted not long after the fall of the **ancien regime**, and Manet's Olympia (1863) are only a few of the images that come to mind. The set-up of the seduction couch is similarly calculated to engage the gaze. However there is no body, except the one that is formed in our minds. Instead it is the scene itself that seduces, inviting our transgression and then rebuffing us with a mild shock, just enough to send us back into our own flesh.

The couch, a support for the reclining body, is in this case a cold and resistant steel plinth. Dramatic lighting casts a veil-like shadow of the perforated metal onto the wall behind, creating the effect of drapery and recalling the compositional conventions of classical nudes. At the foot of the couch, a Van de Graaf generator (a laboratory instrument for experiments with electrostatic energy) crackles at regular intervals, like a staccato accompaniment to an invisible performer. As the generator attracts and harnesses electrostatic energy from the atmosphere, a charge builds up and eventually a blue bolt of electricity leaps the gap between the generator and the couch. The spectator thus becomes aware of being implicated in an electrically charged field and may be tempted to test his or her resistance by touching the couch.

The generator's robot-like re-enactment of the electrostatic charge and the clinical connotations of the stainless steel couch lend an ominous air to this installation. Whether a prop for a model or a casting couch, this scene signals a danger zone in which representations of femininity are reproduced. In addition, the **chaise longue** is the quintessential symbol for Freudian analysis, the site of the "talking cure." Another body - that of the hysteric whose silenced sexuality speaks a somatic language of desires denied and, above all, misread. Like Sterbak's first dress ("I want you to feel..." etc.) Seduction Couch

suggests the risks of intimacy, all the while drawing one nearer.

In 1987 Sterbak also made her second and perhaps most infamous dress, Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic. This is a garment that is also a body, for it is made from over one hundred pounds of raw meat. [fig. 19] Photographs of the dress worn by a model striking conventional fashion poses, though clearly struggling under the dress's weight, emphasize the tyranny of fashion while giving the dress a perversely luxurious allure. [fig. 20] But the "flesh dress" literally turns the seamless image of fashion illustrations and the impossible goal of eternal youth inside out. There is, after all, no body more fiercely condemned by the aging process than that of woman. When it comes to femininity, this dress reveals fashion, a primary social sign of class, gender and sexual mores, to be a grotesque masquerade.

The title of this work suggests further readings as does its insistent presence. The dress is uncomfortably near to life, though it is dead. In the course of its exhibition, it shrinks imperceptibly, day by day, oozing juices, emitting an increasingly foul odour and eventually shrivelling into a leathery skin, or perhaps one should say a "second skin," which is, after all, the colloquial description of the ideal garment. Thus the process of decomposition inherent to the "flesh dress" is also one of disrobing mortality, of laying it bare. This theme is

initially alluded to in the title's art-historical reference to vanity paintings - a popular still-life genre in 17th century Dutch art in which the iconography includes, among other things, food, richly detailed interior decoration, candles, mirrors, skulls and timepieces - a collective symbolism for the brevity of mortal life and the transitory nature of the pleasures of the flesh or material possessions. These images were composed as warnings against the corruption brought about by earthly indulgences and as an encouragement to spiritual aspirations with their promise of another life.

Though the source of inspiration is not the puritanical Christianity of Reformation Holland, the anorectic, also cited in the title of this work, is known to seek the spiritual ecstasies resulting from a radical denial of the body through self-imposed starvation.⁶ She is both successful in stopping the clock (the "disease" is known to begin most frequently in puberty and impedes the development of secondary fat layers as well as the menstrual cycle) and uncommonly victorious in her struggle with the unruly flesh, but often with tragic results. As an example of the cultural investment in feminine appearances, the anorectic creates an exaggerated image of the idealized thin female body, but one which has gone awry. Like the "flesh dress," her presence is profoundly unsettling.

In 1989 Sterbak returned once again to the theme of the dress. With her motorized crinolines, Remote Control 1 & 11 [fig. 21], she further articulated the dialogue of desire and power that informs her oeuvre. Modelled after the imposing hoop crinolines of the 1850's, these larger-than-life metal structures have none of the crude facture or elementary technology of her first dress. Rather, this is a sleek machine that allows the occupant to tower ominously over those around her and to manoeuvre herself silently around the room with the touch of a button. But the controls may also be given to someone else, leaving the occupant powerless to determine her own path or, more eerily, they may be set to guide the crinoline on a predetermined route.

Despite their threatening presence, the crinolines also evoke images of female socio-sexual restraint, even helplessness. Like the first dress, they suggest protective devices - in this case a symbolic enclosure around the woman's virtue - as well as acting as repressive impediments to physical and social freedom. When they are used in performances, a model is hoisted into a diaper-like sling with her feet left dangling several inches above the ground, suggesting women's social infantilization and political lack of agency. However, like all the implicitly feminist commentary in Sterbak's work, these pieces, too, resist any conceptual lapse into a litany of patriarchal oppression. Instead ambiguity and paradox, not to mention some wicked

humour, function to create mobility rather than fixity of meanings.

Formally the crinoline recalls a long history of reshaping women's bodies in an ideal image, and most notably one which both accentuates and conceals her sexuality. Thus themes initiated in Vanitas: Flesh Dress... etc. are here restated in a material idiom that is radically different. But ultimately Sterbak's crinolines are less about the vulnerability of the female body, both physically and culturally, than about possible strategies of resistance. In this regard it is note-worthy that the word crinoline was adopted by military terminology in this century to describe a net structure fitted around battleships for the purpose of protecting them from torpedo attacks.

Sterbak's crinolines are indeed machines with both offensive and defensive capacities. They fulfil the technological promise of extending and increasing the body's power and manoeuvrability. And, inevitably, they enter a feminist discourse of taking control over our bodies and our social interactions while signalling that we are always at risk of being socially and sexually on "remote control," that is, of being controlled by the desires of the other. Thus the use of technology also becomes a metaphor for the alternating relations of dependency and independence that are central to identity formation, and which are prefigured

in Sterbak's first dress piece, "I want you to feel the way I do."

Diana Nemiroff has lucidly summarized the corporeal genealogy that Sterbak's three dresses delineate. She states: "Remote Control is the third of the dresses that trace the outlines of an economy of desire introduced by the "I want" of the first dress, which was magical, as the second was animal and the last mechanical. Moving from the ontological to the social level, what they share as images of clothing is an intimate, yet transformatory, relationship to the body. In essence, this transformation involves the transition from the natural to the cultural state, from body to persona..." ⁷

In many respects Sterbak's dresses lend themselves to a Foucauldian reading, as they are both images of a docile, disciplined female body and of a rebellious, resistant refiguring of that body. As discussed in Chapter Two, some feminists have found fault with Foucault's schema of power/knowledge, its lack of attention to gender differences and its purported tendency to closure on the possibility of resistance. Others, such as Jana Sawicki, reclaim Foucault's work as an emancipatory project, finding liberating theoretical possibilities for feminists in a close reading of his contribution to poststructuralist thought. ⁸

The way issues of power and the female body are raised in Sterbak's work both restates and reinterprets the

cultural construction of femininity while emphasizing the presence of resistance, and the subversive use of the powers of desire. Where it exists in Sterbak's work, technology - whether simple or sophisticated - is an axis upon which power and desire are determined by action and reaction (the light-sensor controlled heating element, the cycles of the van de Graaf generator, the remote control unit etc.).

Jana Sawicki sees the historical aspect of Foucault's work as a positive critical method rather than a theory in itself.⁹ Coincidentally, the historical period referred to by Sterbak's crinolines, one when women's bodies and reproductive capacities became inscribed by the economics and politics of industrial capitalism, is also the one mined by Foucault in his writing of a "genealogy of the present." In Sterbak's work, too, history does not provide a passive background to the present. Rather, by quoting history she reactivates familiar cultural images and resurrects their origins, whether mythical, medical or artistic, calling attention to their transformed but continuing presence in contemporary politics of representation.

The women's bodies that Sterbak's dresses evoke are not only those of an oppressed "second sex": they also are those of the rebellious sorceress Medea, of the anorectic who, like the hysteric, refuses the patriarchal ruse of femininity even while being subjected to its representations, of the courtesan whose boudoir is a place

for the exchange of ideas and a chamber for political negotiations, and of the woman whose feminine appearances serve to make her even more threatening when she uses them to assume control. This is not to say, however, that her works merely underscore the stereotypical powers attributed to feminine wiles or "she who rocks the cradle." Rather Sterbak alludes to such intricate and "behind-the-scenes" venues of feminine power, playing upon their familiarity in ways that underline the shifting and unstable nature of power. Thus the body she proposes is, on one hand, Foucault's "inscribed surface of events..."¹⁰, but it is also, on the other, the Foucauldian body that Jana Sawicki recuperates for feminism in her study: one that takes into account the power/knowledge relations of "biopower," but one whose relation to power is neither fixed nor singular. This fluidity suggests another corporeal model, that of Deleuze's "desiring machine." The electric dress, "I want you to feel..." etc., is, after all, a sinister seduction machine, performing for the body in *absentia*. The body proposed in her last dress, Remote Control (crinoline), too, is a "body without organs," a machine that functions as a "field of immanence" of desire. Even when the machine is empty and motionless, its capacity to move in any direction, to put the occupant in a position to survey all that is around her and to clear a path toward the object of her desire, is implicit.

Nell Tenhaaf

As Foucault's historical analyses of medical perception (The Birth of the Clinic) and the penal institution (Discipline and Punish) demonstrate, the concept of the body as a machine is one that has developed over the last two centuries. But today another image of the body has begun to replace a mechanical one of causal relations and efficient cooperation between diverse parts and their functions. The body is, instead, increasingly conceived of as a cybernetic information system, one in which parts can be removed, exchanged or replaced, and, ideally, generated from microscopic corporeal material made more accessible through its computer imaging. Moreover, these possibilities suggest a body which need no longer remain subject to the autonomous ways of the flesh. Rather it is a body that may be constructed, vacated, re-inhabited and reshaped at will. This may appear to be a world of science fiction, but it is also not far from current scientific knowledge and technomedical possibilities.

The epistemological primacy of the visible - its witness to "truth," its role in legitimating discursive power (the "loquacious gaze"), and its subtle disciplinary transparency for which Bentham's panopticon becomes a metaphor - is stressed by Foucault. In today's "biotechnical universe," Rosi Braidotti sees this scopic drive as

"reaching a paroxysm - as if the basic principle of visibility has shifted into a mirage of absolute transparency." This is the Baudrillardian hyperreality "where representation has priority over that which is represented, it marks the triumph of the image over the represented object..." But in all this excessive representation, as Braidotti notes, the object - whether the body, the woman, or the feminine - ..."remains profoundly absent." ¹¹ Nell Tenhaaf addresses this epistemological legacy, the current power of bio-technology in re-shaping our conceptions of the body and its implications for an incorporated feminine subjectivity. She does so in ways that reflect upon the inextricable link between the body and subjectivity, and thus on the sexual politics of representation.

Unlike feminists who find themselves backed into essentialist positions when faced with the rationalist cultural hegemony of science and technology, Tenhaaf embraces these for their emancipatory potential, exploring sites of resistance from within their determinist discourses. She scavenges high-tech imagery from existing laboratory research, transforming her own drawings on the computer and combining the scientific and the personal to her own ends. Her use of interactive videodiscs and computer imaging constitutes a feminist critique of the ways that scientific knowledge has been constructed and used. Within

this critique she proposes alternative models of knowledge and subjectivity, visually rendering them in corporeal images that challenge the binary logic which continues to dominate the scientific ethos.

Implicit in Tenhaaf's use of computer generated imagery is the increasing presence of simulation in an image-saturated environment. And characteristic of computer imaging techniques is image fragmentation, mutation, speeded-up motion and shattered points of view - a visual analogue for the unfixed, de-centered postmodern subject proposed by poststructuralist theory. The indexical function of the photograph already thoroughly deconstructed in postmodern practices, is further undermined by Tenhaaf's manipulations. By presenting a world of simulation through quotation of the existing technological means used to venture into the deep structures of the living organism, Tenhaaf paradoxically creates a body that mimics the terrain of fantasy adventures in "inner space" described in the language of bio-medical research texts. Yet in the exploration of this deep body space, Tenhaaf suggests that technology may be engaged otherwise: not in its machine-body formulations but as a feminine site, another way of thinking through the body. As Tenhaaf states: "an assertion of corporeality in electronic space is also a struggle against historical absence."

As writers such as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway have analyzed, sex differences and gender issues are simultaneously used and ignored in the ostensibly objective realm of the bio-sciences. The profound social texts within scientific discourse have thus emerged as unassailable "facts" of a natural rather than a cultural order. Tenhaaf's work addresses this epistemological heritage, using contemporary manifestations of the body as visual surface and accentuating visuality as a paradigm of knowledge. Tenhaaf's more general interest in systems of knowledge and how they become reified in an age where information is itself a commodity led her to examine the ways the body has come to be understood within a language paradigm; that is, through the genetically coded structure of the DNA molecule. Computer "language," too, is a system of digital codes. Tenhaaf's use of computer imaging and interactive videodiscs thus highlights both the initial interpretation - the creation of a specialized language - that is performed to make information intelligible, accessible, and manipulable by the computer, and the subsequent inherent partiality of the choices offered to the user.

In her 1989 work Species Life, Tenhaaf makes reference to Nietzsche's "will to power" as the philosophical framework for modern science and technology. She counters his statement, "It is ever a question of a will to live; for life is merely a special case of the will to power....," with

Luce Irigaray's "And the one doesn't stir without the other. But we do not move together. When one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground..." Fundamentally different concepts of life, one based on individual will, the other relational and cooperative, are brought into confrontation.

Species Life is a three-part work that consists of four light-box units, each containing a series of images whose theme is the DNA molecule chain, its division and replication. On one wall, the upper unit shows the formation of the DNA spiral with the Nietzsche and Irigaray texts dispersed word-by-word, in their original languages, over the ladder-like bars that connect the endlessly spiralling DNA strands and the essential genetic information they carry. [fig. 22] Below this is a second series, separated into two light boxes - a division which mirrors the images they contain of a progressively divided, broken and mutated version of the original spiral above. The two texts are thus scattered into their individual components and drained of meaning as the words fall out of sequence.

On the adjacent wall is a fourth light box containing another sequence of images. [fig. 23] The first of these consists of a silhouetted male/female couple standing on the horizon holding hands. The landscape is barren, almost lunar. A simple graphic DNA chain snakes across the foreground of this primeval scene. In the next two frames

the Irigaray text is discursively superimposed on the image of the DNA chain. The fourth frame shows the couple again, but the scene is now illuminated to reveal the underlying forms of the DNA chain whose spiralling curves account for the gentle contours of the "earth." The last two frames of this unit show the Nietzsche text superimposed on the image of a breaking and then replicating DNA chain, intimating the deeply inscribed and self-perpetuating nature of Western philosophy and epistemology.

Formally, Species Life shares the aesthetic of back-lit advertising signs (though more intimate in scale), and the ordered, didactic appearance of educational displays. Moreover, given the scientific content of the images and their exposure of the inner-most parts of the body, one might recall either the display of X-Ray film or the glass slides used to hold organic specimens under the microscope's lens. (Species Life was in fact generated from an appropriated didactic slide kit of a model of the DNA chain.) The will to power cited in the Nietzsche text becomes associated with power over nature in this context, whereas the Irigaray text might be extrapolated into the discourse of ecology, with its ethos of cooperation rather than conquest. The invocation of the landscape and the emblematic role the generic couple play as the original pair mirrored in the genetic material carried by the DNA, recall the myth of nature as the mother of life, an intricate and

unified matrix identified with reproduction and the feminine. But the other couple, Nietzsche and Irigaray, are discordant. Irigaray indicates a place of feminine enunciation that is radically different from the tradition of the intellect that Nietzsche's philosophy represents. Thus, Tenhaaf links the high-tech imagery of scientific information about human origins with the gendered and binary myths that inform its interpretation and representation.

In her 1991 videodisc installation Horror Autotoxicus, the DNA chain is animated and its message-carrying function is invoked as an oracular figure, the keeper of the secrets of destiny. The DNA's internal coding is a sort of "biological memory" that stores genetic destiny. Likewise, the digital memory of the computer's program determines the form and accessibility of the knowledge which the viewer is invited to pursue in this work. Representations of the body are, in turn, implicitly bound to the predominant ordering systems of science and technology.

To view Horror Autotoxicus, one enters a darkened room and is confronted with a back-lit display case containing an image of a didactic chart, the kind unrolled like a blind over the blackboard of high-school science labs before the advent of educational videotapes. [fig. 24] The subject of this chart is primary cell division, the evolution of life as illustrated by three sequences of embryonic cell development. The knowledge at hand is thus knowledge of

origins, of reproduction. The French, English and German works, "choisir," "select" and "wahlen" at the bottom of the chart invite the viewer to touch one of three sensors. We are not so much asked to engage with this imagery as we are tempted by our curiosity, our desire to know more. Without knowing what is to be chosen, or what the choices are, we respond to the imperative of choice, abandoning ourselves to chance. Fate is the theme which is then taken up in one of three spoken excerpts from the myth of Oedipus that our choice activates.

Adjacent to the interactive light box is a monitor that is activated simultaneously with the audio element. Here the verbs "savoir," "know," "wissen" materialize within the video screen's luminous surface, turn in space and give way to a colourful sequence in which the DNA molecule floats effortlessly through space, strangely detached from its corporeal environment, twisting, dividing and replicating for the 45 seconds of a spoken excerpt from the myth of Oedipus. Each visual sequence ends with the invitation to choose again - another sequence, another story, seemingly endless choice: "choisir," "select," "Wahlen."

Oedipus' fate, as recounted through the prophecies of the three seers, was to acquire too much knowledge. The unbearable knowledge revealed is that he has murdered his father and married his own mother. The story is thus an allegorical drama of identity and self-knowledge, one whose

ultimate warning is that chaos ensues when the order of family and sexual relations is violated. As Freud recognized, it is fundamentally a myth about the unruly powers of desire and the fate that befalls civilization when its laws are not recognized. The metaphor of the oracle - the infallible guide to the unknown future - which permeates this work, represents the desire to be assured, to know what will happen next and to control that which is beyond our control. As Tenhaaf states, the "self-fulfilling, cyclical and biodeterministic nature of the Oedipal prophesies," is a powerful way of addressing the "deep implantation of the scientific ethos in the Western imagination." ¹²

The desire for knowledge manifested in the irrepressible drive of the biosciences to conquer and control life through its ordering impulses is, paradoxically, one that could threaten as well as enhance the order of life as we know it, whether in the use of bio-power over death - eugenics, organ transplants, cryogenics etc. - or in the creation of life through new reproductive technologies that blur generational distinctions and genetic filiation. In this context the question of origins becomes more complex yet curiously irrelevant. The fundamental mechanisms of identity, once understood as a psycho-sexual dynamic originating within the structure of the biological family, are torn from their moorings. By bringing together the Oedipal myth and the simulated imagery of the bio-

sciences, Tenhaaf condenses questions of biological destiny, of subjectivity and the social, and of truth, exposing their inextricable relationship to dominant epistemologies.

Between the two elements of Horror Autotoxicus discussed thus far - the archaic, static diagrams of cell division and the fast-paced, smoothly animated video sequence of the DNA chain - an ever-more minute scrutiny of the body occurs as its inner-most information is penetrated and decoded. There is, however, a third, less immediately apparent element to this installation that links these first two. [fig. 25] Projected from the back of the exhibition space is a diagram of the ovaries and fallopian tubes, the voyage of the gamete toward the uterus and cross-sections of the endometrial lining to which the barely discernable fetal form attaches itself. Here the various parts of the female reproductive system are fragmented and detached from the maternal body, the body that becomes merely a temporary host for the more scientifically compelling life of the fetus.

This immaterial image is captured like a phantom as the projection comes to rest upon a black curtain that waves gently in the ambient air currents above the monitor. Despite the order and control of the back-lit interface chart, its encouragement of our apparent ability to "choose" our destiny, and the impression of having access to the genetic code given by the simulated imagery on the monitor, the "mystery" of life is depicted in this element as

ephemeral and elusive. In this context of genetic research and new reproductive technologies, one might consider that the search for origins which Freud claimed was the great motivator of the psyche, is also the driving force behind the bio-sciences. In both cases the maternal figure is the repressed site of origins, significantly absent as either agent or subject.

The title Horror Autotoxicus, is a term that first appeared in 1901 when, as a result of their immunological research, Morgenroth and Ehrlich postulated the existence of auto-immune diseases. The concept of a threatening internal other, of the body turning against itself in a sort of information systems breakdown, lends itself to interpretation on several levels in Tenhaaf's work. (And it is particularly topical at a moment when the culturally inscribed body is thrown into full relief by the social and medical consequences of AIDs.) In the case of Oedipus this internal "other" is the knowledge of his origins, origins that he had fatally violated. The quest for knowledge about ourselves and our fate that motivates research in the bio-sciences constitutes another potentially destructive internal other, the desire for control over life. Finally there is a less apparent internal other, aestheticized and sterilized by orderly and seamless simulations of corporeal matter, and that is the abject body of craven desires, internal decay, uncontrolled cellular division and

multiplication - be it of disease or new life -, and the autonomous ooze and beat of the life-supporting internal organs that may yet betray our desires.

* * * * *

Kati Campbell

In the opening paragraph of his 1949 text on the mirror stage Jacques Lacan posits this primary identificatory moment as profoundly corporeal, describing it as an "experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the **cogito**." ¹³ The body of the mirror stage is the **corps morcelé** - a body in bits and pieces, the fragmented corporeal reality of the infant whose motor capacities are not yet organized such that she can inhabit the image of a complete and separate being, the self she nevertheless "jubilantly" assumes in the illusory reflection that the mirror provides. The mirror stage is a decisive moment in which the body is simultaneously experienced as a disorganized set of parts yet granted a unified image. The precarious agency of this pre-verbal body is fundamentally implicated in the first gesture of the self - a self-recognition which is, after all, a misrecognition. Thus the mirror stage is also a metaphorical figure for the fiction of the unified self, and the catalyst for the fundamental

change that takes place in a subject when he/she assumes an image.

Taking up where Mary Kelly left off a decade before, Campbell does not so much follow the letter of Lacan as she attempts to renegotiate the iconography of the maternal body, the absent, repressed other that is nevertheless structurally implied in Lacan's mirror stage. She draws upon the impersonal imagery of commercial representations and the clean, industrialized look of mass-produced materials to address the production of desire and subjectivity. Alluding to the Lacanian formula of the production of the self in images and the relegation of the primary plenitude of the Imaginary to the unconscious as the acquisition of language ushers in the Symbolic order, Campbell notes that "advertising is the hallucinatory condition of our age" and "desire being (sic.) of course that which cannot be managed." ¹⁴ Thus her work engages the discourses of mass media imagery and consumerism with those of the individual psyche and the construction of subjectivity.

Lacan speaks of the mirror stage as a "spatial captation" of the self. ¹⁵ It is this captivating space in which disjunctive elements appear to be momentarily unified by the gaze, that Kati Campbell re-creates in her 1988 installation Dyad. [fig. 26] However she does so in ways that complicate rather than explicate Lacan's account of the

psycho-sexual constitution of identity as a process of representation.

Dyad consists of an enlarged photograph of a child's eyes mounted on the wall at about the height of a toddler, the age when language begins to be acquired with increasing rapidity. To the right and above these eyes at the approximate height of an adult is an armature, a projecting, open structure that progressively turns back and downward toward the child's eyes to the left. At the lower extremity of this structure is another pair of eyes, a woman's eyes. Unlike the brilliant child's eyes (Campbell's daughter's) that stare outward toward the viewer, rendered in full photographic resolution and printed on a reflective surface, the woman's eyes look downward, veiled by her lashes. They are reproduced from a found image, the mother on a Curity diaper package. The commercial lithographic printing process of the original image is blown-up and printed on a transparent surface, rendering these eyes as permeable as their supporting structure. In profile the armature structure resembles a series of movements in which the final frame containing the sign of the maternal body is positioned in an oblique relation to the child. The dot-matrix pattern accentuated through enlargement of the image assures the unequivocally representational status of these maternal eyes.

The maternal is constructed in Dyad as a transparent site, one that the woman both moves through and is positioned in. This is how Campbell accounts for the rather contorted form of the armature structure which supports the image of the mother's downcast eyes: "I wanted to get some of the tension inherent in being moved into the position of the maternal, in particular codified ways.¹⁶ The gaze of the child is outward, its reflective surface catches the viewer in its line of vision, one that is fixed at approximately adult crotch height. It is this region of the viewer's body which is reflected in the polished image of the child's eyes, as if to emphasize the corporeal intensity of psycho-sexual identification.

Dyad is a strangely awkward and enigmatic work. The mother and child do not exchange the classic gaze of mutual absorption in primary plenitude. Rather the child, older than an infant but not yet fully verbal, looks out to the world beyond as if unconscious of the "body" that bends downward to her, forming a gentle, protective curve. The mother's eyes are absorbed in an inward looking, almost swooning bodily sensation, and they have moved down from their initial position above to align with the child's cheek level. Thus both pairs of eyes in this work function as much as a synecdoche for a body to body relationship as they do for the gaze. It is this corporeal relation that is ultimately reconstructed in the case of the mother and

child, of the child and the spectator, and in the viewer's inevitable physical awareness of the enveloping gesture of the sculptural element.

In searching for a spatial representation of the mother-child relation, Campbell observed that traditional madonna and child imagery depicts two active subjects, both meeting the spectator's gaze. In contemporary advertising imagery she found that this relationship to the spectator had shifted, with the child becoming the active subject, looking outward, and the mother's gaze remaining "submerged in the body." "What is being celebrated, Campbell remarks, is the body relation. She's snuggling up to the baby. What is being represented is the phenomenal bliss of the maternal body." Campbell is suspicious of this cosy imagery, contending that "what is initially proffered as a kind of celebration of maternal "jouissance" can also be viewed as being conscripted to the life of the body - the mother awash in this sea of plenitude." ¹⁷ Dyad, then, abstracts this bodily plenitude refusing all but a structural relationship between partial images of mother and child. In effect, Campbell does not attempt to valorize maternal plenitude nor does she condemn the mother to invisibility for fear of entrapment in her over-determined signifying role. Rather she seems to underscore her subjective "unrepresentability" in contemporary maternal iconography by setting up a

situation where the viewer is inevitably caught in a potential but incomplete circuit of the gaze.

In her 1989 installation Magnet, Campbell pursues the theme of psycho-sexual identity, specifically addressing the signifying role of the corporeal inscription of gender. Once again, she appropriates an image from advertising, this time the generic baby from a Pampers disposable diaper package. The display mechanism in this work consists of two back-lit cases containing identical images of a baby, printed so that they face each other in a mirror relationship. These images are held in opposition not only by their inverse placement but by an intervening, mediating structure in the form of two articulated steel rod armatures. At the end of each armature a small image of the female vulva on one side and the male penis on the other, is positioned so that the viewer can only discern the presence of these genital images through their reflection upon the dark surface of the plexiglas on which the baby's photograph is printed.

[fig. 27]

The baby's pose is a seated three-quarter turn with one arm extended along the crossed over leg, a position uncannily similar to the nude woman who sits, looking out toward the viewer, in the company of two clothed male companions in Manet's Déjeuner sur l'herbe (1863). Because this pose discreetly hides the genitalia, the baby's otherwise androgynous body defies a gendered reading. This

is further complicated as the baby's gaze outward to the spectator is a particularly coy and engaging one. Should one read the child as male or female? What are the gender stereotypes that one is tempted to bring to bear on this image in the absence of anatomical evidence?

The overall look of Magnet evokes medical or scientific discourses through its material vocabulary of high-tech laboratory equipment and imaging techniques. The baby's photograph is printed in an acid-green colour akin to that of the monitor screen on which ultrasound scans are registered. But these still images highlighted by an opaque negative background may also recall X-Ray film. The effect of a clinically scrutinized body is further accentuated by the mechanism of the armatures, their formal similarity to the adjustable bilateral structure of the gynaecological stirrup and the resemblance of the plates holding the genital images to those small mirrors thrust into the dental cavity for better viewing.

This elaborate construction is a more fragile one than it first appears to be. It is easily de-stabilized. The central supporting axis, from which the armatures may potentially swing a full 180 degrees if the adjustable screws are loosened, is adhered to a plate on the wall solely with the invisible force of a magnet. In essence, the attraction of the magnet fixes a structure that can, in fact, be detached. Thus it functions as a stand-in for

biology, something which is in excess of the play of representations in which the other elements are combined to reflect gender construction.

Campbell's most recent work, Battle of the Titans (1992) [fig. 28] represents the inherent aggressivity experienced in the the simultaneous desires for attachment and independence that mark the young child's struggle to move from the primary dyad into social relations. This work departs from a Lacanian model of subjectivity with its absent, "unrepresentable" maternal figure, finding its theoretical framework, instead, in the work of the most influential "mother" of psychoanalysis, Melanie Klein, who addressed the symbolic significance of the mother's body in relation to the child's aggressive urges.

Battle of the Titans began with many months of **ad hoc** videotaping of Campbell interacting with her daughter in everyday domestic situations. The work was therefore generated from that "slice of life" which Mary Kelly found necessary to eliminate from her work a little more than a decade earlier. The centrepiece of the completed installation consists of a ten-minute edited sequence selected from many hours of tape in which Campbell is seen attempting to dress her three year old child who repeatedly undoes her efforts. The simple act of putting on clothes becomes a fundamentally violating control of the child's body by the mother. This "battle" of wills alternates from

playful coaxing, mutual hugging and cajoling, to aggressive outbursts where the child hits her mother who, in turn, physically contains her actions.

The entire ten-minute sequence is shown on an enormous eighteen foot high screen. Intermittently, the image on the screen is traversed by two suspended body-like masses, life-size models depicting the distorted limbs and truncated bodies of Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer's "dolls." This violent, dream-like corporeal procession cuts across the plane of recorded, "real" time like an unconscious fantasy of simultaneous dismemberment and grandiose inflation.

In contrast to this overpoweringly enlarged and intimate scene, on three regular video monitors another videotape of the child viewing and interacting with the first tape is played simultaneously. The viewer is placed between the larger-than-life scale of the video projection, the "adult" element, and the child-height, small monitors which depict the little girl's triumphant seizing of her own image (a virtual mirror image) and gleeful response to her aggressive resistance of her mother's wishes.

What Battle of the Titans dares to reveal is an image that contradicts the maternal ideal of unconditional love. Instead, this work exposes the highly conditional and unstable territory of identification which both mother and child enter upon through an incessant process of negotiations involving domination and submission. The desire

and resistance drained from dominant representations of mother-child relations is restored as Campbell approaches ever-more-closely that taboo which, as Lucy Lippard remarked, has yet to be tackled: the explosive signifying power of the maternal body as origin.

* * * * *

NOTES

1. Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism," Feminism/Postmodernism, Nicholson, 112.
2. Gallop, Thinking Through the Body, 132.
3. Michie, The Flesh Made Word, 149.
4. Braidotti, "Organs without Bodies," 158.
5. This was the title of Sterbak's 1991 exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada.
6. Noelle Caskey, "Interpreting Anorexia Nervosa," The Female Body in Western Culture, ed. Rubin Sulieman, 175-192.
7. Diana Nemiroff, Jana Sterbak: States of Being/Corps à corps (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada/Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, 1991) 32.
8. Jana Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body (New York: Routledge, 1991).
9. Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault, 17-32.
10. Rabinow, The Foucault Reader, 71.
11. Braidotti, "Organs without Bodies," 152.
12. From an unpublished artist's statement.

13. Jacques Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," Écrits - A Selection (New York & London: Norton, 1977) 1.
14. Madill, Identity/identities, 10.
15. Lacan, Écrits, 4.
16. Lemecha, Embodied Viewer, 16.
17. Lemecha, Embodied Viewer, 16.

C O N C L U S I O N

The theme of "thinking through the body" is reiterated throughout this thesis with a two-fold purpose: the phrase resonates as an oxymoron through which the classic opposition of mind and matter is collapsed in an image that calls for a new conception of both subjectivity and corporeality. But thinking through the body also implies thinking about the body, about how it might be re-conceptualized. Moreover, for women it means thinking the body in ways that "traditional intellection denies, or is unable to grasp ...to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized." ¹ These objectives of a thinking through the body converge in the task of rethinking the binary dialectics of Western metaphysics that both poststructuralist and feminist thought have engaged in, and in the opportunities which the discursive body of postmodernism may offer to, or withhold from, a feminist theory of an embodied feminine subjectivity.

As in other disciplines, the body in visual art practice of the past two decades has been represented and produced on the basis of divergent premises. The body of postminimalism emerged from a "realist" position that

posited the ontological body as a guarantor of truth, a reliable register of knowledge and experience, the concrete ground of subjectivity. The body of postmodernism is formulated as a social and cultural signifier, a dispersed and relative figure that is subject to multiple and layered reformulations. In tracing the historical transition of the body during this period from a feminist perspective, the work of both women artists and theorists has been aligned in this thesis. As much as feminist theory has been obliged to confront its own intransigent and self-replicating essentialist/anti-essentialist oppositions, debates in contemporary art discourse around figuration of the female body and the definition of both feminine and feminist aesthetics, have caused equally productive tensions in women's art practice.

This thesis has attempted to trace a genealogy of the body in feminist art practice from a position which is, on one hand, sceptical of the usefulness of the immaterial, hyperreal "body image" offered by postmodernism, and, on the other, playfully engaged in a project which is nevertheless both sober and urgent: the search for a feminist postmodernist body that is more than a disembodied sign.

The contemporary works considered in the closing chapter of this thesis engage in a discourse of the body through the use of, or reference to, technology. The literal metaphor of a mechanistic, impersonal, autonomous body is

however not the one that is evoked in the three corporeal sites suggested by the work of Jana Sterbak, Nell Tenhaaf and Kati Campbell. Rather, through different means - discussed here within three distinct modes of corporeal inscription: the socio-cultural, the epistemological and the psycho-sexual - each invests the body with an insistent physical presence, though it remains significantly absent as a complete or static entity. A living bodily subjectivity is resurrected in each case in a manner which acknowledges the body as a field of power. But, as we have seen, that power is mobile. In Jana Sterbak's work the invocation of the historical oppression of women is reinvested in familiar forms that have acquired an unexpected and rebellious agency. Nell Tenhaaf inserts a feminist discourse in technological extensions of rational, scientific epistemologies and their representations, suggesting ways that technology may be embraced rather than seen as an all powerful, threatening other. Kati Campbell reconsiders the essentialized maternal body, that banished site of origins upon which Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of the subject, so enthusiastically adopted by the first wave of feminist theorists, have been constructed. And so returning to the arresting image on the cover of Jane Gallop's book, Thinking through the Body [fig. 29], which introduced this thesis, there is a body - not the bachelor machine of new reproductive technologies, not the "body

without organs" of Deleuze's desiring machine, nor the procreative body that remains awash in an amniotic sea of maternal plenitude - that remains to be satisfactorily accounted for, both theoretically and representationally.

NOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born (New York: Norton, 1976) 192.

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I L L U S T R A T I O N S

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Carolee Schneeman Interior Scroll 1975
2. Robert Morris & Linda Benglis Exhibition invitations, 1974
3. Urs Luthi This is About You 1973
4. Suzy Lake Are you talking to me? 1979
5. Martha Rosler Vital Statistics of a Citizen... ,1977
6. Colette Whiten Structure no. 4 1972
7. Sorel Cohen After Bacon, After Muybridge 1980
8. Judy Chicago The Dinner Party 1979
9. Mary Kelly Post-Partum Document 1972-1979
10. "
11. "
12. "
13. Mary Scott Imago [VII] 1988
14. Shelagh Alexander Untitled, part I 1983 (panels 1 & 2)
15. Jana Sterbak Measuring Tape Cones 1979
16. " Standard Lives 1988
17. " "I want you to feel..." 1985
18. " Seduction Couch 1987-88
19. " Vanitas.. 1986
20. " (detail)
21. " Remote Control I 1990

22. Nell Tenhaff Species Life (part 1 & 2, detail) 1989
23. " Part 3 (detail)
24. " Horror Autotoxicus (detail) 1991
25. " "
26. Kati Campbell Dyad 1987
27. " Magnet (full view and details) 1989
28. " Battle of the Titans 1992
29. Jane Gallop Thinking Through The body 1988



fig. I



fig. 2



THIS IS ABOUT YOU



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig.6



fig.7

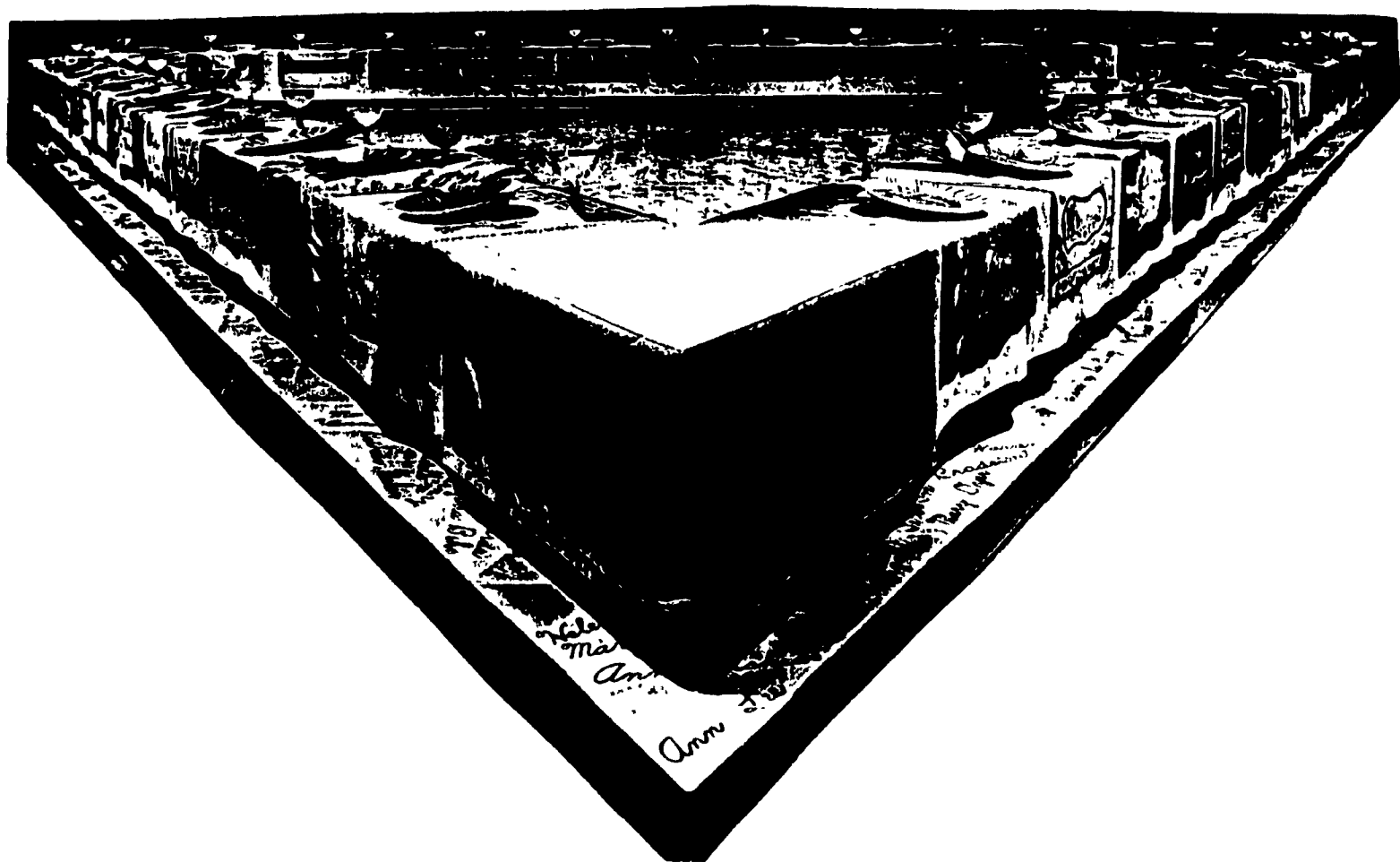
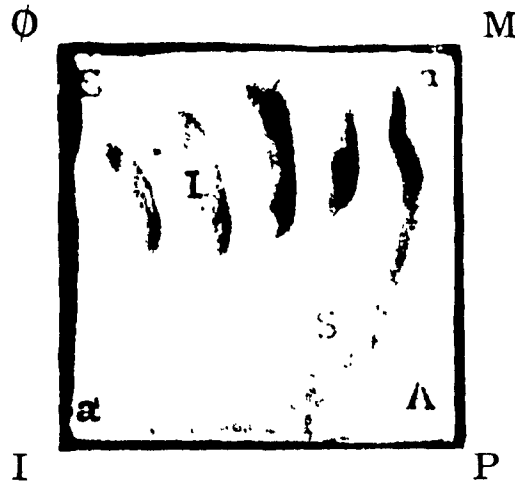


fig. 8





It's really enjoying
 no present relation-
 ship with I, going
 out to lunch to
 the park, sleeping
 together. There's
 no pretty problem
 and few problems.
 He's still living in
 Embassy, living at a
 hotel in 20th cen-
 tury. There's the
 lack of tension
 seems to be related
 to his being able to
 ask out aggression
 or affection as in-
 stinctive objects like
 "buddy" and "Alankie".

T6 5.4.7 PAGE 2.7

fig. 10

UTTERANCE _____ /NO-NO/
 OBJECTS _____ 'DON'T TOUCH THAT'
 FUNCTION _____ REJECTION
 AGE 17.22 FEB 17 1975

17.2.75

COMMENTS: M(mother) and K(son) reading stories. 16.00 HRS.
 SUNDAY EVENING(S) /no-no/E11

11.1 M: Can I read you a story? (sitting down)

K: /nana/ (looking at tea tray)

M: You've finished the banana now.

K: /no-no/ (seeing slides near tea tray on M's desk)

M: Hey, those are my slides! (getting up)

K: /bah/ bah/ o bah/ (leaving them there)

MOST FREQUENT UTTERANCES:

/bah/ no-no/ nana/ dere/
17 months, 22 days

MEAN LENGTH OF UTTERANCE: 1.46

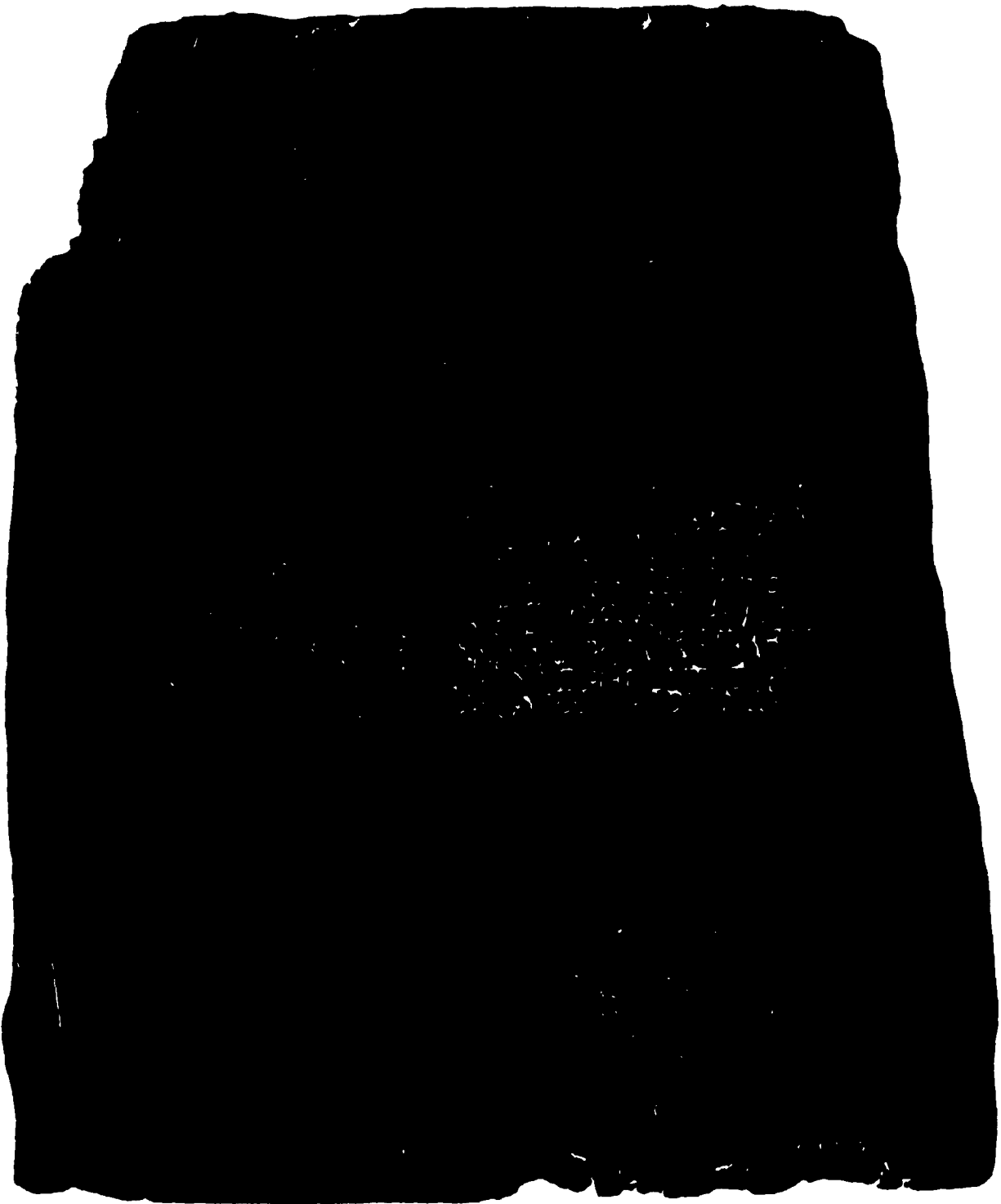


fig. 12



fig. 13

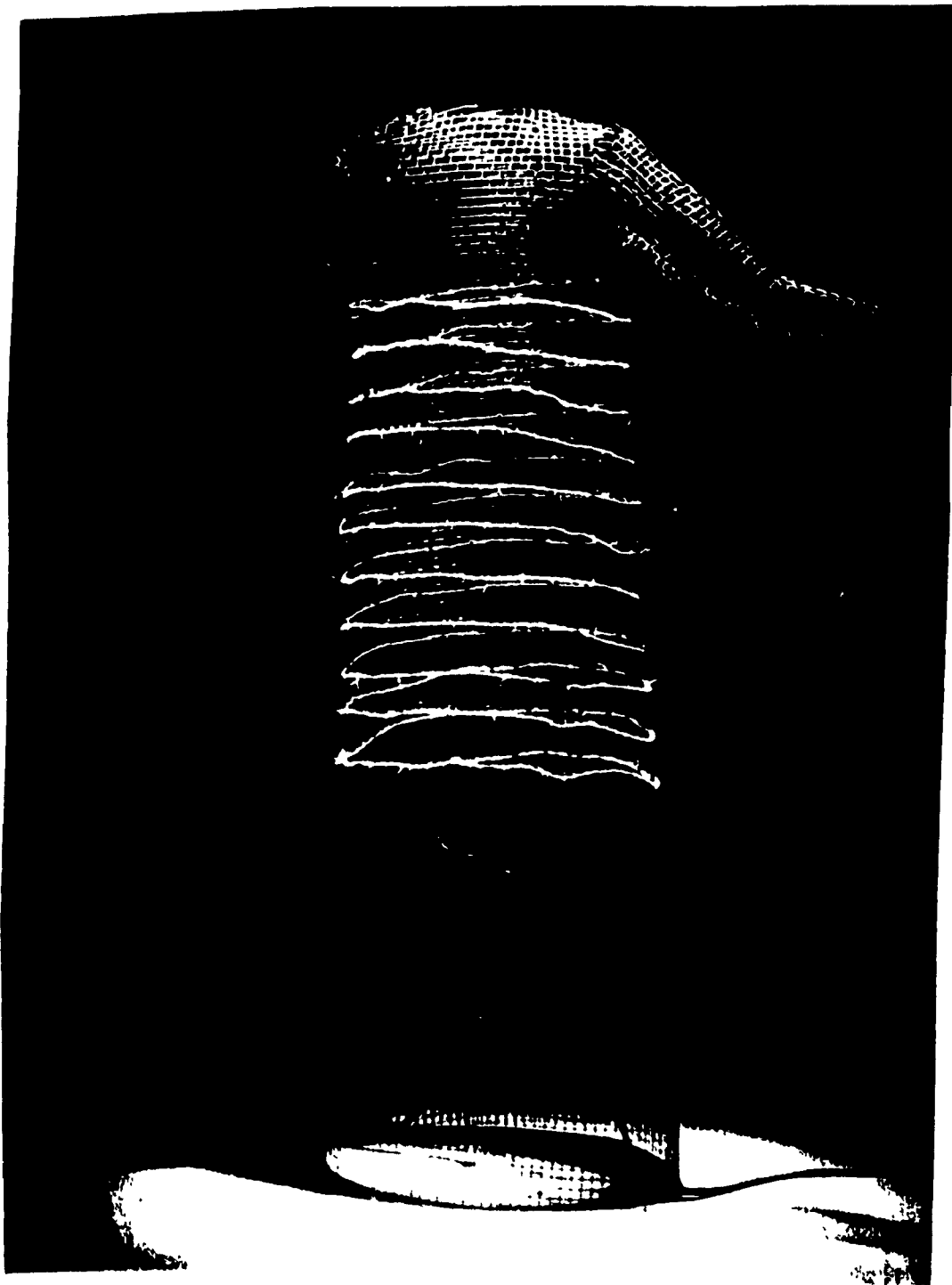


fig. 14





fig. 16



I want you to feel the way I do. These children are as ripped
and around my head, and my skin, aches on my flesh from
the inside. How can you be a comfort, and only to the left
of me. I want you to be as much as I do, but I want more.
I want you to be as much as I do, but I want more.
I want you to be as much as I do, but I want more.
I want you to be as much as I do, but I want more.
I want you to be as much as I do, but I want more.

fig. 17

Now I have your attention, and you are not
comfortable, my dear. Making them, you are, making me
as my opinion, I am, my, I should be, I should be,
I should be, I should be, I should be, I should be,
I should be, I should be, I should be, I should be,
I should be, I should be, I should be, I should be,
I should be, I should be, I should be, I should be.

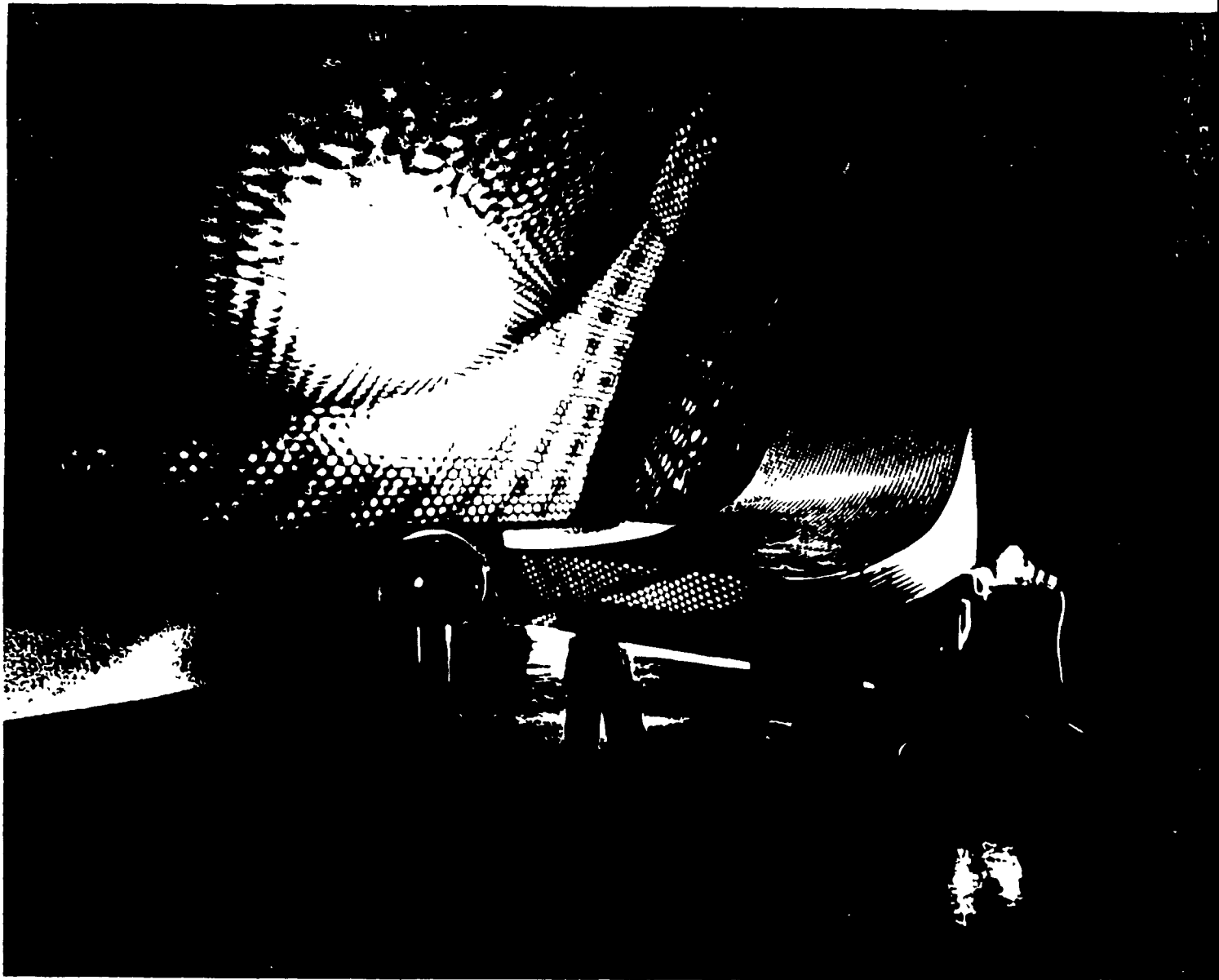


fig. 18



fig. 19



fig. 20

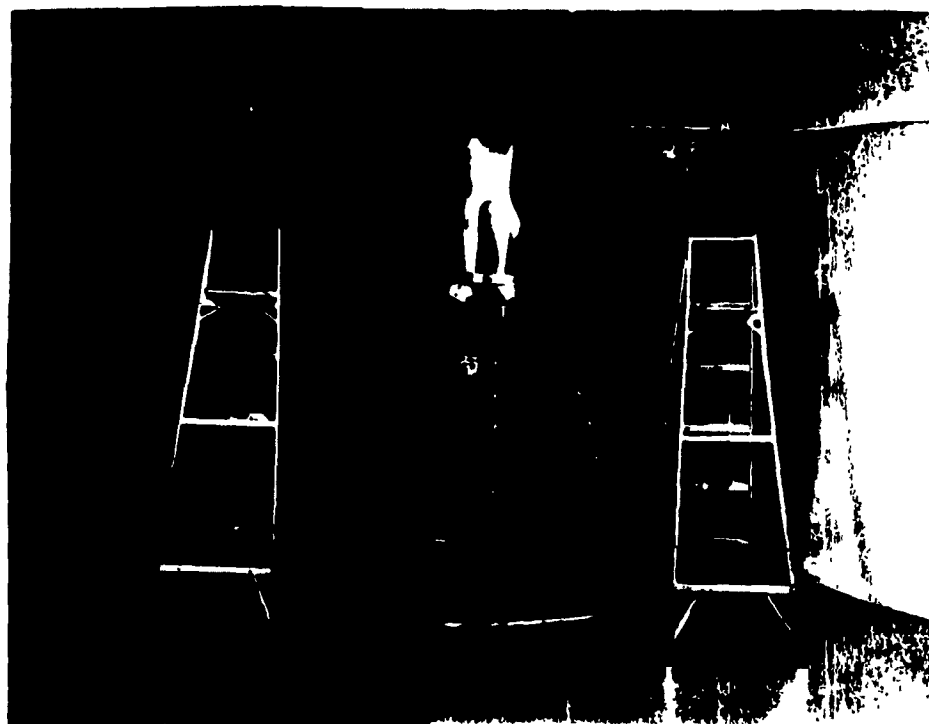


fig. 21

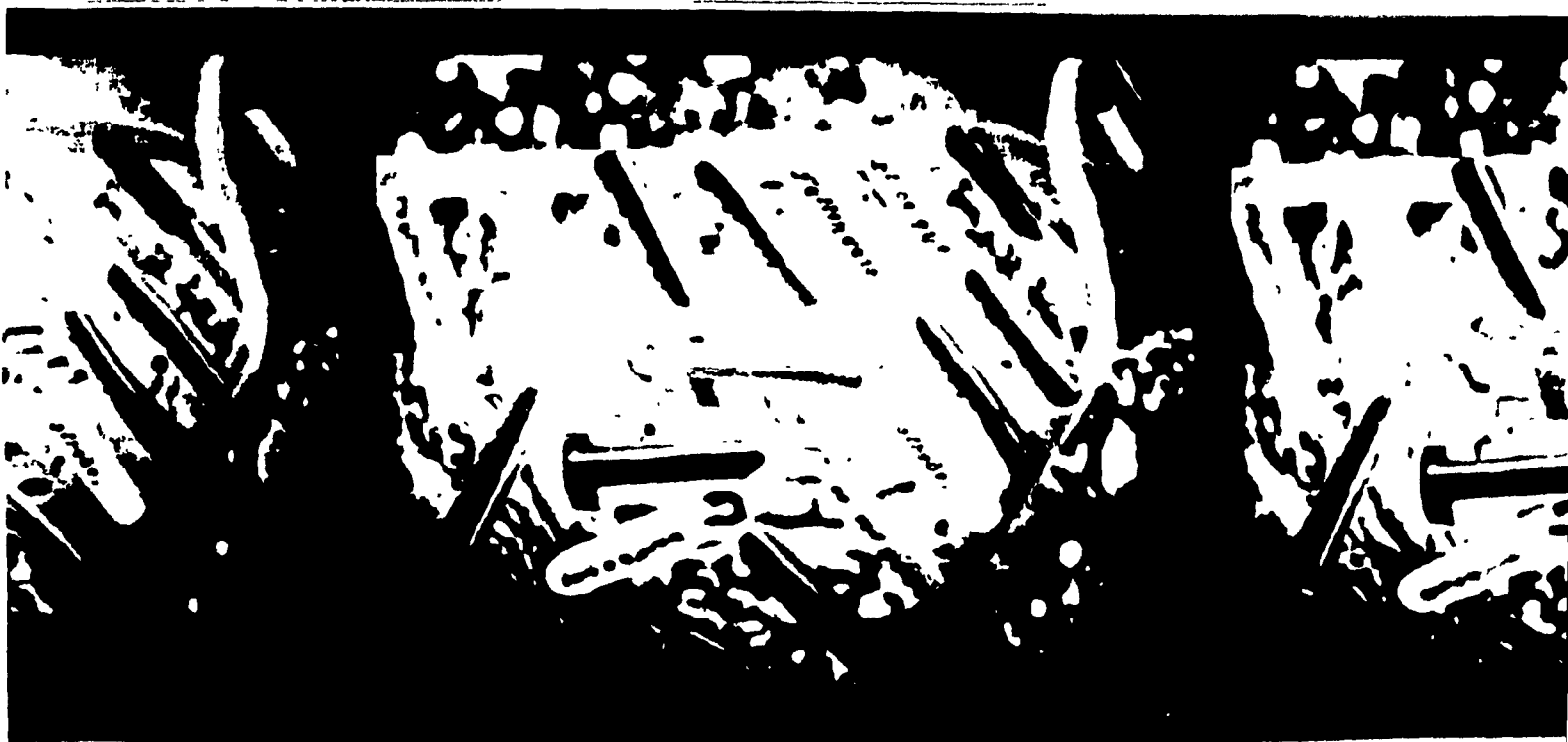


fig. 22

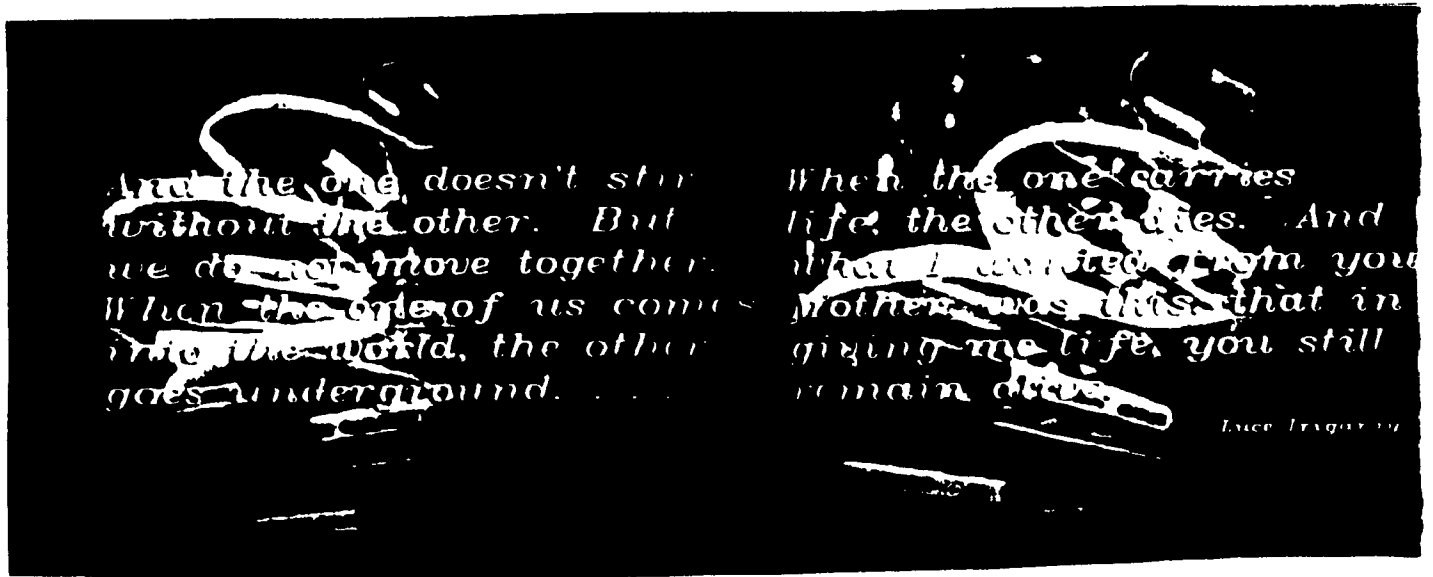


fig. 23

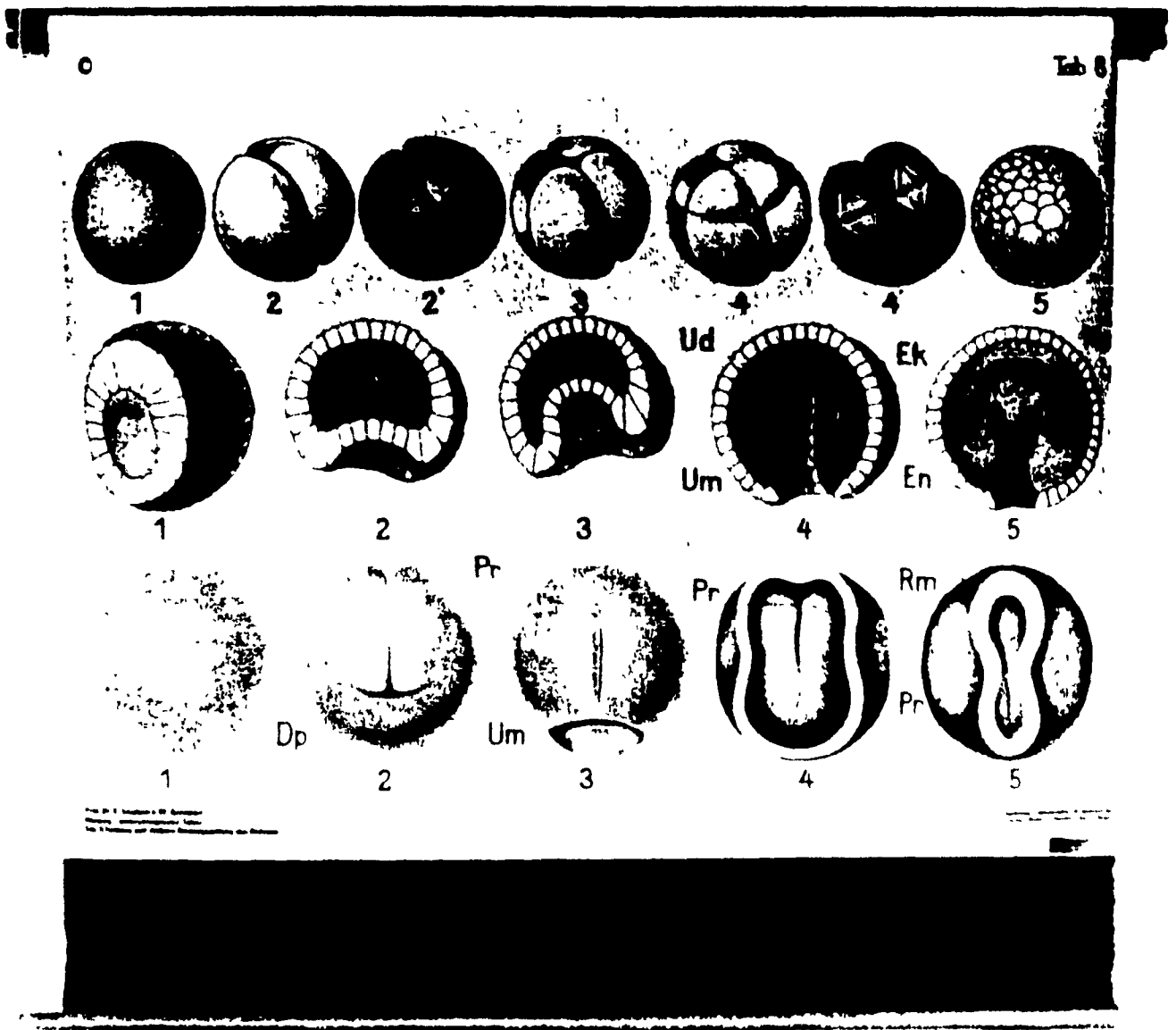


Fig. 24

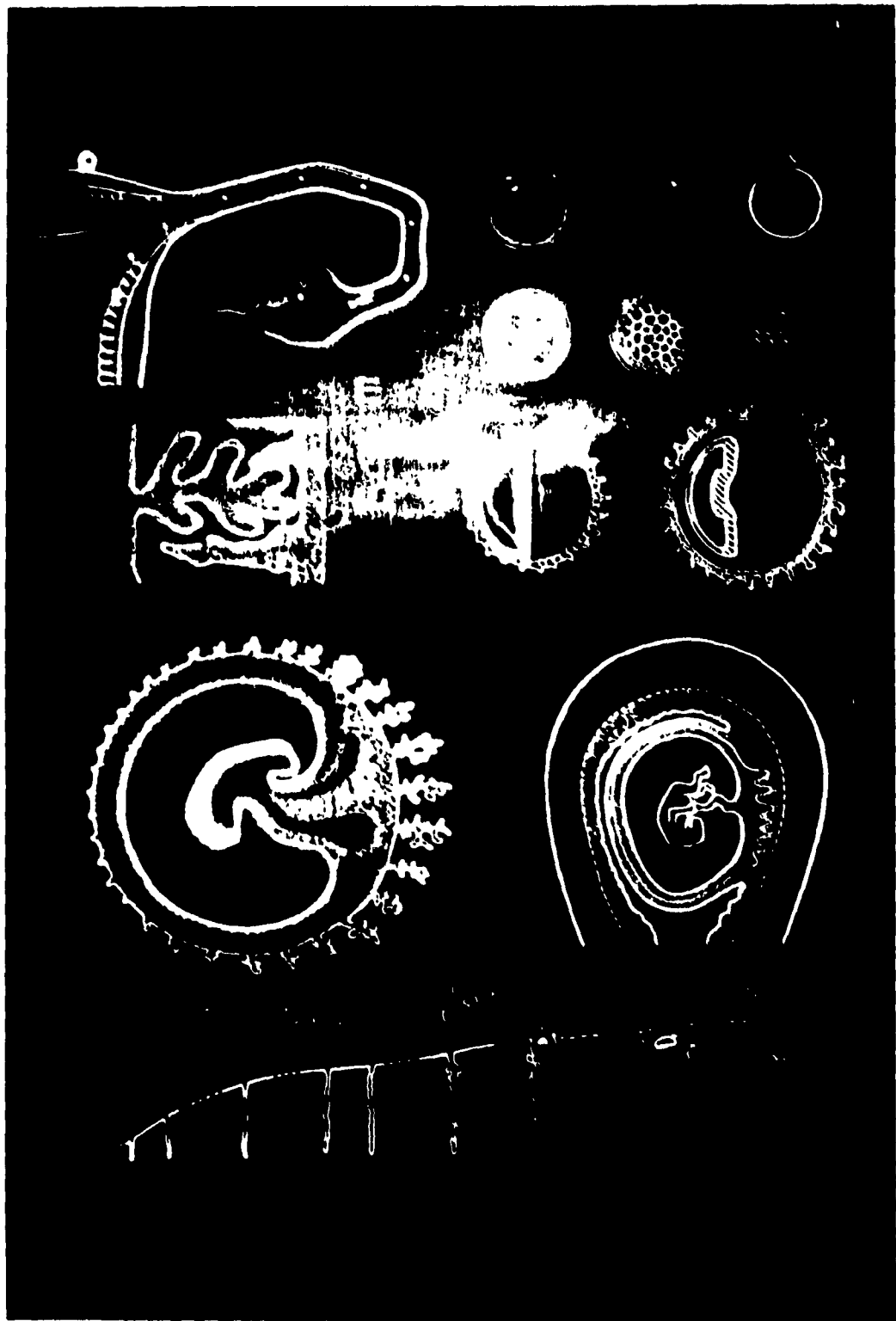


fig. 25

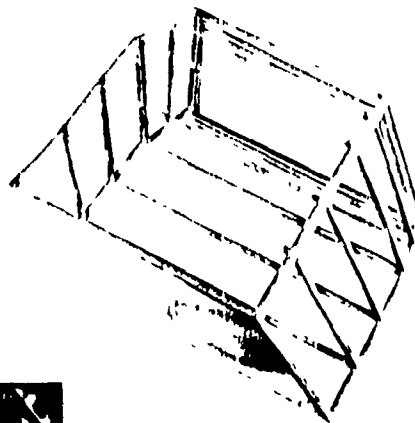
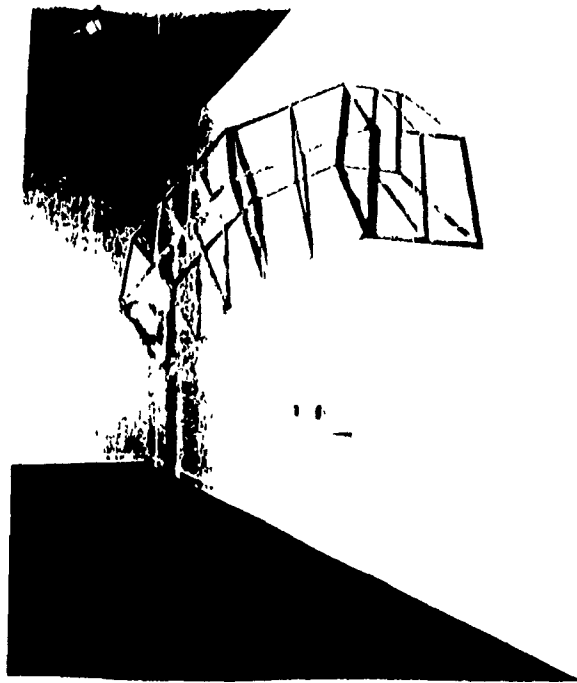


fig.26



fig.27



fig. 28

"The Great
The Great, The Great, The Great"

Jane Gallop



fig. 29