INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as the ideal female body. Even the old masters would have agreed that an ideal is a concept not a thing. Some of the famous nudes in art history were thought to be near-perfect configurations of the ideal female form. For instance, *Venus de Milo* was sculpted for the citizens of Ancient Greece according to the Classical ideal of bodily perfection, and nearly 2,000 years later, Botticelli's *Venus of Urbino* was painted as a Renaissance version of this ideal for the Medici princes. Executed in a representational style, both works of art served for centuries as interpretations of the ideal, and were endlessly copied in art. Popular fashion and pornography provided a succession of specific cultural fantasies of the female body, which ran parallel to and intersected with this high-art industry. In being sanctified as art, however, 'the nude' became singular, academic, historical and exclusive, a myth that was disqualified as a standard that might be applied to living bodies.

In our own century, the goddesses of the silver screen displaced this high-art tradition, adding voice, movement and the illusion of a closer link to real bodies, while seducing mass audiences on an unprecedented scale. Despite their international fame, few stars from this glittering constellation stand out or are remembered as approximating to the ideal. This may be because movies fracture the woman's body to focus on the face or some erotic part, or because even film stars are condemned to be victims of changing fashion, tarnished with the aura of mortality. Occasionally, as in the case of Marilyn Monroe, who was acclaimed as the ideal of her day, personal tragedy and premature death confirmed this aura. It was as though the designation or symbolisation of a woman's body as ideal forced recognition that her body was only too real and particular, a material fact that would soon 'turn to dust'. In spite of this – or perhaps because of it – Marilyn's image achieved the status of a myth. It was repeated in the prints of Andy Warhol and simulated in the performances of Madonna, thus spawning ever-new formations of iconic, feminine beauty.

Though nudes may belong to history and film stars may be destined for the graveyards of the rich and famous, now fashion magazines, video clips and other forms of popular visual culture dominate unchecked as the purveyors of body image. The 'ideal female body' has become a marketing strategy, and as such

it has made international corporations richer than any Ancient Greek or Renaissance prince. Women still try to improve their bodies, but instead of emulating a goddess or saint, they 'work out' according to a promotional theme. Sanctioned by medical science, the 'fit body' drives an industry of gymnasia and sporting products, while 'the healthy body' sustains a vast range of pharmaceutical and health-care products. The 'beautiful body' adds cosmetics and plastic surgery to both of these. Sometimes the themes clash or become confused. Jane Fonda's 'fit body', for example, turned out to be bulimic and therefore not healthy. 'The healthy body', it seems, was not slim enough to qualify also as 'the beautiful body'. It is in the interests of late capitalism to perpetuate this sort of ambiguity, to promote thinness in a culture where obesity is more common and the weight-loss industry prospers. The slim, fit body has become a symbol of self-discipline, and a passport to social and cultural power, but the control required of the individual to maintain it comes at a cost. By inducing women to strive with all their purchasing power towards an ideal that is difficult, elusive and obscure, capitalism ensures that the threat of failure is maintained and the purchasing is never exhausted. On the other hand, recognising that achieving this ideal is more difficult for some than for others, it adjusts the ideal to be more global and inclusive, thus breaking down sexual and cultural boundaries. The promotion of 'the anorectic body', 'the waif', 'the heroin body', and 'the dead body' is the perverse side to this inclusiveness.

Running parallel to this discourse on the ideal female body is a shorter narrative of resistance. Feminist artists have challenged the patriarchal ideal in art as well as commercial norms of feminine beauty. In the 1960s and 1970s, some attempted to replace the Classical ideal of the female body with a positive, feminist ideal, symbolising it with images of the archaic goddess whose maternal body was tied spiritually and essentially to Nature and the Earth. While these images were powerful in some ways, it was not long before they looked anachronistic and crude. Intellectually sophisticated, contemporary women of the early 1980s were uncomfortable with the murky namelessness of maternity, which many of them associated with the sentimentality of regressive artistic modes, particularly painting. These mainly poststructuralist feminists took a different line of attack, re-deploying techniques and images from popular media as well as from modernist art to deconstruct images that had been constructed according to the 'patriarchal' ideal. Barbara Kruger defaced patriarchal representations of the female body in order to obstruct the (male) gaze of the spectator, but did not indicate a positive viewing position for women, or an artistic direction that might lead to positive representations of the female body. Positivity itself was distrusted, as was the sense of sight that established an image or the thing it represents as real.

This was not a crisis for the visual arts so much as a crisis for representation and for the status of the real. It was said that Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* showed that her self-presentations, as 'woman', were constituted in and produced by images in the visual media and popular culture, that they were not constructed

from reality through representation, but were instead simulations that had no attachment to reality. Sherman counted herself as a performance artist, however, and managed to keep the body in art, emphasising the processes of making and enactment. Some artists, such as Karen Finley, used their bodies-in-performance to displace the patriarchal ideal, by resisting stereotypes of femininity and transgressing gendered constructions of the female body. In staging the 'obscene body', and joking about it, 'bad girls' wanted to have it both ways: to shatter binaries but 'reclaim' their bodies and erotic power.

A new typology of ambiguous bodies emerged: the 'androgynous body', the 'hybrid body', the 'abject body' and the 'post-human body'. These exposed the constructedness of femininity, the performativity of gender and sex, and the hollowness of identity as an ideal. The irony of this feminist narrative, however, is that the women who were opposed to the death of identity were often not patriarchal idealists, but those whom feminism should want to defend. Artists who are positioned as 'Other', on account of their race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability or physical difference asserted 'their own' identities in political statements against the white, middle-class norm. On the other hand it has been argued that with the advances of technology and the globalisation of culture, hybridisation collapses the old distinctions based on race, class and sexuality, and renders obsolete that which was once human. Hence, while some feminist artists sought to foreground the real in some new way, cyberfeminists and post-humanists redefined the ideal of a female body as one that transcends binaries and embraces artificiality through fiction.

Although this book does not insist that the above narratives about the female body in representation are either correct or comprehensive, it uses them as a provisional framework for the analysis of contemporary art, and raises questions about them that are kept in suspension. Both narratives have three themes in common: power, idealism and ambiguity. In the first, the themes are positively aligned, since both idealism and ambiguity service the demands of capitalist power. In the second, where the alliance between patriarchal, capitalist power and idealism is under attack by feminists, ambiguity is foregrounded. This ambiguity renders uncertain the status of feminist art production as a counternarrative and it risks pushing the art towards either morbidity or utopian fantasy. Rather than always figuring them as narratives in binary opposition to one another, therefore, I propose a more productive reading of these two histories that does not run the risk of constructing feminism as a failed metanarrative in relation to the victorious metanarrative of capitalist marketing. Instead, I suggest that the dialectical tensions between these parallel and intersecting discourses on the ideal female body have in the 1980s and 1990s produced results that in the 1960s and 1970s were unpredictable, including even some benefits for female consumers from the democratisation of sexuality in fashion and pornography.

My principal concern however is to stress that, over the past thirty years or so, feminism has played a positive role in cultural production, which post-structuralist relativism, with its anti-idealism and foregrounding of rupture and

discontinuity, has in the 1980s and early 1990s sometimes tended to obscure. When feminist art production is seen as not only reactive but also as a positive process in formation then it becomes clear that the art has proceeded in this way according to a feminist ideal for the female body – not a representational ideal, to replace the *Venus de Milo* or Madonna, but a conceptual ideal, based on a principle of inclusiveness, of an erotically appealing female body. It becomes clear, too, that this was not an intentional ideal in the sense that an artist or a group necessarily and consciously intended it. It was an ideal that emerged in relation to feminism as part of the processes and conditions of art production. If it could be acknowledged that most contemporary art by women has developed along these lines, then feminists might be in a better position to assess ethical questions, and what was being sacrificed or refused in the deliberate ambiguity and undecidability of so-called postfeminist art in the late 1990s.

While focusing on the female body in art, this book considers the way in which visual art produced by women was informed by feminism. It is based on the view that contemporary feminism is a coalition of various conflicting feminisms that are neither co-extensive nor independent, but which act collectively to inform contemporary art practices. While a similar case could be made for the processes that have led to the democratisation of sexuality in pornography and fashion marketing, the current book does not develop this point of view. It acknowledges, however, that the inevitable ambiguities and discontinuities which are entailed in this process of feminist information complicate questions of chronology and intention, and that art is always ambiguous, never one thing or another. As representation, art stands between artist and spectator, subject and object, form and matter, concept and thing. As text it hovers at the borders of categories, and as simulacrum it is subsumed in a field of images that bear no relation to 'reality'. If viewed in psychological terms, it is a point of mediation between the self and an 'other'. In bodily and social terms, it is a prosthetic, an extension of the body and a point of intercession between one living body and another, and therefore a mediator in sexual relations. In this last sense, art is also always erotic, especially in the form of the naked female body: hence the book's title, *Erotic Ambiguities*.

Ambiguity in art, and the way artists and feminist critics negotiate ambiguity in their cultural practices is a principal theme in this book. Accordingly, the first four chapters explore ways in which ambiguity has complicated feminist art criticism over the past twenty to thirty years.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Feminism, Ambiguity and the Ideal', is introductory in that it foreshadows the argument and structure of the book, and describes some of the theories referred to therein. It outlines art historical literature on idealism and the female nude in art, various historical, psychoanalytic and philosophical explanations for the erotic ambiguity of visual representations of the female body, and the implications of ambiguity for feminist politics.

Chapter 2, entitled 'Re-visioning the Female Nude', reviews the 1980s 'sex wars' about pornography and 'images of women', the pleasure versus danger

controversy amongst feminists, and the effect of these debates on the visual arts. Against this background, it posits the critical re-visioning of the female nude in art by women artists, as a paradigmatic application of the feminist ideal that informs contemporary art production. Using four examples, it shows how this process of re-visioning the ideal female body entailed, not only the deconstruction of the Classical ideal, and therefore the foregrounding of ambiguity, but also an implicit proposal for a new, inclusive conceptual ideal of an erotically appealing body.

Chapter 3, entitled 'Historical Ambiguity', considers the implications of historicism, demonstrating how deconstructive criticism is useful for focusing on ambiguity to expose how traditional images of the female nude were framed historically in 'sexist' and 'racist' terms, but that in so doing it foregrounds ambiguity as negative.

Chapter 4, entitled 'Seeing Ambiguity', shows how this devaluation of ambiguity was accompanied by a distrust of the sense of sight, which Martin Jay has called the antiocularcentrism of French thought. It cites various theories about the ambiguity of visual art – most of which, but not all, posit a link between language and vision – as a prelude to reviewing the related, anti-visual arguments of deconstructive feminists against 1970s vaginal imagery and body art. It shows that these arguments are not always convincing, especially in the light of the democratisation, or feminisation, of sexuality in body images in advertising over the past twenty years. Analysing some contemporary, feminist 1990s art that questions, defies or refuses the antiocularcentric feminist theory of the 1980s, this chapter concludes that, in these instances, ambiguity in visual art is oriented towards a positive conception of the female body.

The second half of the book continues the theme of ambiguity, but concentrates more on the ways it was navigated in particular visual modes and artistic practices from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. Chapter 5, entitled 'Gender Ambiguity', registers a shift from deconstructive techniques of early 1980s gender feminism to Judith Butler's feminist critique of gender identity as a category and an ideal. It analyses art and criticism that engages with issues that Butler raised, as well as aspects of queer theory and notions of gender ambiguity, and it considers favourably a recommendation for the adoption of 'the performative approach' to the analysis of the way gender and race are enacted. At the same time, it points out that the processes by which 'performativity' is represented, or presented as art, are often orientated towards a feminist ideal.

Chapter 6, entitled 'Making a Difference with Ambiguity', demonstrates that, while queer theory critiques identity, political art that argues for difference on the basis of identitarian claims cannot be refused. Such art does not deny ambiguity, but negotiates and often exploits it, and while feminism is sometimes tangential to these negotiations, it is nevertheless implicated in them in such a way as to orient ambiguity towards a positive conception of the female body.

The next two chapters consider various visual modes and contexts in which artists have negotiated ambiguity productively in relation to feminist concerns.

Chapter 7, entitled 'Turning Ambiguity Around', examines art by women, which pushes ambiguity, as it appeared in surrealist art and Dada, away from negativity towards the possibility of positive representations of the female body. It also considers how this trend developed in conjunction with an interest in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and Kristeva's theory of abjection.

Chapter 8, entitled 'Hybrid Ambiguities', focuses on art in the 1990s that probes ambiguity in its speculations on hybridisation, the globalisation of culture and the impact of new technologies on categories of art and identity. It argues that, while feminism impinges on these artistic projects, it provokes questions that are often left open, pending consideration of ethical concerns.

In summary, this book proposes that art is always ambiguous, especially when it involves the female body. Chapters 1 to 4 develop this argument from theoretical, historical and methodological perspectives, showing that early feminist deconstructions of representation attached a negative value to ambiguity. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the ambivalence that runs through contemporary feminist art production, considering, on the one hand, art and theory that asserts that gender identity is groundless and 'performative', and on the other, political and identitarian art that employs universalist and essentialist terms 'strategically'. These chapters, plus Chapters 7 and 8 propose, on the basis of particular examples, that feminist art practices, in spite of their deconstructive techniques, have negotiated ambiguity according to a conceptual ideal for the female body that is based on a principle of inclusiveness.

The Conclusion does not attempt to predict a future for the ideal. Instead, it returns to the problem for feminism, announced in this introduction, of how to address the ambiguity produced by the conflicting ideals of the female body proposed by advertising and pornography on the one hand and feminist art on the other. It outlines this problem by analysing particular images in which art and advertising are ambiguously implicated with one another in the eroticisation of young adolescent girls. By alluding to the ethical concerns raised by these examples, it invites speculation on the wisdom of possible dissolution or abandonment of the ideal, as against the desirability of maintaining it.

1

FEMINISM, AMBIGUITY AND THE IDEAL

Nakedness is the most potent visual sign that a body is available for sexual encounter with another body. Since art stands between the artist and the spectator, it might be argued that art that represents the naked body serves the artist both as a sexual lure and as a shield against intimacy.[1] This might explain why the female nude has given rise to an astonishing variety of ambiguities related to the construction of gender and identity. In the history of European art, ambiguities clouded, veiled or permeated representations of the female body, rendering their meaning opaque or transparent. As a consequence, the female nude became the most fascinating and disturbing symbol in Western visual culture. For centuries artists refined and exploited it, while art-lovers succumbed to and were shocked by it. Psychoanalysts and feminists, however, were the first to probe the ambiguity of its erotic appeal.

Questions of sexuality were not acknowledged in traditional art history, let alone addressed in a systematic way. Interpretative frameworks of commentators such as Gombrich and Panofsky, for instance, were indifferent to sexuality and to the ambiguities to which it gives rise, while Kenneth Clark's reference to 'erotic feeling' in *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956) reads as an indictment of his rationalist approach (Clark 1957: 6). Clark's first chapter, entitled 'The Naked and the Nude', in which he distinguished between representations of a particular body (the naked) and art that represents an ideal body (the nude), provided a point of departure for most of the recent contributions to the discourse on the female nude in art. John Berger, Griselda Pollock, Marcia Pointon and Lynda Nead, among others, criticised the Enlightenment values that Clark's conceptualisation of the female nude enshrines. Of the examples of recent literature on the female nude in art, some of which I refer to below, a few are books, but most are journal articles or single chapters in books on art, women artists or the female body in representation. All of them, however, have made a considerable impact on feminist thinking about art and the female body.

Reading the female nude in art history

In the TV series and book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger put a Marxist spin on Clark's formulation by reversing the value of the terms naked/nude. Clark valued the nude over the naked whereas Berger favoured nakedness – to be 'without disguise', above nudity – a 'form of dress' that objectifies 'woman' according to male-dominated, capitalist 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972: 54). In art and girlie magazines alike, argued Berger, women are represented as subordinate, passive objects. Carol Duncan argued along similar lines in 'Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting' (1973), claiming that in the art of the Fauves and German Expressionists, for example, images of powerless, passive, available female nudes served as evidence of the male artist's sexual virility and dominating will. In 'The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art' (1977), she described such images as expressions of a 'cultural symptom', thus using Panofsky's term to explain that eroticism was not inherent in modernist nudes but was an effect of the cultural circumstances that produced them. At the same time, Griselda Pollock's article, 'What's wrong with images of women?' (1977), pointed up the 'asymmetry' between meanings attached to images of (nude)'woman' and (nude)'man' in contemporary visual culture. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), Pollock and Rosika Parker developed the theory that 'images reproduce on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 116). Of the female nude in art they said:

> As female nude, woman is body, is nature opposed to male culture, which, in turn, is represented by the very act of transforming nature, that is, the female model or motif, into the ordered forms and colour of a cultural artefact, a *work* of art.
>
> (Parker and Pollock 1981: 119)

Also concerned with the ideological level of art, T.J. Clark discussed the nude in relation to the ambiguities of Manet's *Olympia* (1865) and nineteenth-century notions of female sexuality and class. In *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985), Clark suggested that in departing from the conventions of the traditional nude in art Olympia's nakedness, at that time, signified the working class.

Rosemary Betterton's *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* includes essays that reflect debates in the 1970s and 1980s about constructs of 'femininity' in pornography, the popular media and visual art. In her own essay, for instance, Betterton argued that the early modernist artist, Suzanne Valadon, 'demystified' the female nude with her particularised versions of it by challenging 'the idea that nakedness is essence, an irreducible quality of the "Eternal Feminine" ' (Betterton 1989: 230). In the same book, Lisa Tickner argued that it was possible for contemporary women body artists to

create a female erotica, since 'Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historical juncture, to rework it' (Tickner 1989: 249). In a 1981 article, entitled 'Where do positive images come from? And what does a woman want?', Australian feminists Helen Grace and Ann Stephen questioned the 'reactive and moralistic' response of feminists 'to pornography and violence, and to mass-media representations of women' (Grace and Stephen 1994: 81). Also during the 1980s, raced and gendered constructions of the female nude were investigated in various contexts. Abigail Solomon-Godeau identified 'the invention of primitivist modernism' in the female nudes of Gauguin, arguing that 'what is at stake in the erotics of primitivism is the impulse to domesticate, as well as possess' (Solomon-Godeau 1992: 326). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), black intellectual, bell hooks, interrogated images of black women in film and popular culture, and the way they are informed by the 'politics of domination' (hooks 1992: 5). Speculating on the future for feminist studies of the female body in Western culture, Susan Rubin Suleiman suggested that it might lie 'somewhere in the direction of blurred gender boundaries', and in the capacity to 'redraw and mix up the lines of differences in new, energizing ways' (Suleiman 1986: 4). In short the extension of the boundaries of art history and the expansion of feminist discourse in the 1980s paralleled a general move away from an exclusive interest in the ideal nudes of traditional art. Feminist attention had turned to representation itself, and to the ways the body is constructed in and produced by representations in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality and physical difference.

In the 1990s, Rosemary Betterton's book, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (1996) showed how feminist theories of embodiment and psychoanalytic theory informed art that is concerned with the female body, its relationship to technology and to 'body horror'. New journals on art and critical theory, such as *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, featured articles on various 'raced', 'hybrid', 'postcolonial' and 'post-human' constructions of the female body. Queer theory informed essays on the body, as in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (1995) edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn.

Although these and similar 1990s' feminist analyses of embodiment and desire largely displaced criticism of the female nude and idealism, some art historians in the early 1990s assumed the task of reassessing the female nude in art. Marcia Pointon explained, in *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830–1908* (1990), for instance, that Berger's assumption that the 'naked' can be equated with the 'real' is misguided, since the body is always in representation, always culturally encoded. She also claimed that Berger's presumption that there is 'a pre-constructed male viewer in a relationship of opposition and oppression to a female subject is deeply flawed' (1990: 33). She argued, for example, that when Palma Vecchio's *Venus* is studied in its historical context, it is not 'an unambiguous image of woman as passive object of possession', but one which constructs 'woman as a possible site of moral, intellectual and philosophical

enquiry' (1990: 18). Pointon stressed that images are 'not of themselves oppressive', but are complex 'forms of visual rhetoric' which 'may be seen to function in the articulation of power' (1990: 33, 34). Thus rejecting theories of the male gaze, Pointon proposed a notion of 'communication as intersubjectivity', and she aimed to address the affective elements of art (1990: 6).

Also avoiding gaze theory, Lynda Nead's *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1992) applied Derrida's deconstructive technique, reading the tradition of the female nude, and contemporary visual art, as 'text'. Nead hailed Kenneth Clark's naked/nude distinction as the dualist paradigm that structures not only his thinking in the rest of his text about the ideal female body, but that of Western culture generally. She explained that the notion of ideal forms could be traced from Plato and Aristotle, through the Middle Ages to Descartes in the seventeenth century, then to Kant in the eighteenth century. Plato argued that things that we apprehend through our senses in the empirical world are merely shadows of absolute forms that belong to the ideal world beyond experience. His distinction between base matter and ideal form founded a tradition of dualistic thinking, which, as feminist scholars have convincingly demonstrated, privileges the mind (male) over the body (female). Nead's deconstruction of Clark's naked/nude dichotomy, and of the Kantian aesthetics, which, she showed, inform his conceptualisation, illustrated how this binary opposition is mapped onto the form/matter opposition. It is mapped in turn onto others such as mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, and art/obscenity, all of which are ingrained in the Western psyche, invariably valorising the former term over the latter. This binary model is also the basis for Kant's distinction between the contemplative and sensory pleasures, which, Nead said, underpins a hierarchy of aesthetic experience.

Nead's timely book encapsulated the best of poststructuralist feminist criticism from the previous decade, and I have relied on its lucid explanations as points of departure for my own arguments, including my criticisms of deconstruction. Since the publication of Nead's book, contemporary developments in cultural studies have had an impact on art practices that reference the female body and feminism, which *Erotic Ambiguities* sets out to address. While this book does not align itself with a particular critical method or theory, as Nead's book did, it proposes its own theory that art practices, which referenced the female body and were informed by feminism, were directed towards a feminist ideal. To some readers this proposal might not appear to be a theory at all, let alone the sort of cutting-edge theory that one expects to associate with contemporary art. It might seem to be stating the obvious and the already well known, or to be regressively humanist. In order to justify my approach and to dispel doubts about its validity, therefore, I want first to return to an aspect of Clark's book that Nead ignored.

Clark promoted a particular ideal for the representation of the body, the Classical nude. Although his judgements on beauty were mapped onto the Platonic naked/nude distinction outlined at the beginning of his book, Clark

never mentioned Plato or Kant in the exposition of his argument, and referred to Aristotle only in passing. Instead, he defined the ideal as a framework for the way the nude was conceptualised historically. In fact, he preferred to locate his project within the framework of liberal history rather than in philosophy, for Clark was concerned, above all else, to document the heroic development of Western civilisation as it was enshrined in art. Plato's views were of only limited use to this enterprise, since the Ancient philosopher did not value art highly, believing as he did that all representations are degraded because they deflect attention from the empirical world, which is itself only a shadow of the ideal. Aristotle's view, as Clark summarised it, was similar to Plato's, in that 'everything has an ideal form of which the phenomena of experience are more or less corrupted replicas' (Clark 1957: 9–10). Kant's aesthetics located art within eighteenth-century discourses on beauty and perception, and, as Nead explained, they indirectly inform many of Clark's judgements on art. A deeper philosophical reading of Kant would however reveal that his 'transcendental idealism' was constructed from a position which is so subtle that, as Roger Scruton observed, 'no commentator seems to agree with any other as to what it is' (Scruton 1996: 25).

Like most art historians of his era, Clark was a champion of so-called common sense, and frank about his determination not to 'plunge into a sea of speculation' on philosophical matters (Clark 1957: 10). In stressing the 'practical' aspect of his formalist enterprise, however, Clark conflated the ideal with representation. It is worth quoting in full Clark's preferred definition of the ideal.

> Perhaps the question is best answered in Crocean terms. The ideal is like a myth, in which the finished form can be understood only as the end of a long process of accretion. In the beginning no doubt there is the coincidence of widely diffused desires and the personal tastes of a few individuals endowed with the gift of simplifying their visual experiences into easily comprehensible shapes. Once this fusion has taken place, the resulting image, while still in a plastic state, may be enriched or refined upon by succeeding generations. Or, to change the metaphor, it is like a receptacle into which more and more experience can be poured. Then, at a certain point it is full. It sets. And, partly because at a certain point it seems to be completely satisfying, partly because the mythopoeic faculty has declined, it is accepted as true.
>
> (Clark 1957: 11)

This description of the ideal, as 'a myth', 'a comprehensible shape', 'an image', and 'a receptacle for experience', oscillates between Plato's world of forms and the history of representations, a murky zone somewhere between pure abstraction and lived experience. It points to the difficulty of explaining the relationship between a conceptual ideal and a representational ideal, the latter of which, at least, is mediated by cultural and personal experience.

In practice, Clark's loose definition of the ideal as an historical phenomenon enabled him to include within his argument a formal analysis of different representational ideals for the body that were produced throughout history. He blended Ancient Greek notions of bodily perfection and the Christian association of the body with original sin, thus constructing the ideal nude as a trans-historical category that subsumes conflicting representational schemes and antithetical belief systems under its mantle. Contemporary historiographers, particularly those influenced by Foucault, have criticised this sort of totalising approach, drawing attention to the complexity and contingency of historical systems and events. Their denunciation of all trans-historical categories, plus the criticism that Clark's category of the ideal nude, in particular, emerges from distinctions based on race, class and gender have virtually terminated all speculation on the ideal as a means of conceptualising positive representations of the body.

Addressing concerns that are related to Clark's enterprise, Nicholas Mirzoeff's book for example, entitled *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995), invoked Foucault's variant of 'effective history' and its relationship to the body to explain how various forms of 'the ideal figure', historically, were constructed in art. According to Foucault,

> The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body.
>
> (Foucault 1984: 83)

By renouncing ideals, linear chronologies and progressive histories and focusing instead on 'ruptures', 'discontinuities' and material effects, Foucault analysed the way the body is worked on by the processes of history, is arbitrarily constructed by them and at the same time legitimates their hegemony. Mirzoeff's analysis of art, however, is not as radically anti-essentialist as his reference to Foucault might suggest. Describing *Bodyscape* as a contribution to 'the genealogy of the (post)-modern body image from the Enlightenment to the present', Mirzoeff conducted his analysis primarily within the articulation of art and history, and only secondarily within the articulation of the body and history. Although the 'bodyscape', as he defined it, is a cluster of signs that is multiple rather than singular and flexible rather than fixed, it is metaphysical in that it is distinct from the physical body of 'flesh and blood' and trans-historical in that it is a category that spans the passing of time. Mirzoeff implied moreover that the artist appeals to concepts or ideals which, by means of context and style, 'limit' or 'frame' the 'bodyscape' (Mirzoeff 1995: 3). By addressing the 'bodyscape', however, Mirzoeff could describe the continuing

recurrence of constructs of the 'perfect figure' in Western culture, at the level of representations, rather than ideals.

In identifying a *feminist* ideal for the representation of the female body, my book foregrounds the concepts which 'limit' and 'frame' the 'bodyscape', but acknowledges the lessons to be learnt from Clark's confusion between a conceptual ideal and a representational ideal. My interest in the ideal runs against the grain of much feminist thinking, since deconstruction does not tolerate ideals. For example, Parker and Pollock argued that in being denied access to the nude, historically, women were 'excluded from both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 115). Rather than challenge women to construct the female body according to a feminist ideal, however, Parker and Pollock advocated deconstruction of the 'patriarchal' ideal and representation. I will demonstrate that even feminist art that deconstructed painting, representation and the patriarchal ideal was often also directed towards the conceptual ideal of an erotically appealing female body that was inclusive of difference.

Analysis of Clark's example shows also that, in considering a feminist ideal, it is necessary to take account of how the ideal was mediated by the changing historical, social and signifying relations in which it was implicated. One would have to allow, for example, that Barbara Kruger's resistant body, Karen Finley's transgressive body and Cindy Sherman's simulacral body engaged in different ways with changing attitudes to gender and visual culture, and that to a certain extent they contributed to those changes. It might be argued that the changes, in turn, inflected notions of inclusiveness and eroticism, thus rendering the ideal unstable and eventually groundless. When taken to this extreme, however, such arguments are ultimately counterproductive, and do not reflect the way most visual artists proceeded in their artistic practices. Although one should admit a danger of both distortion and the prioritisation of mind over body in diachronic analyses of body ideals, artists have had to negotiate these difficulties in order to consider the possibility or impossibility of positive representations of the female body. In practice, these negotiations entailed a combination of conceptual and/or bodily manoeuvres as part of the processes of art production.

Since the feminist ideal discussed in this book encompassed only about thirty years of recent history, efforts to define it cannot be either exhaustive or conclusive. Rather than conduct a chronological survey of feminist art production, or to invent my own definition of feminism, I propose to use artworks, in subsequent chapters, as the basis for my analysis. I suggest that a feminist ideal can be traced by focusing on ambiguity in art and by following themes from visual cues. Meanwhile, in order to provide a background to theories and artworks discussed in future chapters, I want to outline how ambiguity has been explained in contemporary theory – especially in relation to sexuality and representation – and how it complicated feminist politics. Most of the theories are by now well known to artists and have informed contemporary art practices in diverse and indirect ways.

Ambiguity

In the visual arts, ambiguity is an effect of representational processes, a complication, a blurring, an uncertainty or vagueness. It may be consciously intended, or it may occur as an accident or mistake. As the latter, it marks the failure of intentions, competencies, perceptions, and the way vision is implicated in all of these. On the other hand, ambiguity may be neither intentional nor a mistake. Depending on your critical perspective, ambiguity can occur in the mind or body of the artist, or in the way the artist is positioned as a 'subject' in discourse. It can be found in the artwork or in the spectator, in public or in private space, or in the relationship between the art and its historical context. If art is to be seen as an extension to the body, and as a point of mediation between the artist's body and that of the spectator, ambiguity is an effect of its being both an object for erotic display and an object of erotic, visual pleasure. As such, ambiguity is of primary interest in a feminist analysis of the female body in visual representation.

Ambiguity in visual art is an effect of the incommensurability of vision and language, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4. Usually, however, it is a term that is associated with the imprecision or artifice of language. Perhaps the most notable writer in English on ambiguity was the modernist literary critic, William Empson, who in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1995 [1930]) set out to demonstrate the importance of ambiguity to the beauty and complexity of poetry. He defined ambiguity as 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (1995: 19). Beginning with the simplest type of ambiguity, where 'a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once', he proceeded to consider its many different aspects, describing more complex forms, with illustrations from a range of canonical texts (1995: 20–21). In these definitions, ambiguity is both a space where different meanings blur, overlap, or are conflated, and a method for achieving these effects. As such it is open, dynamic and multilayered. However, Empson's definition of ambiguity implies that it is also somehow integrated, whole and contained by 'forces' (1995: 272). As he explained, 'A sort of unity may be given by the knowledge of a scheme on which all the things occur; so that the scheme itself becomes the one thing which is being considered' (1995: 271). To be unitary, he suggested, ambiguity must have a basis in rationality, since 'anything (phrase, sentence, or poem) meant to be considered as a unit must be unitary, must stand for a single order of the mind' (1995: 271). Finally Empson claimed that even though ambiguity is inextricable from its context, 'it is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify' (1995: 272). He thus explained ambiguity in positive terms as a measure of artistic value.

If modernist or structuralist criticism constructed ambiguity as a unity, poststructuralist criticism approached it as disunity. It did not conceptualise ambiguity as a category or set of categories for analysis, but as fields of dispersion and moments of discontinuity that threaten to dissolve not only the 'forces' that

contain it, but also all structures, categories and identities. As such, ambiguity is both a description and a feature of postmodernism. Drawing on the theory of Walter Benjamin, Craig Owens attributed ambiguity in postmodern art to the 'allegorical impulse' that underpinned its diverse artistic strategies such as 'Appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization' (Owens 1992: 209). This impulse distinguished postmodern art, he said, from the symbolical impulse that characterised modernist art. For Derrida ambiguity was located in the margins of texts, for Lacan in the incoherences of the psyche, for Kristeva in the space of the undivided mother/child, and for Foucault in the discontinuities of discursive practices and the ruptures in historical formations. In traditional art these ambiguities provide points of entry for deconstructions of the Classical ideal of the female body and of the mind/body dichotomy on which the ideal was built. Since feminists used deconstruction critically and politically, they foregrounded ambiguity in order to reveal the negative impulses and power structures that produced and are concealed by the ideal. Hence, in early feminist discourse, especially, ambiguity in art was inflected as negative or neutral, but never positively, as it might have been had it been attached to a new or alternative ideal. In representation, this negative ambiguity became associated with male desire, and this was no more evident than in the tradition of the female nude in art.

Sexuality and representation

By the 1970s and 1980s, early second-wave feminist research had unearthed a great number of stereotypes in the history of art that were based on a binary system of desirable and undesirable forms of femininity. These stereotypes, which ranged from the 'civilised' virgin, mother and muse to the 'uncivilised' whore, monster and witch, were shown to serve as role models for women. Although the investigations of these earlier feminists were conducted in traditional, iconographic terms, they demonstrated that such stereotypes of femininity reinforced a 'patriarchal' ideal, an ideal that in art was embodied in the female nude. Marxist feminists, in particular, began to ask how and why representations of sexuality played such an important role in women's oppression. As Griselda Pollock explained:

> If Marxist cultural studies rightly privilege ideology, feminist analyses focus on pleasure, on the mechanisms and managements of sexualized pleasures which the major ideological apparatuses organize, none more potently than those involved with visual representation.
>
> (Pollock 1988: 14)

When applied to art, this shift in feminist criticism from ideology to pleasure entailed a rethinking of the relationship between subjectivity and the viewing process. As Pollock said,

> The use of psychoanalytic theory not only provides some interpretative tools for understanding the obsessive preoccupation with images of woman and their inconsistent characters, but shifts attention away from iconographic readings to the study of the process of the image, what is being done with it and what it is doing for its users.
>
> (Pollock 1988: 147)

Such a shift occurred, most notably, with Laura Mulvey's importation of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory into film studies, and her analysis of the 'apparatus' of the male gaze.

Lacan appealed to feminists, not only because of the prominence he gave to the role of sexuality in the formation of the subject, but also because he linked this to 'positionality' in language and hence to culture. Lacan followed Freud in that he directed attention to ambiguity as an effect of the way the unconscious interrupts conscious processes. However, his proposal that subjectivity is only achieved with the acquisition of language challenged Freud's account of the infant's progress through oral, anal, phallic phases. According to Lacan, before the child assumes his 'subject position' within the 'Symbolic Order' of language, he must pass through two other major orders of meaning onto which the Symbolic is mapped: that is, from the Real to the Imaginary. The Imaginary Order is based on the mirror phase, which occurs when the pre-oedipal child recognizes its own image in a mirror. The child's image of itself as a visual whole, or as a *Gestalt*, 'situates the agency of the ego' in a 'fictional direction', and is 'in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him'.

> Thus, this *Gestalt* . . . symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion.
>
> (Lacan 1977a: 2–3)

In other words, the mirror phase, which provides the child with the basis of an identity as well as the basis of 'an alienation', establishes the preconditions for psychic and subjective ambiguity.

Lacan's description of the mirror phase and the Order of the Imaginary clearly has implications for the analysis of the female nude in art. The (male) child's fascination with a visual image, or reflection of itself, in the place of an 'other' is crucial to its apprehension of (sexual) difference and to the formation of its ego ideal. Since the ideal that the child desires is also predicated on a series of splits and losses, the concealment of these, in the Symbolic Order of representation, produces ambiguity. Hence, ambiguity, on the level of the

Symbolic Order, is associated with repression. To explain this level of meaning and the centrality of sexuality within it, Lacan incorporated the Freudian Oedipus and castration complexes. In order for the (male) child to be accessed into the Symbolic Order, the mother–child dyad must be mediated by the phallus, a 'third term' that is represented by the 'father'. The phallus represents the Father's Law which prohibits incest through the threat of castration, but which offers the child the Name-of-the Father, a position as speaking subject within the symbolic relations of the family and of culture.

According to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which followed Lacan's scheme for the Order of the Imaginary, the image of 'woman' serves the ambiguous function of the phallus, a fetish or substitute for woman's lack, with which the male spectator identifies narcissistically. In a critique of the way the 'mass media' constructed images of 'woman as spectacle', Mulvey referred in particular to the art of Allen Jones. Rather than focusing on ambiguity in Jones's images of 'woman', Mulvey concluded that 'the *true* exhibit is always the phallus' (my emphasis), and that 'Women are *simply* the scenery on to which men project their narcissistic fantasies' (Mulvey 1987: 131).

The theory of the male gaze became the framework for a feminist critique of representation, both in art and criticism of the 1980s. For example, the script superimposed on Barbara Kruger's photocomposition, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* disrupts hierarchical, 'phallocentric' modes of visual display (Plate 1). It defiantly challenges the 'ideal spectator' in direct speech, while defacing the image of a sculpted female head in profile that might have been read as the representation of a patriarchal ideal. Kate Linker described the effect of Kruger's 'scripto-visual' interventions: 'And within the gap between image and text, between illusioned object and assaultive, contradictory voice, is cleared a space for the participation of a feminine subjectivity long denied by its subjected status' (Linker 1992: 414). The ambiguity of this in-between space of feminine subjectivity allowed the feminist artist to refashion the artwork, symbolically, as a shield against the unwelcome intimacy of, or exploitation by the male 'other'. As Linker said, there is 'no basic self or fixed identity, but only a construction in process' (1992: 414–15). Therefore, although ambiguity made available the 'prospect of a counterlanguage', neither Kruger's art nor Linker's commentary went so far as to suggest how such a counterlanguage might be effected beyond this point of protest (1992: 415).

While Lacanian psychoanalysis has been a very productive area for feminist analysis of decentred, gendered subjectivity, it has been criticised for its focus on the psyche at the expense of consideration of the body. In other words, Lacan has been accused of privileging the mind over the body and thus for reinscribing the dualistic foundations of Western metaphysics that served to devalue women. In this respect, Julia Kristeva's emphasis on the pre-oedipal, maternal phase as the precondition for all symbolic functioning appealed to feminists. In her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), she argued that 'proper' subjectivity requires the expulsion of the improper and

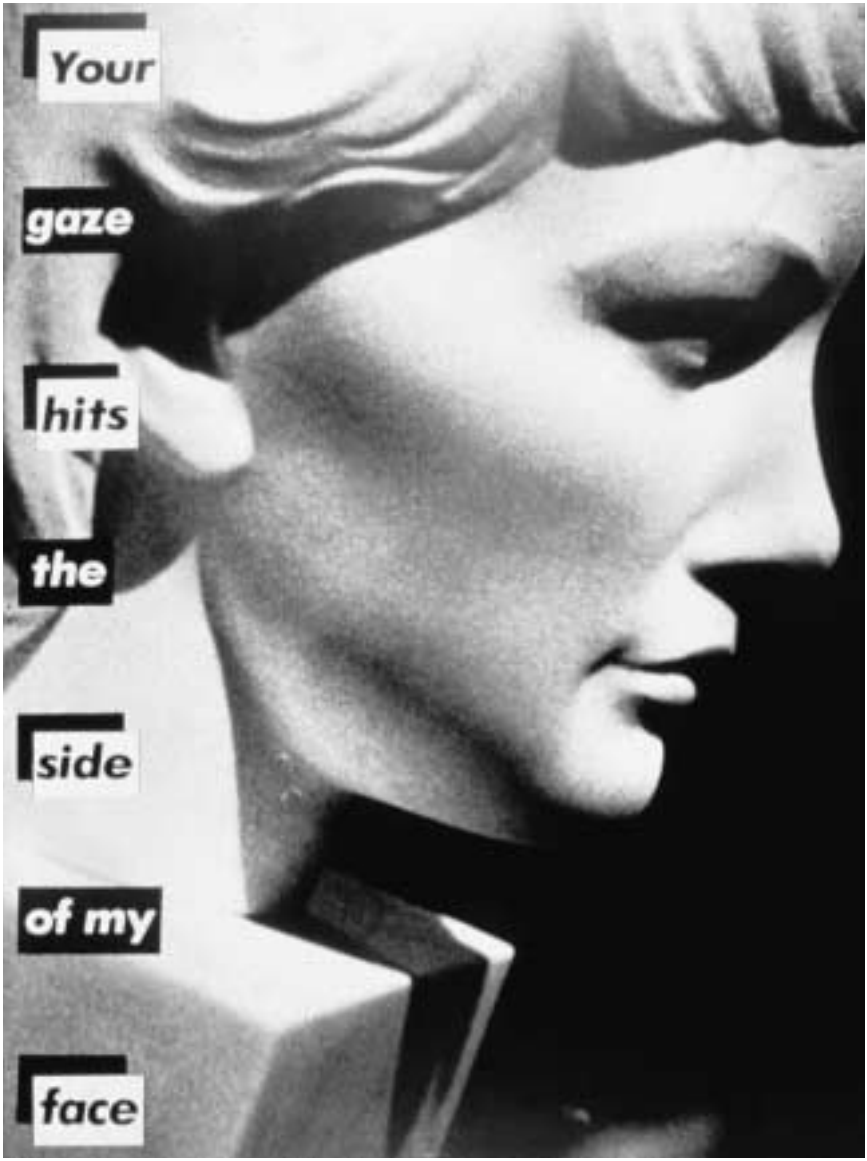

Plate 1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, 1981, photograph, 55″ × 41″ (collection Ydessa Art Foundation, Toronto). Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

the unclean, which can never be fully eradicated and are therefore always ambiguously present, threatening the fictional unity of the subject. Abjection is registered in the horror that this ambiguity produces.

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what treatens(sic) it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also, abjection itself is a compromise of judgement and affect, a condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out.
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 9–10)

According to this view, therefore, it might be argued that the ambiguity of the female body in representation invokes the abject.

The 'abject body' was prefigured, to some extent, in feminist performance body art of the 1960s and 1970s, which touched on bodily horror and disgust. This included Carolee Schneemann's ritualised performance, *Eye/Body* (1963), in which she allowed snakes to slither across her paint-spattered body, as an expression of 'feminine sensibility', and Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971), which depicts a soiled tampon being extracted from a woman's (the artist's) vagina. More recently, Kristevian theory has inspired artists and critics to explore the obsessive dimensions of female desire, and its relation to the maternal body. Janine Antoni's gnawed and licked lumps of chocolate, for example, have been interpreted as symptomatic of neurotic behaviour and eating disorders that are linked to the abject and the problem of separating the 'self' from the (m)other. Rosemary Betterton argued that art such as Antoni's and Helen Chadwick's is not regressive or essentialist, but 'functions in a similar way as a fetish which both alludes to and denies (maternal) loss' (Betterton 1996: 153). One might add that in this respect the artwork fails as a point of mediation between bodies, for it not only resists the male 'other', but also turns back towards the female body of the producer. In its relation to the female body, a massive, gnawed and licked cube of chocolate by Antoni does not function as a representation that serves as a mediator between self and other. It is not a lure or an object of display, or a shield against exploitation. Rather, it is itself the monstrous remnant of an erotic object of desire, part of which has already been absorbed back into the body/self. As excess, its ambiguity lies in whether it might sustain the subject or because of pollution poison it. Such art is very effective as a prompt to considering new perspectives on the relationship between the girl child and the mother, and serves as a measure of that 'pre-objectal' relationship's 'imponderable affect' (Kristeva 1982: 9–10). From a

political perspective, however, it is often difficult to justify in feminist terms, for it could be seen to reinforce culturally encoded, negative associations with the female body.

Feminist art critics in the late 1980s responded to the threat posed by ambiguity in psychoanalytic theory by questioning or rejecting earlier poststructuralist critical and artistic strategies. Teresa de Lauretis wrote in 1985, for example, that strategies in feminist film for disrupting the male gaze had been superseded:

> The project of women's cinema . . . is no longer that of destroying or disrupting man-centred vision by representing its blind spots, its gaps or its repressed. The effort and challenge now are to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject.
>
> (De Lauretis 1985: 163)

This move was paralleled by the search for alternate theories of desire and of the body, where the issue of ambiguity in representation was sidelined or suppressed. In a bid to find a feminist orientation in a non-psychoanalytic theory of desire, Elizabeth Grosz extolled the benefits of the theories of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose anti-Lacanian speculations configured desire as 'not a lack but a positive force of production' (Grosz 1994: xvi). For Deleuze and Guattari, she said, desire was 'no longer identified with a purely psychical and signifying relation' as it had been with Lacan, but was 'a force or energy which creates links between objects, which makes things, forges alliances, produces connections' (Grosz 1994: xvi). The metaphor which Deleuze and Guattari offered to express desire's complexity was the 'rhizome', a stem of a plant that can produce both roots and shoots.

> There is a rupture in the rhizome each time the segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines never cease to refer to one another, which is why a dualism or dichotomy can never be assumed, even in the rudimentary form of good and bad. A rupture is made, a line of flight is traced, yet there is always the risk of finding along it organizations which restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject.
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 18)

Hence, this conceptualisation of desire is neither a return to the Enlightenment ideal nor a rupture that signifies lack. Instead it positions the embodied subject within a set of material practices in which ambiguity does not figure in a negative way. As Grosz explained: 'In place of plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity is not lack, absence, rupture, but rather becoming' (Grosz 1994: 165). Since lack is always associated with woman as the embodiment of male

desire, any model of desire that dispenses with it, argued Grosz, 'seems to be a positive step forward' (1994: 165).

Elspeth Probyn's commentary on a routine by US stand-up comic, Suzanne Westenhoefer, corresponds with this model and is an example of Deleuze and Guattari's theories being applied in the analysis of what is arguably performance art. Quoting from Deleuze and Guattari, Probyn said that Westenhoefer's performance demonstrated that 'emotion as desire, desire as emotion "does not have, strictly speaking, an object, but merely an *essence* that spreads itself over various objects"' (Probyn 1995: 14). Westenhoefer's monologue about her desire to lick the vein on Martina Navratilova's forearm, for example, described 'a specific queer form of movement and mediation between individuals', rather than a desire for the whole of Martina as an image (ibid.). Probyn concluded that 'the productive force of desire can then be seen as it incessantly spins lines between the thing and the representation. Desire then is the force that connects and disconnects images and things' (ibid.). Understood thus as a productive force and as an essence, desire is dissociated from the ambiguities of representation, and displaced from the usual, psychoanalytic 'site and citing' of desire 'within a project of origins' (1995: 15). This enables a point of departure from which to constitute 'queer belongings' in a network of material relations.

Although speculation such as Probyn's provided new and useful directions for queer theory and feminist art criticism that are unencumbered by the ambiguities of the psyche, feminists have had reason to be deterred by the elaborate complexity of Deleuze and Guattari's writing. As Grosz explained, the fact that their scheme does not admit a rudimentary form of 'good' or 'bad' makes it difficult to articulate a feminist perspective within it, and its abstract terminology and minute distinctions require an extraordinary degree of perseverance from the reader (Grosz 1994: 166).

Politics and ambiguity

Generally speaking, in the 1990s, ambiguity in art still posed a problem for feminists, and thus for feminist art practices such as those outlined above. In particular, poststructuralist analyses of subjectivity upset the status of feminism as a politics of emancipation. Arguments that subjectivity does not have an essential core, but is a provisional, relational and historically contingent set of subject positions, precluded notions of agency based on the assumption of a self-determining, politically active individual. Femininity was exposed as a social construction, and, by extension, it was argued that the categories of man, woman and patriarchy were also constructs of reductive dualisms, as evident even in Lacan's framework for the psyche. As Elizabeth Grosz said, feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Jane Gallop 'have justifiably accused Lacan of phallocentrism – the representation of *two* sexes by a single, masculine or sexually neutral model' (Grosz 1989: 25). Kristeva's work, too, was suspect, as it questioned 'the

long-term effectivity of feminist goals of claiming a recognized social position and value for women as women' (1989: 99). Judith Butler rejected Lacan on the grounds that his debt to Nietzsche is evident in 'a romanticization or, indeed a religious idealization of "failure", humility and limitation before the Law, which makes the Lacanian narrative ideologically suspect' (Butler 1990: 56).

Politically speaking, the most devastating critique of unitary feminism came in the 1970s and 1980s from 'women of colour' in the US and Britain. Indigenous women in Australia, Canada and New Zealand soon joined them, since they saw that their interests, too, were not represented by the predominantly white, middle-class constituency of 'second-wave feminism'. To take a simple example, indigenous Australian women had little sympathy in the 1970s for the abortion law-reform protests of white Australian women. Since many of them belonged to the 'Stolen Generation' who had been taken from their natural mothers to be raised by white foster families, it made sense for them to repopulate. In this respect they had more in common with the black activist groups in the US and Britain than with white Australian feminists.

Meanwhile, ethnic women, gay women and women with disabilities added their voices in opposition to unitary feminism. Their dissatisfaction corresponded to a general intensification in identity politics that had emerged in most so-called Western cultures in reaction to the rise of the 'respectable Right', and to the neo-conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s. During this period new social movements were fuelled by growing 'crises', such as the high rate of Australian Aboriginal deaths in custody into which there was a Royal Commission of enquiry in 1987, and the prejudice directed at gays as an effect of the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, these events coincided with a series of ecological 'disasters', such as the appearance of a hole in the ozone layer over southern Australia and New Zealand.

In academic circles, this spate of urgent 'crises' tested theories on the dissolution of the subject, and the more politically passive or nihilistic positions of postmodernist relativism, such as Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, an image in contemporary culture is 'its own simulacrum', bearing 'no relation to any reality whatever' (Baudrillard 1992: 256). Similarly, so-called 'crises' in contemporary culture, according to Baudrillard, have no connection with any reality. They are hyperreal events that are inscribed in advance in the processes of TV and the media. As such, they function 'as a set of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer to their "real" goal at all' (1992: 267). Baudrillard demonstrated that capitalist power, which is 'monstrous' and 'unprincipled', disguises this shift.

> The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy, and the finalities of production. For that purpose it prefers the discourse of crisis.
>
> (Baudrillard 1992: 268)

Thus, according to Baudrillard, power counteracts the image's betrayal of reality by instigating a proliferation of 'reality effects'. Baudrillard's observation that in contemporary culture we are confronted not with the reality of objects but the hyperreality of simulacra was important for the analysis of postmodern, visual culture and art practices. The *Film Stills* of Cindy Sherman, for example, might be 'self-portraits' that suggest stereotypical heroines from Hollywood films, but they are more accurately described as simulacral, in that they are 'copies' without originals. In addition, Baudrillard's description of the processes of cyberpower and virtual reality, in relation to post world-war politics, proved to be prescient, as in the case of the Gulf War. His presumption that we are powerless to do anything about it, however, was too nihilistic for some social critics, such as the postcolonial feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. From the point of view of oppressed and marginalised groups, Baudrillard's denial of a relation between representation and a basic reality and his depiction of 'the masses' as a group of captive, inert media consumers, spelled effacement of their difference and indifference to their particular struggles.

While cultural theorists, such as Spivak, were critical of the neutrality and universalism of some postmodernisms, they were often reluctant to abandon poststructuralism and its foregrounding of ambiguity. In postcolonial criticism, deconstructive techniques proved to be useful in combination with Marxist and feminist perspectives. Derrida used deconstruction as a means of intervening in what he described as 'logocentric' texts, which he said are based on a logic of presence and are structured by binary oppositions. His procedure was to reverse the negative and positive terms, to displace the negative term and show that it is the precondition of the positive term, and to create or discover a term that includes both binary terms but exceeds their scope. By these means, Derrida contested the underlying presumptions of metaphysics and idealism. In accord with this practice, some postcolonial critics used deconstruction to expose the exclusions and reductiveness of conceptualisations of race, ethnicity, class, disability and gender. The politics of alterity, itself, is constructed along dualistic lines, often inverting the hierarchical structure of binaries such as black and white, or positing social groups such as 'blacks', 'lesbians' or 'women' as homogeneous and unitary. Deconstruction was a strategy for curbing this tendency towards domination and replacing it with 'a more fluid and less coercive conceptual organisation of terms' (Grosz 1989: xv).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak politicised deconstruction as a way of overcoming the subject/object dichotomy in the analysis of racism. As she explained:

> If you talk about the class struggle – the mode of production narrative – as the final determinant, or if you speak about women's oppression as the final determinant, you take a stand, distinguishing yourself from capitalists, racists, men, and also, of course, from the people of the

> other races, you are, to an extent, making yourself, as the subject of investigation, transparent, and deconstruction will not allow this.
>
> (Spivak 1990: 121)

In using deconstruction to problematise the 'positionality of the subject of investigation', Spivak's aim was to mobilise the occupants of the hegemonic subject position into occupying the subject position of the 'Other'. Although in uttering such imperatives she risked employing an 'essentialist' discourse, Spivak defended this strategy.

> I think it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism, universalism as it comes in terms of the universal – of classical German philosophy or the universal of the white upper-class male ... etc. But *strategically* we cannot. Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing – not only generalising but universalising. Since the moment of essentialising, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.
>
> (Spivak 1990: 11)

In other words, although Spivak employed deconstructive techniques and focused on the ambiguities of 'texts', she was prepared to engage in essentialist discourse 'strategically' for a political purpose. In this respect her approach paralleled that of so-called postcolonial, political and identitarian art practices, such as Fiona Foley's appropriation of the genre of the female nude in art for her 'self portrait', which will be examined in Chapter 2, and Rea's antiracist art, which features in Chapter 6. For these artists, deconstruction was a useful starting point for a postcolonial critique from which to assert their identities as indigenous Australians.

Thus, while postcolonial criticism and anti-racist art was very effective in drawing attention to the struggles of various oppressed minorities, they often exposed and exploited the shortcomings of postmodern ambiguity. Primary among these shortcomings was the fact that poststructuralism's disavowal of Enlightenment ideals and totalisations such as truth, reason and freedom prevented the establishment of an ethical framework for resisting oppression, or of appealing to ethical principles, or a 'metanarrative' of justice. While postmodern perspectives on contemporary culture, such as Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra', and Lyotard's 'incredulity towards metanarratives', pointed emphatically to the impossibility of political action, some critics argued that human rights issues highlighted a need to distinguish between politics and ethics. Politics, it might be argued, involves winners and losers in a specific

historical struggle, whereas ethics are a set of principles by which to live one's life, or fashion the 'self'.

Terry Eagleton argued against such a simplistic distinction, claiming that 'Deconstruction's embarrassment with ethics is, more precisely, an embarrassment with *political* ethics' (Eagleton 1998: 213). Noting the paradox that deconstruction turned to Kant for some of its ethical insights, Eagleton suggested that neither deconstruction, nor Marxian theory, can afford to ignore the question of justice. Responding to such concerns, some poststructuralists seeking an affirmative direction for feminism, and ways of theorising agency, recommended a revision of Foucault's later work on sexuality, in which he claimed that power can be a productive and positive force. Lois McNay, for example, recommended Foucault's final texts, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, in which he described 'practices and techniques through which individuals *actively* fashion their own identities' (McNay 1992: 3). McNay said 'such an idea permits Foucault to explain how individuals may escape the homogenizing tendencies of power in modern society through the assertion of their own autonomy' (1992: 3). With this in view, 'different aspects to the formation of one's self as an ethical subject are incorporated by Foucault under the category of practices or techniques of the self, or an "aesthetics of existence"' (1992: 52). McNay concluded that Foucault's final work could thus be seen as 'tentatively mapping out some of the contours for a renewed development of feminist theory and debate' (1992: 198). These contours were mapped out most effectively in queer theory.

Negotiating a path through ambiguity

In 'Volume One' of his three-part series, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argued that

> Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.
>
> (Foucault 1990: 105–6)

By articulating sexuality in material terms, as a network of effects linked to strategies of power, Foucault located sexuality on the surface of the body, thus dispelling ambiguities associated with the mind or psyche. Ambiguity, too, could be located in this surface network of sexuality, for by describing sexuality

as an historical construct, Foucault effectively collapsed the distinction between sex and gender, leaving some residuum from the relation between the two. Foucault's perspective on sexuality was developed in gay and lesbian studies, where the issues of ambiguity in relation to sexuality in art, or visual representation, were not so much solved as bypassed or redirected in a positive way according to a principle of inclusiveness.

Queer emerged in reaction to the divisions within gay and lesbian politics in which feminism had sometimes been negatively implicated. Many lesbians and transsexual women argued, for example, that their interests were excluded by the heterosexist assumptions of unitary feminism. Queer denounced such exclusions, while abjuring assimilation to the norm. Annamarie Jagose explained that 'Acknowledging the inevitable violence of identity politics and having no stake in its own hegemony, queer is less an identity than a *critique* of identity' (Jagose 1996: 131). Paving the way for this critique, Judith Butler had introduced 'performativity' as a term for describing gender as an 'enactment'. As she said, 'Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1990: 140). This idea of gender as an unstable identity constituted in exterior space and time develops Foucault's claim that sexuality is 'a great surface network' on the surface of the body, the components of which are linked together by strategies of power and knowledge. Butler went further than Foucault, however, in deconstructing gender and insisting that identity is totally groundless.

> The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'. The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.
>
> (Butler 1990: 141)

This description of 'performativity', according to which possibilities for gender transformations and discontinuities co-exist across time and in an exterior space, operates on the assumption that the enactment of gender is anticipated by an internal and prior, but not essential, mode of ambiguity. Just as Spivak practised deconstruction while condoning a sort of strategic essentialism in anti-racist politics, Judith Butler's deconstruction of gender acknowledged the importance of gay and lesbian politics as well as the inevitable exclusions that they incur. She explained this situation in poststructuralist terms:

> Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics – as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. As such, the critical point of departure is *the historical present*, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize and immobilize.
>
> (Butler 1990: 5)

Recommending the acceptance of identity politics and the deconstruction of identity categories simultaneously, Butler was then able to theorise the 'performativity' of gender within a feminist framework. In arguing that gender and sexuality are always performative, moreover, Butler avoided the question of psychical ambiguity and its relationship to representation. Ambiguity was reintroduced in performance art, where the 'performativity' of gender is enacted on a symbolic level. In cases such as Linda Sproul's performances, which are discussed in Chapter 5, for instance, ambiguity is present and the 'performative approach' has proved to be useful for conceptualising a feminist, queer and anti-racist ideal in relation to the representation of the female body.

Like Butler's notion of 'performativity', Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire as a rhizomatic web in which all elements are linked, lends itself to feminist analyses of contemporary culture. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that art could be viewed as a prosthetic, as an extension of the body that acts both as an erotic visual lure and as a shield against intimacy with an 'other'. This view accords with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the body and with Elizabeth Grosz's recommendation of their theory to feminists. As Grosz explained

> Their (Deleuze and Guattari's) notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior oppositions.
>
> (Grosz 1994: 164)

Grosz explained further that

> Following Spinoza, the body is regarded as neither a locus for a consciousness nor an organically determined entity; it is understood more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations and becomings it undergoes, and the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can

> link with, how it can proliferate its other capacities – a rare, affirmative understanding of the body.
>
> (Grosz 1994: 165)

According to this view, art, as an extension of the body, acts both as a machinic connection, a link with other bodies, and as a means of 'proliferating the body's other capacities'. As a link it is an intersection of corporeal flows that avoids the usual conceptual ambiguities associated with binary oppositions. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, for example, Rosalind Krauss speculated that Louise Bourgeois's 'part-object' sculptures that resemble dismembered body-parts could be understood as 'desiring machines'. As such they desire connections in 'the material domain' rather than the 'psychoanalytically understood realm of ideality' in which fantasy and desire are traditionally located (Krauss 1999: 64).

Theorist, Donna Haraway, too, was wary of binaries, and recommended art to feminists as a way of adjusting to the current world of globalisation, hybridisation and advanced technology. She proposed that, in the 'border war' between organism and machine, cyberfeminism should provide the framework for '*responsibility*' in the construction of boundaries (Haraway 1991: 150). Although the term responsibility implies the existence of and adherence to some normative, ethical standard, Haraway did not spell it out in this way. Instead she stuck to the metaphor of war, in which the stakes were 'the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination' (1991: 150). In these terms she specifically looked at 'two overlapping groups of texts for their insight into the construction of a potentially helpful cyborg myth: constructions of women of colour and monstrous selves in science fiction' (1991: 174).

Many young artists took their cue from Haraway, proving that advances in science and information technologies provide feminists with exciting tools, stimulate joyful imaginings and enable new embodied becomings that displace the female nude in art. Linda Dement's hybrid 'girlmonsters', for example, transgress boundaries between animal and human or human and machine, and are expressive of a feminist, queer form of desire. On the whole, however, the most challenging cyber art tends to focus on nostalgic ambiguities that cannot be dispelled, such as unease at reality's eclipse, commercial exploitation of the feminine, or the occasional resurgence of anger that might once have been labelled as essentialist, feminist politics. As I will show in Chapter 8, anxieties are present in Dement's art, which clearly run counter to the culture of joy and affirmation predicted or aspired to by Haraway. Critics have argued that by yielding to ambiguity on the question of subjective agency and simultaneously embracing artificiality, cyberfeminism avails itself only of the subject-in-fantasy, and claims only a fictional responsibility to the 'human' and the 'real'. According to this argument, cyberfeminism is the reverse of strategies adopted by 'women of colour', and Haraway's proposal has the effect of invalidating feminism's strategic positioning of art at the intersection of culture and politics.

No matter how one assesses the success of contemporary feminist attempts to escape binaries, it is clear that the production and negotiation of ambiguity became a function and precondition of visual art in the 1990s. In these often post-poststructuralist moments, ambiguity in art was related not only to meanings, presence and consciousness, as well as to the unconscious, absence and lack, it was also involved with embodiment and at the social site. It absorbed the residual traces of the mind/body split, was entangled with new formations of the present, and infused predictions of the future. The erotic and hybrid ambiguities that devolved from these processes were hardly recognisable as having any relation to the female nude in art. By the same token, the stakes for feminism became higher, and finding ways to address ethical questions became a general concern.

In taking ambiguity as the focus of my analysis of art practices, I have suggested that contemporary feminist art that critically re-visioned the female nude, or referred critically to the female body in representation, proceeded in this way on the basis of a conceptual ideal. In producing such art, artists navigated ambiguities according to the positive value of visual, erotic appeal, and to the ethical principle of inclusiveness. Such 'metaphysical' assumptions have been crucial, although perhaps not necessary, to the way feminism has informed critical and artistic practices, and, more generally, to the way it has been enacted as an emancipatory, political project. In making these claims, my analysis is conducted from a general theoretical framework. Since anti-humanist critics dismiss some feminisms on account of their 'regressive' idealism, I want to stress that such a framework need not replicate the 'lucid' rationalisations or arrogant truths of modernist aesthetics or promote certain styles, modes or gender ideals over others. Instead, by providing a useful distance from post-structuralist theories, it could avoid the aporias and false antagonisms to which deconstruction sometimes gives rise, while being sensitive to complexities and differences. In this respect such a framework would be receptive to the many insights and orientations of poststructuralist and post-poststructuralist analyses of art and sexuality, including the prominence given to ambiguity.

Deconstruction played an important role in teasing out and highlighting the negative values and power relations that are implicated in idealist structures, and it is clear that time is needed for those values and relations to be evacuated or completely dislodged. The association of modernist conceptualisations of the body with painting, for example, is so ingrained in the minds of some critics who demand that art be political, transgressive or deviant, that the medium itself provokes resistance and even contempt. For this reason, among others, it would be foolish to predict another return of painting or to advocate the reinstatement of the female nude in art. Nevertheless, as a way of conceptualising the female body, the feminist ideal of positive erotic appeal and inclusiveness has been very useful. As invoked by the contemporary women artists named in Chapter 2, who re-visioned the female nude in art, the ideal encompasses difference while acknowledging the eroticism and ambiguity

inherent in visual images of the body. By taking its cue from these contemporary art practices that have reinstated the female nude, therefore, a general analytical framework, which acknowledges ambiguity, can function as a feminist critique of existing representational ideals. It can assert the value of the 'Other' and of the particular, while giving credence to art that lays claim to the glamour of the ideal. It is a way of thinking that is implicated in and inextricable from bodily processes, social relations, material practices and the materials of art. It involves the ambiguous spaces in and around the body, and thereby makes connections with other bodies, spaces and networks that impinge on, or are implicated in those spaces. It favours the possibility of positive, ethical social relations while tapping into the wider systems – be they discursive, metabolic, cybernetic or ecological – of the contemporary world.

2

RE-VISIONING THE FEMALE NUDE

By the 1980s, the female nude, which was once the principal icon of Western art and a symbol for art itself, had virtually vanished from acceptable contemporary art practice. Performance art, video, photography and film managed to keep bodies in sight, and students of painting and sculpture took life-classes in order to hone their drafting skills. Generally speaking, however, the visual representation of the female body was a risky business for artists, and the representing of it according to some conceptual ideal, such as beauty, or truth, is still strictly taboo. To an observer who is unfamiliar with academic discourses on Western visual culture and feminism, this suppression could look like a form of censorship that works against the best interests of women. The uninformed spectator might ask, what is so wrong with the naked female body that it cannot be represented? So what if it is sexy? Why can we not see it in art when we see it everywhere in advertising, pornography and the popular media? Such questions bespeak ignorance of John Berger's 1971 TV series, which criticised Western ways of viewing and representing the female body, and of feminist theories of spectatorship, which were broadcast, in some form of the media or another, to popular and academic audiences alike. There is more than a touch of irony, therefore, in the fact that similar questions to those above were asked most urgently in the 1990s, not by outside observers but by feminists, of feminism itself.

The few instances of the female nude in visual art of the 1990s draw attention to its absence from avant-garde practices over the preceding fifteen years. As will become clear throughout the rest of this book, these reappearances also highlight the possibility that such challenges to critical feminist orthodoxies regarding the visual representation of the female body were latent in the ambiguity of feminist art practices of the 1980s. In the second half of the present chapter, I will examine how some artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s revisioned the female nude according to a new conceptual ideal. Meanwhile, I want to consider the restrictive effect in the 1980s of anti-pornography legislation on the visual arts, the role played by anti-pornography feminists in this, and contemporaneous debates within feminism about pornography. An outline of these events might provide some background to the conflicting feminist

approaches to sexuality and visual representation that developed at the time, and to why the representation of the naked female body was such a daunting and complicated issue for artists.

Censorship and 'images of women'

A perceived 'backlash' against women's equality in the 1980s, in America, induced feminists generally to take a more sober approach to women's sexuality and pleasure than that which had been initiated in the 1970s. In fact, anti-pornography feminists tended to ignore pleasure altogether, narrowing their political and theoretical focus in the belief that pornography – which allegedly 'degraded' women, 'objectified' them and promoted violence against them – lay at the very heart of women's oppression. 'Libertarian' feminists, 'pro-sex' feminists, 'feminist sex radicals' and 'anti-censorship feminists', on the other hand, maintained variously that feminist opposition to pornography overlooked the diversity and potentiality of women's sexual experience and hindered the development of a positive politics of sexuality for women. As 'feminist sex radical', Carole Vance, explained, anti-pornography feminists contributed to a general 'sexual panic' in the broader community, which not only confused visual representations with actual sex, but reinforced conservative, misogynist and anti-feminist attitudes (Vance 1992: xxi).

In 1983, anti-pornography feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin co-authored the Minneapolis anti-pornography ordinance, in which pornography was defined as a form of sex discrimination. They thereby proposed a new moral basis for anti-pornography legislation, shifting emphasis from 'obscenity' – a traditional, human rights issue – to the civil rights of women. The ordinance proscribed material that included 'the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or words' (Vance 1992: xxv). It targeted art works, books, magazines, films and videos that depicted women 'in postures of sexual submission', 'as whores by nature', or 'being penetrated by objects' (1992: xxv). Even though the ordinance was declared unconstitutional in 1986 on grounds that it violated the First Amendment, which advocated freedom of speech, its effects at the time were considerable. Many images and books were removed from sale or public view according to the terms of the ordinance, but interpretations of expressions such as 'submission', 'degradation' and 'sexually explicit', were highly subjective. The inability, even amongst feminists, to agree on distinctions between violence, sexism and sex in images of women, suggested a general, unacknowledged assumption that sexuality itself was dangerous.

To avoid this confusion, British anti-pornography feminist, Susanne Kappeler shifted the ground of the argument. She posited that 'Pornography is not a special case of sexuality; it is a form of representation', and she proposed, accordingly, that 'a more elaborate analysis of representation' was required (Kappeler 1986: 2, 3). Censorship experts had argued that a link between

pornography and criminal sexual practice could not be proven, since pornography is fantasy, not reality. Kappeler insisted, however, that 'there is a dialectical relationship between representational practices which construct sexuality, and actual sexual practices, each informing the other', and she argued that representations 'have a continued existence in reality as objects of exchange; they have a genesis in material production' (1986: 3). As such, she explained, 'They are more real than the reality that they are said to represent or reflect' (1986: 3). Since all representations are products of their 'patriarchal', economic, political and cultural contexts, she argued, distinctions between good and bad erotic images, and between 'the Arts – the storehouses of (respectable) representations' and pornography, were specious (1986: 3). A feminist campaign against pornography, according to Kappeler, could not afford to be sidelined from its political purpose, as it was when it was conducted within the 'sanctuary' of art and literature.

Anti-censorship feminists were opposed to such attacks on art, and were outraged when US right-wing conservatives appropriated MacKinnon-styled anti-pornography feminist rhetoric, during the 1985–86 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography. This strategy of the Meese Commission, as it is better known, turned into a 'war on culture', when, in 1986, the Reagan administration attacked the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (Vance 1992: xxxii). In particular, the photography of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, the performance art of feminist, Karen Finley, and that of gay and lesbian artists, was cited as 'pornographic' and 'obscene'. Vance argued that:

> Once moral conservative groups successfully modernized their language, they could use words like 'degrading' and 'pornographic', without further reference to women's exploitation, to attack more customary targets, like homosexuality, non-marital sex, and sexually rebellious women.
>
> (Vance 1992: xxxiii)

According to Vance, 'even occasional nudity or mere reference to homosexuality were called "sexually explicit", while any representation containing sex or gender innovation was called pornography' (1992: xxxii).

Anti-pornography feminism made an impact also on British public policy debates, when for instance Labour MP, Clare Short, introduced an amendment to the 1985 Obscene Publications Bill. As Lynda Nead explained, although it was finally defeated, the bill aimed 'to ban pictures in newspapers of naked or partially naked women in sexually provocative poses' (Nead 1992: 101–2). Nead conceded that banning nudes was not the answer, but argued that Short's amendment forced 'into the open' a struggle to define obscenity in relation to 'the more everyday and apparently acceptable images of women published on page three of the *Sun* and in other national newspapers' (1992: 102). On the other hand, anti-censorship feminists, Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol,

argued strenuously against anti-pornography feminist interventions in British government policy. They cited Bristol MP, Dawn Primarolo's proposed bill, which aimed to prevent the unlicensed display and distribution of 'pornographic' materials, and was popular with conservative MPs in the early 1990s. Assiter and Carol argued that the bill would 'create a new category of shop and licence for Britain – the porn shop', would empower 'Trading Standards Officers to be the arbiters of our tastes', and would punish, in particular, the tastes of feminists and gays (Assiter and Carol 1993: 41).

In spite of the efforts of anti-pornography feminists to influence public policy, pro-sex feminists and feminist sex radicals maintained their determination throughout the 1980s to develop a nuanced analysis of sexuality that was based on women's desire, curiosity, adventure and success. Vance claimed, for example, that, in academic feminist circles, 'the dominance of the anti-pornography analysis from 1977–1982 came to an end' with the Barnard Sexuality Conference (Vance 1992: xxii). This meeting of a wide spectrum of feminist scholars of varying sexual and theoretical orientations aimed to address

> the central question, even paradox: how could feminism at the time reduce the sexual danger women faced and expand their sexual pleasure, without sacrificing women's accounts of either one? How could we formulate and work on a shared vision that acknowledged and made space for diversity? In the face of a right-wing program of shame and punishment, how could we identify the ways in which women had been humiliated through sex, without affirming that sexuality was intrinsically humiliating? And most of all, how could we support the continuing evolution of a sexual conversation, language, and analysis beyond these initial, tentative steps?
>
> (Vance 1992: xx)

The above questions imply a unitary feminist purpose, but in attempting to answer them, feminists first had to examine their desires and, perhaps more importantly, to listen to those of others.

Lesbians and other women of marginalised sexualities who were excluded or criticised by anti-pornography feminists had to defend their own sexual practices, often risking their reputations, jobs and personal safety to do so. Pat Califia's confession that she was a sadist or a lesbian 'top' who did not enjoy 'vanilla' lesbian sex (1994), for example, was part of her long-term defence of pornography, public sex, consensual sadomasochism and paedophilia. In challenging state control of sexuality, Califia claimed to be 'skeptical of utopian schemes (including feminist ones) that don't take into account the human need for adventure, risk, competition, self-display, pleasurable stimulation and novelty' (Califia 1994: 151). She showed not only that 'objectification', consensual violence, pain, 'submission', 'subordination' and 'penetration' played an important part in her own sexual practices and erotic fantasies about the female body, but also that

such fantasies are neither exclusive to men, nor universally experienced by lesbians. On the darker side, events such as the murders committed by Myra Hindley and Rosemary West demonstrated that women are as capable of sadistic sexual crimes as are men. Such evidence against the implied purity and goodness of women undermined the charge that women are innocent victims of sexual exploitation by men. At the same time, intelligent, well-researched, feminist defences of pornography, such as Califia's, weakened the case of anti-pornography feminists who claimed to speak on behalf of all women.

On the populist front, Madonna introduced her variant of pro-sex feminism to a mass, mainstream audience, blatantly advocating female 'power' through erotic bodily display. Cultural commentators positioned her work at the interface of consumerism and postmodernism, since her performances blurred boundaries between the public sphere of reason and the private realm of pleasure. She used the language of feminism and symbols of sexuality, including S/M gear, cross-dressing, and aspects of different races and ethnicities, in ways that were deliberately ambiguous and provocative. Many of her videos and performances were censored, but the allusions to 'perversion' and 'pornography' in her work only served to further her popularity and success. The publication of her photo-book, *Sex*, in the 1990s, was the high-point of Madonna's challenge to anti-pornography feminism.

In this era of contradictions, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when theorists and popstars alike advocated sexual transgression, and artists receiving NEA grants were required to sign oaths aimed to prevent them from producing art that was 'obscene', 'female sexuality' had become a problematic category for artists. Vance claimed that

> Despite their deep involvement in deploying sexual images, few anti-porn groups or leaders ever mounted an exhibition of the much vaunted 'erotica' (good, feminist imagery), sparing themselves both the moral contamination sexual images bring and the inevitable encounter with women's unruly and unpredictable responses to all but the most sanitized sexual imagery.
>
> (Vance 1992: xix–xx)

On the other hand, from the mid 1980s, performance art included increasingly 'transgressive', 'bad girl' acts by butch-femme lesbians, former sex workers, and porn stars who challenged conventional, heterosexual notions of sexuality in various, often contradictory, ways. Karen Finley enraged members of her audience by performing on stage naked as a rape victim, for instance, while Annie Sprinkle, who invited members of her audience to view her cervix with a speculum, aimed to 'demystify' the female body, and to teach people that sex is fun (Juno and Vale 1991: 23). In 1994, in the US, the 'Bad Girls' and 'Bad Girls West' exhibitions of art by feminists, gays, lesbians and people of colour invited viewers 'to see and think beyond stereotypes and simple either/or

oppositions, to imagine a more inclusive, various and funny world' (Tanner 1994: 49). Emphasising the roles of carnival, parody, laughter and a resistance to dogma and ideology in shaping contemporary feminist art practices, the curators traced a matrilineage of 'bad girl' artists that ranged from Artemisia Gentileschi to Cindy Sherman. By this time, the 'sex wars' of the 1980s had lost their heat, and 'bad girls' risked becoming an unfocused, lightweight, curatorial theme. At its best, this version of postmodern feminism was a means of deconstructing dogmatic feminist cultural codes, particularly in relation to the female body and sexuality. It reflected trends in academic research, where the legacy of feminist explorations of sexuality and pleasure was evident in queer theory, postcolonial studies, and media and cultural studies. It partook in a shift from representation to the body, and from identity to performativity and desire. As Elizabeth Grosz observed, 'feminists (had) come to regard women's bodies as objects of intense wonder and productivity, pleasure and desire, rather than of regulation and control' (Grosz 1995: 2).

In spite of this change of emphasis in feminist writing in universities, however, young women of the 1990s, including students and artists, often associated 'feminism' with the arguments of anti-pornography feminism, which they perceived, in turn, to be puritanical, authoritarian and out of date. In her book, *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s* (1997), Catharine Lumby launched an assault on this 'imagined orthodoxy' of 'good women', as Marilyn Lake put it, by defending the 'bad girl' point of view (Lake 1997: 339). Lumby named Australian bureaucrats and policy-makers, such as Senators Reynolds, Crowley and Kernot, who used state power to condemn and censor 'degrading images' of women. Lumby's strategy was deliberately populist and divisive, but her suggestion that the experiences and desires of contemporary young women were different from those of young women in the 1970s and 1980s is at least partly convincing. Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* (1993) made a similar case for US college students, and Natasha Walter argued that feminism had no place in the bedroom and asserted that in Britain 'young women today are unlikely to want lectures from feminists about their private lives' (Walter 1998: 5). Lumby claimed that rather than being potential victims needing protection, young women are 'savvy', 'media-wise', 'discerning' and able to consume media images of women and enjoy pornography without being adversely affected by them. Lake noted that Lumby, like the 'senior' feminists whom she criticised, made a 'particular bunch' of women speak for all women, regardless of race, class, or the difference of desire (Lumby's group was apparently 'young, white and English-speaking') (Lake 1997: 345). Lake admitted, however, that many Australian feminists needed to update their reading and thinking, for 'more than their sisters in other countries (they) relentlessly defined sexuality as the source and site of women's degradation' (1997: 341).

Lumby designed the cover of *Bad Girls* in such a way as to make it defiantly sexy (Plate 2). It features the semi-naked torso of a young woman, who

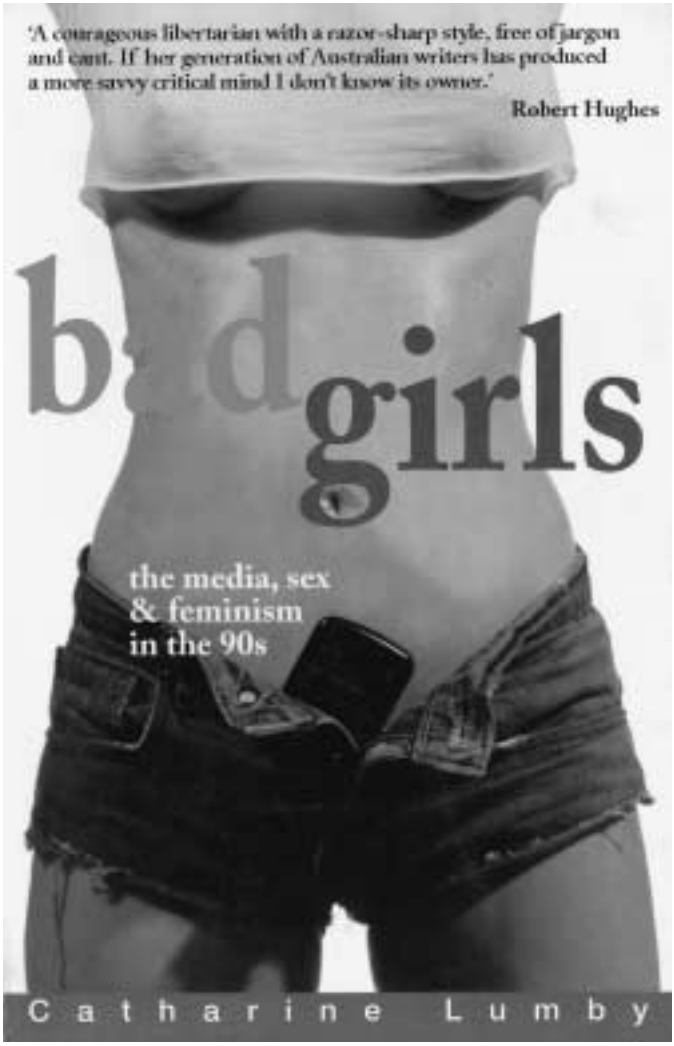

Plate 2 *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*, front cover, 1997.

is wearing hipster cut-off jeans that are half unzipped, with a video remote-control panel rammed down into them, towards the crotch. She has a ring in her navel, and a clinging transparent top that is abruptly cut off below her nipples, leaving the underside of her breasts exposed to the camera. The headless, limbless aspect of the anonymous body is reminiscent of the cover of Germaine Greer's, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), which depicts an empty carapace of a woman's torso, as though it were waiting to be worn as a garment.

The differences between the two cover images are telling. Lumby's image spells out visually her thesis that feminists should no longer concern themselves with stereotypes of female beauty, socially constructed sex roles and patriarchal femininity. Instead they should acknowledge the reality of women's desires, attend to what women actually buy and consume, and examine how they negotiate images (and display their bodies) for their own pleasure. As a teacher in media studies, therefore, Lumby argued that

> A viable feminist approach to media images needs to recognise, develop and enhance women's abilities to negotiate images. Which surely must begin, not with a campaign to reinforce the idea that images are demeaning and degrading to women, but with a campaign to show what the diversity of women can, and regularly do, make of images and themselves.
>
> (Lumby 1997: 25)

Such a feminist campaign, suggested Lumby, would entail 'recognition of the role that desire, fantasy and guilt play in the way we consume media images' (Lumby 1997: 24). Furthermore, it would 'embrace contradictions and compromises as a strength' (1997: 170).

Feminising the ideal

The few attempts by artists to re-vision the female nude in the late 1980s and early 1990s must be seen against the history of controversy surrounding 'images of women' and female sexuality in the 1980s. Feminist deconstruction and theories about negative 'ways of seeing', which I outlined in Chapter 1, were implicated in these events that for artists complicated the eroticisation and visual representation of the female body. The reinstatement of the female nude, with its implied framework for a feminist ideal, was only one way of tackling the problem, and not one that was especially favoured by theorists or even by artists. I have chosen to focus on it because it is a strategy that can be seen as a metaphor for contemporary feminist enquiry in general. It demonstrates how feminist conceptualisations of the body have advanced through artistic practices, and provokes questions as to how feminism might proceed in this area from hereon.

The following works by Jane Burton, Fiona Foley, Mary Duffy and Zoe Leonard register the 1980s shift of emphasis in feminist enquiry from danger to pleasure, and from the 'patriarchal' way women are 'looked at' to the ways women negotiate 'images of women' and make something of themselves. They neither resist patriarchy in a 'politically correct' way, nor revel in eroticism, but steer a course between both of these positions. Furthermore, they demonstrate how some contemporary visual artists included difference and absorbed ambiguity within their frames of reference, thus avoiding the totalising and

exclusionary practices that feminism has sometimes been guilty of implementing. Their art achieves this in feminist terms, I suggest, by being reorientated towards the production of positive images of the female body, adherence to certain universal principles such as erotic appeal and inclusiveness, and hence according to a conceptual ideal. Because such universals are very open to interpretation, however, part of the process of conceptualising the ideal entailed the contestation of existing definitions of these terms, and in this regard, all of the works are deconstructive. If they do not '*embrace*' contradictions and compromises, they are at least built on a tacit acknowledgement that art is always ambiguous.

Jane Burton's 1995 photocompositions reinstated the female nude as a symbol of beauty, with all its latent eroticism. She said that, in her art, the nude functioned as a metaphor for the self, and that as such it is a vehicle for the exploration of her own sexuality. This statement implies an authorial basis to meaning, ignores the social construction of the body and downplays the pernicious involutions of the male gaze. In fact, Burton's essentialist explanation of her work appears innocently to disregard the preoccupations of feminist criticism over the past ten to twenty years. It is as though she had never read or heard of such arguments, in spite of the fact that the same issues were still being debated in the 1990s, in universities and art schools, and in the popular press. There are ambiguities in Burton's art, however, which indicate that she was astutely attuned to the contradictions of her era, and that she was aware of how its uncertainties impinged on her, as a young woman artist in the late 1990s. It was a time when all distinctions pertaining to sexuality and identity seemed to have collapsed or to be under review. Pornography flooded the media and information networks, children were sexualised to become models, and models posed as corpses to sell expensive clothes. At the same time, governments were increasingly pressured by the 'moral majority' to expose and punish 'deviant' sexual practices, such as incest and paedophilia. This and similar regulatory practices imposed on the 'postmodern body' encouraged critics to valorise transgression. In this climate, arguments for the prohibition of the female nude in art were showing signs of strain. Burton responded by defying the ban with a hint of rebelliousness, making concessions to feminism and art styles that are implicit rather than overt.

Having exhibited earlier works in shows with 'bad girl' themes, Burton gave her series of nudes the whimsical title of *Two or three things I know about her*, 1994–5 (Plates 3a, b, c, d). She confessed that, although she had not seen Godard's film of the same name, she was attracted to the title simply for its suggestions of secrecy and mystery. When attached to Burton's studies of nudes, the title's oblique implication is that their voyeuristic purpose, like that of pornography, is to reveal the truth of woman's sexual pleasure. However, in Burton's cool, pink-skinned nudes there is no suggestion of what Linda Williams called 'the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core "frenzy of the visible"'(Williams 1990: 50). These nudes wait alone in dark corners, tense and absorbed in bluish shadows, reminiscent of *film noir*. Subtle stains and

Plate 3 a, b, c, d Jane Burton, *Two or three things I know about her*, 1994–5, photographs, C-type colour prints, each 29 cm × 25 cm (collection of the artist).

artificial colouring on the skin of some of the women, according to Burton, suggest the possibility of their engagement in some sort of foul play. These traces connote the woman's guilt, perhaps, but, as such, they signify an interiorised and psychological subjectivity. Another reason why Burton's nudes are so alluring is not that they repeat or allude to the explicit visual patterns and forms that pornography constructs, but rather that they embody the uncanniness of photography itself. As I show in Chapter 4, Barthes said that, by configuring nature as a sign and arresting the body in motion, photography invokes a premonition of both eroticism and death. While Burton's nudes crouch against wooden walls and rough floorboards, or stretch across a vinyl 1970s chair, they are, symbolically, anticipating this ambivalent fate.

In spite of the camera's fetishistic focus, Burton insisted that her nudes are not ciphers of male desire. She explained that there are no traces of violence or threats of rupture to the surface of the body in her compositions, and that her nudes do not acknowledge complicity with the male gaze through self-conscious gestures or returned looks. By emphasising this resilience in her work to codes of looking, Burton left questions regarding the gender of the spectator unanswered, and gave rise to doubts about the sexual orientation of her nudes. Can the reinstatement of the nude exclude its formerly negative, ideological coding? If not, can the ambiguity which results be construed positively for women? The languid assurance of Burton's nudes suggests that it can be.

During the same period in which Burton produced her nudes, Fiona Foley appropriated the form of the female nude for her series of self-portraits, entitled *Native Blood*, 1994 (Plate 4). Unlike Burton's studies of the nude, Foley's portraits function as an explicit critique of the European tradition enshrined in the academic nude, which her self-image as an indigenous Australian woman abruptly displaces. The pose of the central figure in *Native Blood* is remarkably close to that of Manet's *Olympia*, an icon of modernist painting, which has been so thoroughly deconstructed in recent years that it has almost come to represent

Plate 4 Fiona Foley, *Native Blood* (detail), 1994, black and white photograph, hand coloured, 39.6 cm × 49.8 cm (image size), 67.3 cm × 59 cm (framed). Courtesy of the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

a cliché in art criticism. There have been parodies of it in art, too, by at least one feminist artist, and the African-American artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982.[1] Foley said that she did not have Manet's picture in mind, when she composed *Native Blood*. Nor did she refer critically or otherwise to any particular nude from the history of art, such as Gauguin's *Manao Tupapau*, the so-called 'Brown Olympia'. Her self-portrait nevertheless contributes a new dimension to the aforementioned critical iconology, where discourses on race and gender intersect. While the maid in Manet's *Olympia* is a black African, Foley, as a 'brown' Australian, cast herself in the traditionally white woman's role as the reclining nude. Sander Gilman, whose work I cite in Chapter 3, argued that the significance of the African woman in Manet's painting can be understood as an effect of nineteenth-century medical discourses on race and gender. In short, that the black maid who stands next to her white, courtesan mistress can be read accordingly as a sign of the other's sexual excess, corruption and disease. Although the genealogies of black Africans and black Australians are very different, Gilman's theory has struck a deep chord of conviction in postcolonial scholarship, and this contributes in turn to the way Foley's work is received. She herself was not familiar with these discourses, but she was very aware of racist attitudes to the black female body that circulate in contemporary Australian culture.[2] Hence, in a move that was at once defensive and self-assertive, she modelled for her 'nude' self-portrait having covered her body from waist to toes, in an ensemble of traditional and contemporary clothes of the Giviid people. ('Giviid' is the local Aboriginal name for the indigenous people of Queensland.) Foley explained the significance of these clothes:

> The skirt . . . is from Maningrida. Like the shell and reed necklaces, these objects were made by Aboriginal women coming from a remote Australian community. The red, black and yellow hand-painted platform shoes symbolize the Aboriginal land rights flag.
>
> (Foley 1998: 167)

Thus, Foley's *Native Blood* upset colonialist, modernist and postmodernist readings of the female nude, disentangling them from the European obsession with sexuality, in which feminism allegedly partakes, to focus on how they are implicated in questions of her own racial identity.

Foley is a descendant of the Badtjala tribe of Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast of Australia. The island is named after the English woman, Eliza Fraser, who was stranded there for five weeks in the eighteenth century, after her ship was wrecked. As a schoolgirl, Foley was taught that Fraser, who became a 'heroine', was badly treated at the hands of the Badtjala people. As she said, 'The absence of a dialogue with the Badtjala has irrevocably damaged and put this people to rest' (1998: 165). While combing the photographic archives of the local library, however, Foley made a discovery that encouraged her to review this story. She described her discovery in an article: 'Within my retrieval

of Badtjala archival material there was a mysterious and striking image of one of my forebears. Her gaze was averted. No name. No birth. No death' (1998: 165). The appeal of recovering a connection with her ancestors led Foley to ignore some of the negative implications of the ethnographic portrait genre. The series of appropriational strategies by which she constructed *Native Blood* demystified the technology of photography to a great extent, but Foley suspended her disbelief in response to the archival photograph's narrative promise. In fact, she set about re-inventing the 'unknown Aborigine' as a heroine in her own image. Although the caption *Untitled (Aborigine, Fraser Island*), *c.*1899, told Foley that the Aborigine in the photograph must have been a blood relative, a *visual* detail in the image convinced her more forcefully of this fact (Plate 5). She recognised that the shape of the woman's breast was similar to that of her own breasts, and she took this formal feature as a cue for her project of re-enactment. Even though Foley did not spell out an essentialist theory of expression, the primacy she gave to visual, historical and biological 'evidence' was at odds with postmodernism's distrust of representation. In addition, the following is Foley's recollection of an historical anecdote that is more relevant to *Native Blood* than, say, Kristeva's reading of the (female) child's ambiguous relationship to the maternal body. Eliza Fraser had lost a baby during childbirth and was still lactating at a time when Aboriginal babies on the Island were starving, but when asked to suckle the black babies she refused. This insult to the Badtjala people, with its combination of maternal rejection and racism, has much more resonance, it might be argued, than a sophisticated psychoanalytic reading.

Similarly, Foley's use of the archival photograph is a valid means for 'reclaiming' her ancestral past and signifying her cultural presence. According to Susan Stewart, the appeal of the ancestral photograph, as a genre, lies in its metonymic relation to a lost point of origin, and the context that it restores to the viewer is an imaginary projection of the viewer's childhood. On the grounds that this context is not 'authentic' or 'native', Stewart saw the ancestral photograph, and other members of the 'souvenir' genre, as having no useful function other than that of feeding 'the social disease of nostalgia' (Stewart 1993: ix). Foley's engagement with the *Aborigine* photograph challenged the exclusions of white Australian history and, by implication, the negative terms of Stewart's argument. Until recently, Aboriginal Australian children were taken from their parents and adopted out to white Australian families. Subsequent attempts by many of these children in adult life to retrace their Aboriginal parents proved to be impossible, for this assimilationist practice, and similar colonialist strategies for controlling indigenous populations, effectively destroyed the kinship systems of Aborigines. In 1991, Paul Keating (Labor) became the first Prime Minister to acknowledge formally the negative effects of this practice. In the same year, his Government announced the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and from 1995 to 1997 there was a Federal Inquiry into the Removal of Children. In 1998, the next Prime Minister, John

Plate 5 Photographer unknown, *Untitled (Aborigine, Fraser Island*), *c.*1899, black and white photographic print, taken from negative, 16.5 cm × 11 cm (collection of John Oxley Library of the State Library Queensland, Brisbane). Courtesy Fiona Foley.

Howard (Liberal) refused the advice of the councillors and church leaders to apologise formally to the 'Stolen Generation'. In the light of these events, Fiona Foley's imaginative reclamation of kinship shows that the rigour with which Stewart critiqued nostalgia is possible only from a position of white, middle-class privilege.

Although Foley disclaimed a feminist intention in *Native Blood*, the essentialist claims and inferences implicit in her work enable a feminist perspective on it. Few women have the courage to draw attention to the particular shape of their breasts. Models who pose naked can rely on the photographer airbrushing away their 'imperfections', or rejecting proofs that do not attain the standards of some commercial ideal. Foley ignored contemporary fashions in body image to re-vision the high art nude in her own image, with no apologies. This is not just an inadvertent revival of 1970s feminist techniques, it is also a refusal of or disregard for deconstructive 'logic'. Like many artists in the 1990s, Foley's use of the hybrid codes and methods of contemporary visual culture, such as the artificial backdrop that vaguely resembles a cloudy sky, signal her awareness of their false relation to her seemingly prediscursive, essential self. With a final rebuff to early 1980s feminist art criticism, however, Foley invited the viewer to consider her project in sexualised terms: 'Yet I live in hope that my heroine could be your heroine, as she defies all odds with an unspoken eloquence of spunk' (Foley 1998: 167). The ambiguity of this verbal appeal to reconsider the erotic status of her ancestor inhabits Foley's 'self-portrait' in *Native Blood*.

Although Mary Duffy's eight-panel photographic piece, *Cutting the Ties that Bind*, 1987, was exhibited eight years before Foley constructed her photo-compositions, both artists invoked the academic female nude from a critical perspective, while retrieving its potential for erotic appeal (Plates 6a, b, c). I have used Lynda Nead's sensitive commentary on Duffy's series, plus the accompanying quotations from Duffy herself, as my only source of information. I want to effect a shift in emphasis in my reading, however, while suggesting that in the course of her analysis, Nead played down the eroticism that is present in Duffy's own commentary as well as in her work. Duffy is a disabled artist who was born without arms and, according to Nead, the series recorded a sequence of events by which Duffy's body gradually discarded the 'bandages' that enveloped her, a process that stood as a metaphor for her rejection of social constraints. Duffy's critique was levelled at media representations that show disabled women as tragic and pathetic. She challenged her viewers to see her differently, confronting them with her body and, as she said, 'with its softness, its roundness and its threat' (Nead 1992: 78). Her 'performance' reconstructed a framework for viewing which recalls that of Classical statuary, and Nead argued that, by invoking this tradition and the critical discourses that surround it, Duffy's work repudiates the aesthetic of the fragment. According to this aesthetic, the appeal of *Venus de Milo*, for example, lies in its ability to stimulate in the viewer an impulse to restore it to its former wholeness.

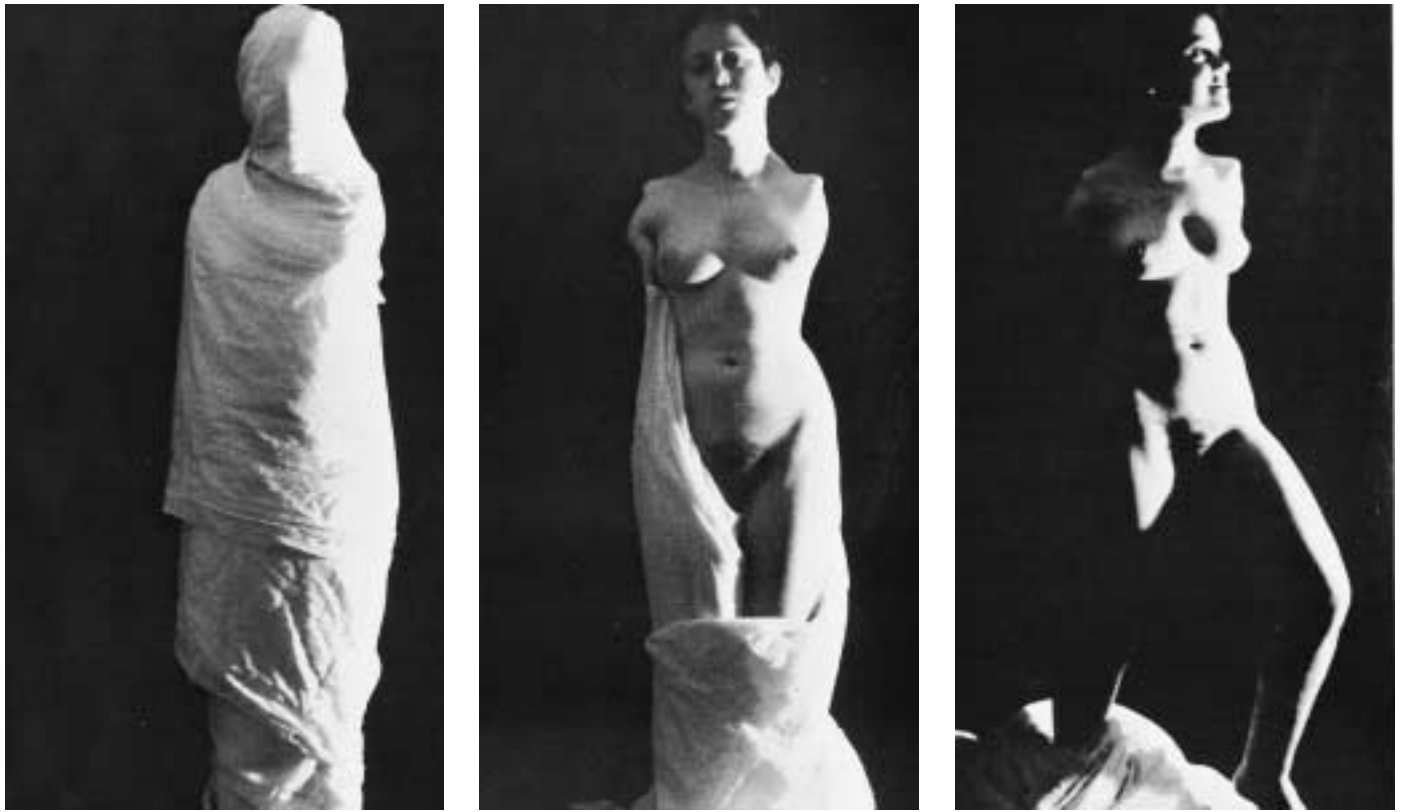

Plate 6 a, b, c Mary Duffy, *Cutting the Ties that Bind*, 1987, 8-panel photographic series with text (Arts Council of Ireland).

Nead's emphasis on how Duffy challenged the psychology of the viewer in relation to the ideal is very perceptive. However Duffy's self-presentation made a simultaneous and contradictory demand on the spectator. She presented her body in the traditional terms of formal beauty and, by using dramatic, sensuous effects of drapery, lighting, texture and sculptural mass, she asked that her body be accepted as dignified, healthy, dynamic and erotically appealing. As Duffy said, 'My identity as a woman with a disability is one that is strong, sensual, sexual, fluid, flexible and political' (Nead 1992: 77). In this way, the images of Duffy's performance succeed in arousing feelings and responses in the spectator that highlight the inappropriateness of measuring the value or desirability of a living, human being against a particular representation or interpretation of an ideal, such as a statue. Nevertheless Duffy's aestheticised body-in-performance does not argue for the complete abandonment, or dismantling of the ideal, as a mode of conceptualising beauty or as a model for identity. Instead it insists that the ideal's terms and their usage be broadened to include differences from popular conceptions of what is normal. The norm in this case, according to Nead's account, was defined not only by the exclusive terms of the academic ideal, but more particularly by media representations which circulate in contemporary culture.

Zoe Leonard's *Pin-up # 1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe)* (Plate 7), photographed in 1995, is a parody of both the tradition of the fine art nude, and the pin-up girl, as exemplified in *Playboy*'s calendar image of Marilyn Monroe. John Berger showed in the 1970s how the two traditions were linked in a negative way of seeing, and in the 1980s Andy Warhol collapsed the two by appropriating Marilyn's image into contemporary art. In a startling twist on this postmodernist game, Leonard's photocomposition replaces the late, blonde bombshell of the 1960s with the dark haired, black bearded and generally hirsute Jennifer Miller. Leonard's choice of a bearded model confuses the usual gender coding of the pin-up as hairless, but highlights the fact that hairiness is more 'natural' than the fantasy of hairlessness. Jennifer Miller is a woman, biologically, and she is very attractive by 'normal' standards, except for her unusually thick, long beard and bodily hair. In the context of Leonard's photocomposition, Jennifer Miller's smile challenges the spectator to accept her, with her beard, as desirable. Like Duffy's art, she forces recognition of the arbitrary way norms of beauty control spectatorial desire. Rather than disavow the aesthetic of the fragment and its implications of incompleteness, however, Leonard's *Pin-up* exposes the way femininity is constructed as a means of controlling the female body and sexuality, which, by normative standards, are excessive.

As a work of art, *Jennifer Miller* is reminiscent of a much older image entitled *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband*, 1631, by the Spanish artist, Ribera (Plate 8).[3] It is a portrait of an Italian woman, Magdalena Ventura, who was remarkable for the fact that at the age of thirty-seven she grew a long beard. Ribera lived and worked in Italy during the seventeenth century, when dwarfs,

Plate 7 Zoe Leonard, *Pin-up # 1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe)*, 1995, cibachrome, 57 ¼″ × 41 ⅜″, edition of 3. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Plate 8 Jusepe de Ribera, *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband*, 1631, oil on canvas (collection of the Museo Fondación Duque de Lerma, Toledo).

for example, were given special status in the royal court. *Magdalena Ventura* has been linked to a contemporary fascination with 'freaks' and 'the grotesque', and also with the Spanish tradition of the 'picaresque'. As though to prove that Magdalena Ventura was female, Ribera depicted her in the genre of the family portrait, from a frontal point of view. With her husband at her side, she is shown standing with one breast conspicuously bare as she holds her baby. Leonard, by contrast, made no attempt to 'naturalise' Jennifer Miller in a 'social' or 'historical' context. The particular composition, the pin-up format in general and the image of 'woman' in *Pin-up* are all culturally constructed and, as components of Leonard's parody, are coded as such. In this way the question of excessive hair on Miller's face and body engages the spectator with contemporary discourses on beauty, sexuality, gender identity and eroticism. It points to the ambiguity of the sex/gender distinction, which is the concern of much queer theory, and which is a theme in the work of artists such as Catherine Opie. It shows how gender roles are performed through repeated acts and gestures, but also how social constructions of femininity are out of step with the lived experiences and particular anatomies of actual women. It is both a joyful appeal and a defiant challenge to the spectator to accept difference. As such, *Pin-up* embraces ambiguity, but adheres to the ideal of an erotic, healthy and dynamic female body.

Evidence of Leonard's long-standing fascination with the historical aspect of this construct of femininity and its association with the grotesque is evident in her earlier photographs of anatomical models, and her series of five images entitled *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman, Musée Orfilia*, 1991 (Plate 9). Displayed in a museum and encapsulated in its glass case, the head is an icon to the voyeuristic curiosity of European, patriarchal culture. As Liz Kotz pointed out, however, Leonard's photographs of the head are saved from 'strident moralism' by the intensity of the artist's personal, masochistic interest in it, which is signalled by the 'formal beauty' of her work (Kotz 1994: 44). Kotz explained that an 'extreme voyeurism is coded into the images themselves, through the awkward angles and sometimes grainy, underlit quality, to suggest complicity and the surreptitious looking at forbidden objects: we really do desire that these things be analyzed' (1994: 44). Leonard's involvement in and confounding of the processes of gazing and representing bear witness to the fact that spectatorial desire transgresses boundaries, whether they are normative or feminist.

The four artists whose work I have discussed above disavowed the social and cultural values that have traditionally been attached to the ideal, while constructing their own bodily images, or the body of woman, in ideal terms. Burton redeployed the academic nude, reorientating its potential as a metaphor for sexuality, and Foley, Duffy and Leonard invited an erotic response in the spectator while insisting on difference being included in the ideal's terms of reference. In Foley's case this insistence entailed self-portraiture and a turn to identity politics, but avoided lapsing into separatism by being orientated towards

Plate 9 Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of Bearded Woman, Musée Orfilia*, 1991, gelatin silver print, 34 ¾″ × 23 ⅜″ image, 37 ½″ × 26 ″ sheet, edition of 6. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.

a conceptual ideal. Although the artistic productions of these artists are very different from one another, and although participation in feminist discourses was not their primary concern, each used the ideal nude as a framework for the representation of the female body in *positive* terms. The body in question, in its ideal form, was one which, by asserting its impulse towards erotic desire,

knowledge and ethical relations, negotiated a position for itself in the complex structures of contemporary culture and society. Part of this body's task of negotiation involved resisting regulatory aspects of the structures of power that constituted that culture and society. Inevitably, for the artists discussed here at least, this entailed contesting earlier manifestations of feminism whose deconstructions of idealism, visual representation and identity sometimes resulted in an orthodoxy that itself was dominating and exclusionary. The critique entailed in the reinstatement of the ideal may be one if not the only means of ensuring the survival of feminism in the visual representation of the female body.

3

HISTORICAL AMBIGUITY

That the ambiguity of images of the female nude provokes ethical questions was as true in Melbourne, Australia, in the 1990s, as it was in Rome in the 1600s. Consider the following letter to the editor of *The Age*, Melbourne's daily newspaper.

> How come *The Age* review of a film about black deaths in custody, *Black River* (21/4), was accompanied by a photograph of bare-breasted black women, while the review of a film about bare-breasted white women, *Sirens* (28/4), was accompanied by a photograph of fully clothed white women?
>
> (Reed 1994: 20)

Entitled 'Color Bar(e)', this letter expresses social concerns that are inferred from ambiguity in two visual images, both of which featured in successive weekly film reviews in the arts section of the daily newspaper. By comparing these promotional photographs, the *Age* reader who wrote the letter identified a disturbing set of contradictions inherent in the representation of the female body. His concern suggested that one does not need to be a deconstructive feminist to ask why the grossly unacceptable number of Aboriginal deaths in Australian gaols, which is the subject of the film *Black River*, has been represented by a sensuous image of female nudity.[1] Nor does one need to be a voyeur to be intrigued by this shift from racial violence to aestheticised erotic display. Similarly, it seems fair to ask why a film about the female nude in art, for centuries the only area in Western culture where nudity was sanctioned, was promoted by an image of the fully-dressed Elle Macpherson. She appeared naked in the film on several occasions, and is famous for her willingness to pose less than fully dressed.[2] Distinctions between art and reality are invoked here, which in part account for the *Age* reader's disquiet. However, his question does more than engage with discourses on art and reality, or race and sexuality. It posits the naked female body as a site where these discourses intersect, and in so doing it identifies a complex interrelationship of overlapping meanings.

This positioning of the body accords with the theories of Foucault and with current feminist orientations in cultural studies, which, by considering how networks of power work on the body, implicitly critique earlier feminisms that are concerned exclusively with gender. In the light of the *Age* reader's example, therefore, the present chapter aims to evaluate some of the strengths and limitations of poststructuralism as a critical framework for the feminist analysis of modern and pre-modern European art. It will demonstrate how deconstruction offers, from the ambiguity of margins, an effective critique of the Enlightenment values inherent in popular visual culture, and the tradition of the Classical female nude. As well as making some specific criticisms, it suggests that deconstruction ultimately imposes similar limitations on the feminist project as those posed by the *Age* reader's rhetorical question. That is, it views ambiguity in art negatively, but neither anticipates answers nor shows ways towards a positive, alternative conceptualisation of the female body.

Since Elle Macpherson is a well-known supermodel who often poses nude or semi-nude, her costume in the photograph, *Sirens*, signifies not only her new status as actress, but also the shift she made from a fashion model to a rich and powerful media personality. In this respect the image fits the category of fan-magazine photograph. The photograph entitled *Spirit Women*, 1993, presents three naked Aboriginal women posed as though asleep in a landscape setting, thus inviting the association with the nymphs and maenads of the Classical tradition in art (Plate 10). In this sense, *Spirit Women* can be seen as an attempt to secure equal rights for Aboriginal women with white women in the art and beauty stakes, for the harmonious composition and careful containment of swelling, overlapping forms accord with conventional standards of formal beauty. Moreover the analogy between the Aborigine and the land, which this photograph announces by means of the muddy markings which crack across skin and ground alike, is relatively recent in Western art. It is significant that in the same year that the photograph was taken, the High Court of Australia ruling on the Mabo land claim was enacted, providing the first determination under common law that Aboriginal people had land rights. Chapter 6 demonstrates that a feminist approach to this problem can be found in the works of some contemporary women artists whose explorations of post-colonial issues, in relation to the female nude in art, were conducted within the framework of a conceptual ideal. In the meantime, in order to consider the uses of deconstructive criticism in analysing these images, it is instructive to return to the *Age* reader's question.

Black deaths in custody can be seen as a consequence of an institutionally entrenched denial of black sovereignty. Therefore in the sense that *Spirit Women* celebrates the Aboriginal link with the land it is consistent with the politics of the film *Black River*, and succeeds in subverting the racist premise on which the traditionally white ideal nude is built. The political potential of *Spirit Women* becomes ambiguous, however, when the question of gender is addressed. The film *Black River* is a music feature which includes dancers as a sort of chorus to

Plate 10 Michael Bianchino, *Spirit Women*, 1993, black and white promotional photograph, 14.5 cm × 21.5 cm.

the main action of the contemporary setting, evoking the spirit world of ancient Aboriginal culture. In the photograph the dancers are transformed from animated, fleeting apparitions as they were in the context of the musical/dance/film, to passive surfaces in black and white to be viewed in silence. Only the faces and torsos of the women's bodies are included in the frame, while seductive details of the parched and furrowed ground on which they lie, their hair and their skin smeared with mud, are starkly delineated. The breasts that are so worrying to the *Age* reader invoke fertility and the stereotypical association between 'woman' and 'nature', while the closed eyes suggest the absence of consciousness or mind. Linked to this are devices for recording the exotic other culture, reminiscent of early colonialist art. For example, the drawing of a young woman from the tribe of the Cam-mer-ray-gal, by the artist, Nicolas Petit, from the French expedition, uses similar strategies for display (Plate 11). The woman's averted gaze, the three-quarter frontal pose and the inclusion of skin markings, or scars, cast the spectator as an authoritative ethnographer, invited to decipher the inscription on this

Plate 11 Nicolas Petit, *Portrait of a 'jeune femme de la tribu des Cam-Mer-Ray-Gal de Novelle Galles Du Sud'*, 1800–1804 (collection of Lesueur, Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre).

foreign/indigenous female body. The subjectivity of the particular woman is not as interesting to the ethnographer as is her exotic appearance or the way her body has been literally perforated with meaning by a culture which is, according to European conceptualisation, beyond the boundary of civilisation. Since representation itself is an act of regulation, the women in *Spirit Women* are colonised by the artist in this process and, to some extent, they are idealised. But the status of this image as ideal art, by traditional criteria, remains insecure.

Other themes could be traced in both *Spirit Women* and *Sirens*, such as lesbian sexuality and Australian national identity. In fact the *Age* reader's comparison urges recognition of the constant circulation in contemporary culture of codes regulating the female body in art. At the same time it constructs ambiguity as a mask for the ways in which these codes intersect to devious effect. If one accepts that *Spirit Women* reinscribes the gendered mind/body dichotomy, a postcolonial critique of it needs to address Western culture's racist assumptions in terms that simultaneously dismantle its gendered distinctions. Poststructuralism has provided ways of unravelling the negative effects of these conceptual processes, and of articulating connections between power, sexuality and the body. As will eventually become clear in the following discussion, however, Derridean deconstruction, which is focused exclusively on gender, misses the complexity of sexuality, while Foucault's sociology of the body is too generalised to enable an effective feminist critique. The main shortcoming of these two forms of deconstruction for feminism, moreover, is that, ultimately, they perceive ambiguity as a stagnant zone, polluted by lurking dangers and stifled by structures of power. Hence, as a hostile, negative space, ambiguity is figured as falsifying that which is visible and corroding all that might signify.

Art, obscenity and alterity

Lynda Nead's deconstruction of the female nude in art addressed its significance historically as the principal icon of European culture. Her book, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, was, as she said, the first 'serious or sustained challenge' to Clark's 'critical premises' (Nead 1992: 2). As her starting point she took Clark's naked/nude dichotomy, where nude is favoured over naked, form over matter, culture over nature and male over female, and she used Jacques Derrida's essay 'Parergon' as a paradigm for a feminist deconstruction of Clark's argument. Derrida wrote:

> This permanent requirement – to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about – organizes all philosophical discourse on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such . . . This requirement presupposes a discourse on the limit between the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame*.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 45)

Using frames or framing as a theme for her book, Nead deconstructed art and the writings of critics and art historians to show how definitions of the female nude, and particularly Clark's naked/nude dichotomy, hinge on distinctions between art and obscenity. She focused on the limits, margins, boundaries and borders that frame these categories and which are, according to Derrida, the critical sites at which meaning is constructed.

Proceeding in this way, Nead argued convincingly that the representation of the female nude in the history of Western art functions as a means of containing the female body, which is perceived as base matter, and of regulating female sexuality, which is perceived as wayward and uncontrolled. To illustrate these points, she used specific examples from different media. As a symbol of chastity, for example, the image of a sieve, which does not leak water, in Morroni's painting, *Chastity* (1550s), speaks of conserving the boundaries of the female body and sexuality. Dürer's engraving, *Draughtsman Drawing a Nude* (1538), on the other hand, shows how 'Through the procedures of art, woman can become culture' (Nead 1992: 11). As well as being a metaphor for art itself, argued Nead, the represented female nude can be understood as a discourse on the subject. In the light of Freud's notion of the formation of the ego, Nead showed that what is at stake in the construction of ideal form from base matter is the sense of a unified subject. Nead represented the female nude thus, as a gendered visual sign, and her task was to decode it in these terms. In order to unravel the underlying tensions to which the *Age* reader's question referred, however, one needs to consider what is at stake when racial difference is introduced to this signifying system.

I will use a similar framework to Nead's analysis of sexuality, but will extend it to show also how issues of race and ethnicity become problematic around the borders of categories for the female nude. With these issues in mind, I will analyse the conceptualisation of the female nude in the following three examples: the art criticism of Kenneth Clark, particularly his discussion of Rubens's *The Three Graces*, *c.*1639, in his book *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (Plate 12); the social milieu in Rome, around 1600, in which Annibale Carracci painted *The Loves of the Gods*, including *Perseus and Andromeda* (Plate 13); and Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, 1559, now in Edinburgh (Plate 14). All three paintings have been categorised, on account of their formal characteristics and dates of execution, as Baroque. Titian's painting is now generally regarded as Mannerist, following Panofsky's iconographical interpretation, but for the sake of consistency, I have accepted Waterhouse's earlier stylistic definition of it as Baroque. As will become clear during my discussion, neither a stylistic nor iconographic analysis adequately accounts for the issues of race and sexuality in Titian's painting. Nevertheless, the Baroque period-style is a convenient framework in which to consider the discursive formation of the category of the nude, since it was accorded special significance in Clark's evolutionary scheme in which the nudes of Rubens, in particular, were considered a high-point. Clark described Rubens as 'the unchallenged master of Venus Naturalis'

Plate 12 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, oil on canvas, *c.*1639 (collection of the Prado, Madrid).

(Clark 1957: 139), and he claimed that 'Rubens did for the female nude what Michelangelo had done for the male' (1957: 148). In addition, the period is a useful starting point from which to test Foucault's account of the way people displayed their bodies in the seventeenth century against the 'evidence' of contemporaneous Roman representations of the female body.

Kenneth Clark made racial distinctions throughout his book to prop up a hierarchy of Western values for which the nude became a metaphor. One need

Plate 13 Annibale Carracci, *Perseus and Andromeda*, *c.*1600, ceiling fresco, the Farnese Gallery, Rome.

Plate 14 Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1559, oil on canvas (on loan from the Duke of Sutherland to the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).

not read beyond the first paragraph to appreciate that this strategy was fundamental to his conceptual framework. The word 'nude', he said, 'was forced into our vocabulary by critics of the early eighteenth century to persuade the artless islanders that, in countries where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art' (1957: 1). This sentence establishes the following presumptions about the nude: that it is the central subject of art; that it is an artificial construct, since the word was not always a 'natural' part of the English language, or language; that it is therefore a metaphor for art; and that it is therefore a metaphor for European civilisation. In Clark's scheme, the artless islanders exist outside the parameters of art and civilisation, but their presence indicates a division within civilisation, a split that is signalled by the inclusion of the word 'nude' into English. Clark himself hinted at the constructedness, even violence of this inclusion when he describes it as 'forced'. He excused it with the claim that, as opposed to 'naked', the 'nude' carries with it 'no uncomfortable overtone'; and he added a further proviso, based on a class distinction, that it is only through 'educated usage' that the representational distinction can be preserved. It seems therefore that a principal function of the 'nude', in Clark's scheme, is to forestall discussion of a social taboo – that is the naked body, or nakedness. Performing this function, the nude acts as a foil that ensures that the authority of the taboo remains undisturbed, but which, when considered in relation to this authority, becomes unstable and ambiguous. The reiteration of Clark's naked/nude dichotomy ensured the effectiveness of the nude as a foil within language, within representation and within European culture. But to survive external scrutiny, this ingenious framework needed to be shored up by racial and class distinctions, which drew a line between the inside and the outside of civilisation.

Nead showed how Clark's distinction between naked and nude, which she and others accepted as an accurate paradigm for patriarchal thinking about the represented female body, can be reduced to a set of distinctions which privilege form over matter, male over female and art over obscenity. The nudes of Rubens, she argued, were a particularly challenging case for Clark, and she suggested that it was in rising to this challenge that he drew his most tenuous and therefore most revealing distinctions. He wrote that Rubens 'learned what a severe formal discipline the naked body must undergo if it is to survive as art. Rubens's nudes seem at first sight to have been tumbled out of a cornucopia of abundance; the more we study them the more we discover them to be under control' (1957: 133). Here, obscenity, which is conceived by Clark in terms of excess and lack of boundaries, is regulated through the discipline of form, and Rubens's figures are thus able to survive as art. Despite Clark's confident assertion that Rubens's nudes are art, however, he had to study them hard before he was convinced. Later in the passage he justified his stance with an even more starkly drawn distinction than the one Nead identified. Clark claimed that

> in the end the greatness of Rubens does not lie in the realm of technique, but in that of imagination. He takes the female body, the plump, comfortable, clothed female body of the North, and transforms it imaginatively with less sacrifice of its carnal reality than had ever been necessary before. He creates a new, complete race of women. (Clark 1957: 137)

In this passage Clark temporarily put aside the naked/nude dichotomy for a racial distinction: Rubens transformed the unidealised, Northern body into art, Clark implied, according to the principles of Italian Classical form. It was no accident that Clark referred to Rubens's nudes as 'a new, complete race of women'. What was at stake in endorsing Rubens's nudes, as art, was the notion of form as a mechanism for controlling female sexuality. But also at stake, and perhaps more importantly for Clark, was the Anglo-Italian Classical tradition. Only by invoking racial difference and 'dressedness' could he discard the naked/nude dichotomy and avoid the issue of obscenity in Rubens's nudes. At the same time the possibility of obscenity was attributed to racial difference.

In a similar move Clark justified what might otherwise have been seen as an excess of sexuality, in Rubens's nudes, by invoking the 'otherness' of the seventeenth century. This was a time, he explained, when 'the human mind had begun to conceive a universe governed by beneficent cause and effect but had not yet subjected it to analysis' (1957: 133). From this it can be inferred that the principles of reason by which mind is distinguished from body, nude from naked or art from obscenity, were not available to the seventeenth-century artist. Hence Clark temporarily positioned Rubens outside civilisation along with the artless islanders and plump Northerners, as though the artist belonged to a different race. In this regard, the methodologies of Clark and Foucault can be compared. Despite his radical opposition to idealism such as Clark's, Foucault began *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* with a similarly historicist claim for the seventeenth century. He wrote that 'At the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common it would seem. . . . Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century . . . it was a period when bodies "made a display of themselves"' (Foucault 1990: 3).

A principal difference between Clark's and Foucault's points of view is that the latter perceived the alleged laxity of the seventeenth century in nostalgic terms, pointing out that 'twilight soon fell upon this bright day, followed by the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home' (Foucault 1990: 3). Foucault's point was not to reinscribe Enlightenment values to distinguish mind from body or art from obscenity in seventeenth-century representations of the body, as Clark had done. It was rather to lament the fact that the twentieth-century regulation of sexuality is an effect of nineteenth-century discursive practices, such as those which constitute the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry and education,

or of institutions such as the family and employers. It was thus the basis of an ethical judgement as well as a theory of cultural change.

As effects of historically situated, discursive practices, according to Foucault, standards of decency, bodily 'display' and normative sexual behaviour are neither timeless nor universal. Foucault eschewed an organicist view of 'the human mind', notions of causality, reason and the mind/body split for a materialist account of how bodies are regulated by networks of power. Within this framework he avoided gender and racial distinctions, but did not provide a specific analytical framework for 'opposition to the power of men over women' (Foucault 1992: 419). He adopted the broader aim of defining what this oppositional struggle had in common with other 'transversal struggles' such as those 'of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the way people live' (ibid.). By focusing mainly on discursive practices of the nineteenth century, he aimed to show 'how men have learned to recognise themselves as subjects of "sexuality" ' (1992: 417). This period represented an epistemic shift, he argued, from an *ars erotica*, in which 'truth is drawn from pleasure itself', to a *scientia sexualis*, in which 'procedures for telling the truth of sex are geared to a form of knowledge-power' (1990: 58). This development, he said, was coterminous with that of the modern state. The power of the modern state was uniquely individualising and totalising, he argued, because from the seventeenth century onwards it integrated Christian 'pastoral power' into its own political structure.

In spite of the persuasiveness of his general argument, Foucault's distinction between an *ars erotica* and a *scientia sexualis* connotes the traditional and problematic separation of art from science, a separation which lends itself to the mind/body dualism to which Foucault was fundamentally opposed.[3] Furthermore, he did not develop or explain the implication that the *ars erotica*, which he related to techniques of 'display', was specifically *visual*. Above all, Foucault's initial assertion that the regulation of the seventeenth-century body was comparatively lax is hard to substantiate with examples of art from the seventeenth century. The following analysis of *The Loves of the Gods*, painted on the Farnese Palace ceiling, confirms this difficulty. Although the gods are represented as nude and in amorous poses, Foucault's claim that bodies were less regulated during this earlier period, and that the stakes in their being so were lower than they were in the nineteenth century, is not supported.

The loves of the gods

The circumstances surrounding the decoration and reception of the Farnese Palace ceiling in Rome, which was finally completed in 1600 by Annibale Carracci, provide a point of reference from which to assess the accuracy of the claim that codes of decency were lax at the time. For a start, this claim is contradicted by Jean de la Bruyère's criticism of the decorations. In 1692 Bruyère said: 'That the filthy stories of the gods, Venus, Ganymede, and the

other nudities of the Carracci were made for princes of the Church, and those who call themselves successors of the Apostles, the Farnese Palace offers proof' (Dempsey 1968: 363). Admittedly this comment was made almost a century after the work was completed, but it was nevertheless a response that was made in the seventeenth century and would not seem incongruous coming from the lips of a Victorian prude. By 1600 the Council of Trent had banned nudity in art, and even though Cardinal Borghese issued an edict, in 1603, stipulating that this only applied to paintings in churches, there was still a requirement of moral justification for erotic art in private collections. For example, Mancini stated in his *Rules for Collecting Pictures*, that erotic pictures ('pitture lascive') should be placed only in rooms where a man might take his wife to benefit from the exciting atmosphere of amorous embraces. This experience, explained Mancini, might assist the couple in reproducing beautiful, healthy, valiant children ('all far figli belli, sani e gagliardi') (Mancini 1956: 143). The rooms, he stressed, must be very secluded and out of the way of people who could be offended by the works ('non devono esser viste da fanciulli e zitelle, nè da persone esterne e scrupolose') (Mancini 1956: 123). The subject matter included nudes, and the gods Venus and Mars. Mancini's distinction here between public decorum and the private display of bodies and sexuality (in art), contrary to Foucault's advice, was quite clear-cut. It supports the view that the Farnese Palace presented a conspicuous moral dilemma for the Church. As Pastor put it, in *The History of the Popes*

> Men realised the paradox of (Oduardo Farnese) a great prince of the Church, just as if he were living in the days of Leo X., having his palace adorned with such erotic subjects, and at the same time trying to make those subjects more acceptable to the most rigid censors by means of allegories and interpretations, attempting thus to reconcile the Christian conscience with representations of scenes of loves of the gods and pagan heroes, which went beyond all due limits.
>
> (Pastor 1952: 511)

In the Farnese Ceiling decorations, according to Pastor, the slackening of what Foucault called 'codes regulating the course, the obscene and the indecent' was little short of a scandal. Furthermore, his allegation that the Farnese family deliberately complicated the meaning of the paintings in order to justify them as art asserts that ambiguity was no accident, but was the desired result.

Modern scholars were divided about how this ambiguity reflected the intentions of artist and patron. Charles Dempsey argued, for example, that, rather than representing Sacred Love Triumphant, as Bellori suggested it does, the series is 'a theme here turned mock-epic . . . a Triumph not of Virtue and Valor, but of drunkenness and lasciviousness' (Dempsey 1968: 372). In Dempsey's view, the female nude was central to this ambiguity. He observed that the 'sensuous nude' in the *Perseus and Andromeda* panel formed a 'nice

transition' between the two sections, the *Loves of the Gods* on the ceiling and the heroic virtues in combat around the walls, even though 'thematically they are subtly different' (Dempsey 1968: 365) (Plate 13). While the decoration of the two sections could not be explained as consistent in iconographic terms, Dempsey saw that the spectacle of female nudity and sexuality in both sections serves a unifying function. Dempsey's observation was perceptive, but traditional art historiography did not provide him with an adequate framework for analysing the ambiguity of the ceiling painting beyond this casual aside.

Roberto Zapperi adopted a more productive approach to unravelling the ceiling's contradictory aspect, when he searched for archival evidence of seventeenth-century Roman social practices and attitudes to sexuality. He concluded that the general perception of the human body at that time, plus the desire of Pope Clemente to control female sexuality and the incidence of nudity, were critical factors underpinning the ambiguity of the decorations. Given this, posited Zapperi, the decorations of the Galleria Farnese were a protest by the Farnese – the most powerful of the Roman families – against the Pope's moral values. The Pope had attempted with much virulence to impose these values on his subjects. Zapperi recounted in great detail the Pope's repeated attempts to eradicate prostitution, ban nude bathing and destroy nude images in painting and sculpture in churches. He also provided examples where the public exhibition of a wrongdoer's naked body was imposed as a punishment. One of the principal attractions of the Roman Carnival was a cultural practice that is of particular interest to my study, as it posited the naked body as a site for discourses on racial difference. It centred on the foot race, which, according to a prescription in the Roman Statutes of 1469, was inaugurated by the Jews.

Unlike all the other runners, the Jews were compelled to run with their bodies largely bare. The significance nakedness had on this occasion was furnished by a report from a town official at the Carnival of 1599. The race of the Jews had been going for some days and now the runners were resting, except for those 'who run like wild animals, that is if those who run are not mainly animals, although in human form, since naked they show themselves *publice et palam*' (Zapperi 1987: 63). Nakedness was thus imposed as a punishment on the enemies of Christ, and became a vehicle of degradation and mockery. The enforced exhibition of the naked body, uncovered and defenceless, automatically provoked aggression from the spectators who threw eggs, fruit, rotten vegetables, mud and snow at the runners. Over the years this became a serious embarrassment to the Pope, who eventually outlawed the molestation of the Jewish runners. Nevertheless, as Zapperi pointed out, their enforced nakedness was never hinted at. The Pope's silence on this issue indicates the depth at which the conceptual link between nakedness and racial difference was embedded in the unconscious structures of Western culture.

Despite the plausibility of Foucault's argument that 'power relations have come more and more under state control' (Foucault 1992: 430), Zapperi's research shows that even in the seventeenth century the body was already

subject to regulation by a complex coalition of familial, social, pastoral, dynastic and state powers. Given these facts, Foucault's assertion that 'it was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will' does not carry conviction (Foucault 1990: 3). The seventeenth century was a time when religious wars in Europe ensured not only an increase in what Foucault called the 'pastoral power' of the Christian Church, it also witnessed some of that power's most violent manifestations. In Rome, in 1600, the same year in which the Farnese Palace was completed, the body of Francesco Bruni was publicly burnt to death for heresy. Throughout the Christian world, particularly outside Rome, over the next hundred years, many thousands of people, mostly women, were executed as witches, often on account of some suspected sexual indiscretion. The state at the time was very involved in these mechanisms for controlling various populations, and more often than not, for enacting them on the female body.

The notorious trial in 1612 of artist Agostino Tassi, who was charged with the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi, also an artist, illustrates how the female body was the central focus of such controls. The Roman archives provide detailed evidence of the way, during the trial proceedings, the State, the Curia and the artistic community of Rome co-operated in exercising techniques of interrogation and surveillance over the sexual conduct of individuals. Using this evidence from the trial, it could be argued that sexual practices among the men in Tassi's circle of friends, as Foucault said, 'had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment' (Foucault 1990: 3). Although sodomy was a criminal offence referred to in the trial in relation to Tassi's alleged procuring of young boys, for example, one witness spoke openly about intimate conversations between himself and Tassi, with whom he shared the same bed and exchanged letters containing erotic poetry addressed to him.[4] So far as the Law and this particular society were concerned, most distinctions pertaining to decency and sexuality were inscribed on the female body. A veritable army of personnel, including Artemisia's father and brothers, a chaperone, numerous priests, clerics, neighbours, teachers and midwives, policed these mechanisms for control. Much attention was given to whether Artemisia had made a display of herself by being visible from her window, for instance, or whether she had revealed her naked body to her 'betrothed'. Finally, it was she, not her assailant, who was subjected to the physical torture of the thumbscrew, in order to determine whether she was telling the truth. Although Tassi's innocence was clearly in doubt, he was released from jail within a year of the trial's conclusion. In short, the trial of Agostino Tassi brought to light an astounding catalogue of accusations of transgression, made by various members of the community, against those engaged in 'teaching' and 'protecting' the young woman.

These allegations draw attention to the stringency with which social codes, in seventeenth-century Rome, separated surveillance from voyeurism, familial care from incest, and private from commercial sex. Despite its infamous, bawdy

excesses, therefore, this community of artists and their associates were a society in which codes regulating decency and bodily display were no more lax, and the subjectivity of women was no less problematic than it is in Europe today. It could even be argued that the complexity of discursive practices and social techniques for containing the sexuality of Artemisia Gentileschi have more in common with nineteenth-century European practices in the domestication of women than with those of today.

By contesting Foucault's remark about 'codes regulating the obscene', I am not recommending an ahistorical approach to the seventeenth century, which was obviously very different from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nor am I refuting his argument that this period saw the beginnings of 'an incitement to discourse' that culminated in the nineteenth century, and has since subsided to some extent. Judging from the proceedings of the rape trial of 1612, however, Foucault's failure to acknowledge the way the oppression of women informed 'codes regulating . . . the indecent' in the seventeenth century partly explains why his generalisation lacks credence, not only for feminism, but according to its own terms of reference.[5] In short, the usefulness of Foucault's theories for an analysis of the female nude does not lie in his interpretation of seventeenth-century customs. Instead it can be found in his positioning of the body in relation to regulating networks of power, and in his assertion that those networks are complex, overlapping and subject to change over time. As he explained, 'The forms and the specific situations of the government of men by one another in a given society are multiple; they are superimposed, they cross, impose their own limits, sometimes cancel one another out, sometimes reinforce one another' (Foucault 1992: 430). This description of complex power relations being 'rooted in the system of social networks' has provided the analytical framework for many projects in cultural studies (1992: 430). It is also the model for my own analysis of how ambiguity is an effect of the intersection of discourses on race, gender and sexuality in the representation of the body in early seventeenth-century Rome.

My eclectic use of techniques of deconstruction, as a means of analysing the effects of ambiguity in seventeenth-century representations of the female body has facilitated a study of nudity, and of the claim that bodies made a display of themselves, in 1600. It has shown that, in Rome, at the time, nakedness was a sign of racial difference and barbarism, while the nudes of the Farnese Ceiling signified civilisation at its most refined. From this, it becomes clear that in conceptualising the nude, what was at stake for Pope Clemente and the Farnese Princes was, not only the regulation of female sexuality, but also the preservation of a privileged class structure and a Christianised Classical heritage. As it did in Clark's case, racial difference forced recognition of this. In my final example, Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1599), I consider what is achieved when a racial distinction is included within the sphere of art itself – or in Derrida's terms, when it is included inside rather than outside the art object, or as part of the internal and proper sense of the object being talked about.

Diana's dark side

According to Ovid, the hunter Actaeon accidentally came across the Goddess Diana while she was bathing naked with her nymphs. She took offence at this and punished him by turning him into a stag. Then his dogs ate him. In Titian's picture, nude Diana is depicted with a black, fully-dressed female companion whose presence has thrown up a challenge to interpreters, since there is no iconographic precedence for such a coupling. This duality is not explained adequately either by formalist or iconographic interpretations. For example, Ellis Waterhouse, in 1952, explained Titian's inclusion of the black woman in purely formal terms. He spoke of 'touches designed to enhance the sensuous appeal of the picture, such as the negro attendant, with the flecks of cold blue in her hair, which set off the warm ivory of Diana's flesh' (Waterhouse 1952: 21). This is clearly an inadequate justification for such an unusual image. Marie Tanner, by contrast, presented a detailed iconology in which she cited previous representations of Diana as black, such as Falconetto's, that Titian may have seen. She linked Titian's black figure to Diana's dark side, which was associated with the dark side of the moon, Diana's symbol. This symbol appears in the painting as the crescent diadem in Diana's hair, and again as the crescent-shaped bodice on the black woman's dress. Fortune was also sometimes represented in art as a black African woman. From this Tanner set out to prove that, by taking Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* as his text, where Actaeon wilfully seeks out Diana, 'Titian used the encounter . . . to explore the relationship of fate and fortune in regard to free will, a primary question for the sixteenth century' (Tanner 1974: 536). She suggested further that 'Titian utilized the theme of Actaeon's contemplation of the goddess to express a new interpretation of Nature as the mediatrix between divine wisdom and human understanding' (ibid.). According to this theory, Diana represents the twofold nature of Divinity, which simultaneously emanates beauty and dispenses death.

Tanner argued that Diana thus 'represents the body of Nature which mirrors the divine essence' (1974: 548). Titian's black Diana, she claimed, invokes the Diana at Ephesus, which symbolises *Natura*, and thus 'reinforces this connection' (ibid.). The dichotomised conceptualisation of Love and Divinity in much of the contemporaneous literature cited by Tanner provides a fascinating parallel with Titian's painting. In her interpretation, however, Tanner conflated these sources to the point of strain. The fact that Titian included the black Diana at a very late stage of the painting to replace a fair-skinned nymph seems to contradict the intentionality Tanner was anxious to ascribe to him. Above all, her tendency to deflect attention from the issues of nudity, sexuality and race seemed almost perverse. Waterhouse's suggestion that the subject gave Titian a chance to tackle the problem of the female nude was more pertinent (Waterhouse 1952: 16). For all its reductive formalism, Waterhouse's view is supported by the visual evidence of naked female bodies represented from several points of view, as well as by the patron Phillip II of Spain's alleged taste for erotica.

With female sexuality and nudity as its central theme, Titian's painting is profoundly ambiguous. There are some historical reasons for this. For a start, in myth, Diana's qualities as the Chaste Huntress are ambivalent. As Goddess of Hunting she presides over the welfare of small animals, while her association with Chastity suggests sexuality. In the social sphere of the seventeenth century there was a related contradiction: virginity was prized only until marriage was achieved, and it was the hope of marriage that made women chaste. In representation there is a further contradiction: the chaste Diana, a Goddess and therefore immortal, is seen to have the body and sensuality of a mortal woman. Aspects of Diana's pose and expression, in Titian's painting, may be interpreted as predatory, but the only clear indication of her role as Huntress is the stag's head on the pier. Her small lap-dog is an obvious contrast to Actaeon's hunting dog, and refers, symbolically, to the chastity of the Goddess, while the accoutrements of the bath – the mirror, the vase, perfume, towels and veils – all relate metonymically to the erotic presentation of Diana's body. Her nymphs display their bodies from various angles to complete this spectacle of female nudity. The association with Titian's other *poesia*, *Diana and Calisto*, which was probably designed by him as its pendant, duplicates the theme of revelation and concealment of the female body. Considering these details, the clothed, servile, black woman and the powerful but modest Diana function collectively to signify her dual aspect of both sensuality and chastity.

It would be a mistake to designate one figure as chastity and the other as sensuality, for the two share these and other meanings ambiguously. For example, if, as Waterhouse suggested, the black woman is Diana's maid, the fact that she is clothed is likely to signify inferiority rather than modesty. Black maids were common in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and are represented in paintings from this period when Europe was engaged in massive slave-trading and large-scale colonising of North Africa. Perhaps a conception of the black woman existed then, which was similar to that which Sander Gilman located in Manet's *Olympia*, where the maid's face alone signifies excessive sexuality and is often associated with prostitution, venereal disease and death. If so, Titian's painting maps onto the chaste/unchaste dichotomy a distinction between the barbaric and the civilised which accords with Clark's model. Unlike Manet's painting, however, Titian's inclusion of the black woman in a mythological narrative, her complementarity with the white Diana and her sharing of the moon symbolism seem to accord her unprecedented signifying potential. This raises her above an association with the immediate and the particular, or the literal and the real.

According to Nead's analysis of the nude in art such idealisation emerges from a biased, dualistic conceptual process. If we accept Clark's conceptualisation of the nude as a metaphor for civilisation, therefore, then perhaps Titian's painting can be read as an illustration of these conceptual processes. Actaeon's story is, after all, a narrative of spectatorship. In myth he is punished for spying on a naked divinity, for by catching her in this undignified state, he is guilty

of *hubris*. In Titian's painting, however, Actaeon's gaze is directed beyond Diana, perhaps as Tanner suggested at the pier and skull which signify his death, or perhaps at the nymph whose body is hidden. The ambiguous direction of his gaze underscores Actaeon's dilemma. It is reminiscent of the anxiety underlying Kenneth Clark's distinguishing the nude from the naked, ideal form from base matter, or art from obscenity, as a means of controlling female sexuality. Nead suggested that it is the boundaries between these categories for defining the female nude, where danger lies. In Actaeon's case, the danger is loss of identity. It is significant therefore that, as Tanner noted, Titian deviated from traditional iconography in depicting Actaeon immediately before metamorphosis, thereby maximising the sense of danger and imminent tragedy. This too can be interpreted as an illustration of Clark's conceptual model where what is at stake is the unified subject or the individual self. Nead noted that to counter the constant threat of transgression in constructing ideal form from base matter, boundaries are continuously redrawn. The inclusion of the black woman consolidates these boundaries, symbolically, thus establishing the white female nude as a metaphor for civilisation.

The naked and the dressed

By addressing the issue of race it has become clear that Clark's naked/nude conceptualisation keeps the realm of art separate from the social world of cultural and racial diversity. An effect of Clark's strategy of distinguishing naked from nude, for example, is that it deflects attention from the significance of clothes, or 'dressedness'. A more valid binary, which has its roots in social structures, might be the naked and the dressed, which, given Clark's dualistic way of thinking, is hinted at by his reference to the 'artless islanders'. He did not give a reason for the fact that the islanders were struck by the oddness of the European preoccupation with the nude in art, or explain that the expression of this preoccupation in visual art contradicted the European custom of wearing clothes. Nor did he suggest that the islanders, whom he did not identify, were innocently naked before colonisation. Had he done so he would have had to explain the taboo of nakedness as essentially European; that is, as an 'irrational' fear that threatens the entire epistemological framework of European culture *from within*. The flip side of this way of thinking would be the popular misconception that so-called 'primitive' cultures did not have their own codes for regulating bodily display. Clark was wise to stop short of articulating a conceptual distinction between the naked and the dressed, and of mapping it onto racial 'otherness'. Nevertheless, he *insinuated* these moves, very clearly, by his description of the islanders as 'artless'.

Nead's deconstructive position, that 'there can be no naked "other" to the nude, for the body is *always already* in representation' points up Clark's assumption that there is a 'physical body that is outside representation' (Nead 1992: 16). Within his naked/nude formulation, female sexuality could be addressed

as internal, domestic and constructed in representation, rather than external, global and real. Racial difference was a threat to this conceptual structure, and was thus dealt with early by Clark and then kept outside his discussion, creeping back only at anxious moments to reinforce boundaries of propriety, as in the case of Rubens's *The Three Graces*. A similar mechanism for controlling sexuality was evident in the decoration of the Farnese Palace, in Rome, where a racist custom of the time highlighted how the ambiguity of the female nude was employed to bolster structures of dynastic power. Finally, Titian's profoundly ambiguous incorporation of a racial distinction into the *Diana and Actaeon* enabled the construction of the female nude as an icon of 'civilisation', a hegemonic symbolisation which informed all of these works and lay at the heart of Western visual culture.

To return to the *Age* reader's question about female nudity in popular culture, it should be remembered that the above analysis began with Nead's positioning of the female nude as a visual sign, which she deconstructed in terms of Western culture's gendered distinctions, and then mapped onto a binary frame. Once discourses on race were traced in the same visual tradition, one could visualise this basically symmetrical map being rearranged as a cluster, or spectrum of terms, where some binaries remained intact and others were split apart to form new pairs or coalitions. As a cluster of visual signs, in fact, the dualistic formulation of the white-female-nude and the black-dressed-woman has recurred at significant moments in the history of Western art. It was alluded to by Clark in his analysis of Rubens's nudes, and appeared in Titian's *Diana*. It reappeared in paintings such as Gerôme's *The Great Bath at Bursa* – painted in the era of France's Orientalist expeditions, and Manet's *Olympia* – painted at the height of the nineteenth-century European slave trade. As an entry into the tradition of European art in Australia, it appeared in the *oeuvre* of the Symbolist painter, Sydney Long. For example, the Aboriginal woman, who is cast as a nature spirit in Long's best-known painting, *The Music Lesson*, 1904 (Plate 15), is semi-dressed, whereas the white spirits in his other paintings, such as *The Spirit of the Plains,* 1897, are completely nude (Plate 16). The conformity of Long's thinking about (male) Aborigines emerged in his article entitled 'The Trend of Australian Art Considered and Discussed'. He argued for an authentically Australian mythology, where Aborigines would play a major role. Hence he wrote that 'instead of Pans and Centaurs, (the artist) will bid the Aboriginal blossom out in all the graceful proportions of manly vigour; when sufficient time has intervened to allow us to forget his failings' (Long 1975: 226–7). Although Long's project has recently been defended as a 'sincere and honest attempt to seek new directions in Australian art', his assumptions reflected the belief, at that time, that the Australian Aborigines would soon be extinct, and would thus remain forever beyond the boundary of civilisation (Mendelssohn 1979: 78). His placing of clothes on the Aboriginal woman in *The Music Lesson* suggests he felt that this belief needed to be reinforced.

Plate 15 Sydney Long, *The Music Lesson*, 1904, oil on canvas, 71.7 cm × 51.4 cm (Art Gallery of New South Wales; © Opthalmic Research Institute of Australia).

Plate 16 Sydney Long, *The Spirit of the Plains*, 1897, oil on canvas on wood, 62 cm × 131.4 cm (gift of William Howard-Smith in memory of his grandfather, Ormond Charles Smith, 1940. Collection Queensland Art Gallery).

Anxieties related to Long's exist today. It was the ambiguous relationship between images of black, nude women and white, clothed women that troubled the *Age* reader, and prompted him to write his letter. The anti-racist tone of the letter and its awareness of feminist concerns suggested a more promising critique than that entailed in Long's outdated speculations. It also indicated a capacity in the general community in the 1990s for critical visual analysis, which feminists in the early 1980s may not have thought possible. Given this and the facts that commercially 'exploitative' visual images of female nudity are now widespread, and racial inequity in Australia is still largely ignored, it might be argued that a feminist re-visioning of the female body in art is clearly more urgent than ever before.

I have argued that, as a way of addressing this need, poststructuralism provided insights into ambiguities, as it did to those perceived by the *Age* reader, but that it also has limitations for a feminist analysis of the female body in representation. Foucault's postulation that power penetrates social and cultural structures that work on the body provided a framework for the analysis of subjectivity and sexuality. This framework can be used to define more precisely how discourses on race, gender and sexuality intersect to produce ambiguous effects in representations. On the other hand, Foucault's analyses of how art is constituted were piecemeal and inconsistent, and his claims about the seventeenth-century body were unconvincing, partly due to his neglect of gender. In this last regard, Nead's model for deconstruction, based on Derrida's, was a more useful project for a feminist analysis of ambiguity, since it showed how representation produces a surplus over exact meanings. The drawback was

that by dismantling gendered distinctions in the tradition of conceptualising the fine art nude, Nead's dualistic focus reified the mind/body dichotomy as a Eurocentric, critical ideal. An eclectic use of both techniques of deconstruction, as demonstrated in the above analysis of the Farnese Ceiling decorations, avoids the shortcomings of each, to some extent. Generally speaking, however, poststructuralist criticism approaches ambiguity in modern and pre-modern European art as negative. Ambiguity in visual representations of the female body, which belong to this tradition, was seen accordingly as a nebulous zone infected by violent impulses and hostile forces that invade the healthy body, crushing it with oppressive frameworks, and distorting its appearance into a seductive visual disguise.

4

SEEING AMBIGUITY

Poststructuralism's foregrounding of ambiguity as negative was paralleled by its distrust of the centrality given to the sense of sight by Enlightenment aesthetics. 'Antiocularcentrism', as Martin Jay termed it, was especially evident in feminist art and criticism in the 1980s. Certain modes of looking were denigrated, particularly in relation to the representation of the female body. Antiocularcentrism was implied in the theory of the male gaze and in the tendency amongst many artists to turn away from painting towards site-specific art, such as installation and performance art. From the perspective of the late 1990s, however, some of the theory underpinning this tendency was unconvincing in that it underestimated the potential in ambiguity to be read and seen as positive as well as negative. To develop this argument, the first half of the current chapter outlines theoretical approaches to ambiguities associated with vision. The second part critically reviews some early 1980s feminist theory in the light of more recent developments in both visual marketing and contemporary art practices.

The close relationship between vision and language in historical manifestations of art makes it difficult to differentiate between the roles of the senses and psychic drives. As Jay said 'There is . . . something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word "image", which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena' (Jay 1994: 8–9). This claim that there is a potential for revelation in ambiguities may appear to be a contradiction in terms for how can ambiguity be revealing when it indicates obscurity, lack of clarity, indistinctness and multiple-meanings? Surely the presence of ambiguity cancels the possibility of revelation, preventing the final definition of objects and the fixity of meaning? In considering these questions it is instructive to consult some of the many philosophers and writers who have pondered upon the presence of ambiguity in visual art. Their insights have led to an increased awareness of the processes of perception, to reassessments of how psychic, social and cultural conditions mediate these processes, and to estimations of the degree to which meaning and objectivity are constructed.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's example of the duck-rabbit (a drawing-puzzle from a humorous magazine) drew attention to how a paradoxical visual image could

show up a difference between the way language is used to report a perception and the way it is used to describe a change of aspect. 'But what is different: my impression? My point of view? – Can I say? I *describe* the alteration like a perception: quite as if the object had changed before my eyes' (Wittgenstein 1976: 195e–196e). By focusing on the use of language, aspect-seeing 'reveals' the complications of perceiving, knowing and interpreting.

Commenting on Wittgenstein's example, the British art historian Ernst Gombrich described the experience of perceiving the duck-rabbit as an illusion, and he concluded that 'we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion' (Gombrich 1962: 5). He emphasised the failure of vision, rather than of language, to overcome ambiguity when he applied this theory to the example of his friend, Kenneth Clark, standing in front of a painting:

> Looking at a great Velázquez, he wanted to observe what went on when the brushstrokes and dabs of pigment on the canvas transformed themselves into a vision of transfigured reality as he stepped back. But try as he might, stepping backward and forward, he could never hold both visions at the same time, and therefore the answer to his problem of how it was done always seemed to elude him.
>
> (Gombrich 1962: 5)

In this case of ambiguity, Gombrich said, 'the issues of aesthetics and psychology are subtly intertwined' (1962: 5).

Gombrich's idea of 'aesthetics and psychology' was dubbed 'perceptualism' by Norman Bryson, who objected to 'the exclusive stress placed by Gombrich on *cognition* as the motor of artistic production . . .' (Bryson 1983: 31). Bryson made light of the 'hoary' duck-rabbit picture and of a similar drawing-puzzle of a woman that read as either a young girl or a crone, playing down their challenges to language and psychology in order to emphasise the importance of social and cultural experience in framing perception:

> The point is that the drawings do not change, only the perceptual configurations we bring to them; configurations that may relate to the neurological Gestalten of perceptual psychology, but also depend on the taxonomies and categories which the perceiver brings to the drawings as part of his general experience of enculturation.
>
> (Bryson 1983: 29)

Rather than provide taxonomies and categories, which might clarify the ambiguity of the duck-rabbit picture, Bryson suggested that the interpretative paradigm of painter (viewer) and model, with its attendant illusions and ambiguities, be replaced by a materialist, semiotic analysis of painting, based on the precepts of Continental philosophy, and, in particular, the semiotics of Barthes.

Foucault was one of the earliest of these French philosopher-writers to address ambiguity in visual art. Although he denied that he was influenced by structuralism, his analysis of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* was based on the premise that

> the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.
>
> (Foucault 1973: 9)

Foucault built an arguably (post)structuralist framework, based on these observations, in order to develop his thesis that during the seventeenth century an epistemic shift occurred, when a theory of knowledge as resemblances gave way to a theory of knowledge as representations. He argued that Velázquez's painting was an embodiment of Classical representational space, but that as a semantic system it was interrupted, and 'uncoupled' at certain spots in the painting. The image of the back of the canvas on the left and that of the dog on the right, for example, were presented as 'pure spectacle'. Foucault concluded that

> Around the scene are arranged all the signs and successive forms of representation; but the double relation of the representation to its model and to its sovereign, to its author as well as to the person to whom it is being offered, this relation is necessarily interrupted. It can never be present without some residuum, even in a representation that offers itself as a spectacle.
>
> (Foucault 1973: 16)

Velázquez thus managed, according to Foucault, to represent in the one picture the ambivalent absence/presence of the artist (subject), the model (object) and the beholder. The 'residuum', which occurs when the reciprocity between observing subject and the observed object is interrupted, is a sort of ambiguity.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which was an elaborate commentary on the earlier text, Foucault considered how the materials of art signify. He argued that an archaeology of Painting would aim to discover 'discursive practices . . . even in the very gesture of the painter', and that in this way Painting would be found to be '*shot through* . . . with the positivity of a knowledge (savoir)' (Foucault 1972: 194). Although *giving rise* to knowledge, however, a discursive practice is a process in formation, and as such is open and provisional. Therefore, even when it is 'embodied' in the very gesture of the painter (itself an ambiguous expression, since 'gesture' could signify an action or a trace of paint), there is a

sense in which it offers only the possibility of knowledge. This, too, is a sort of ambiguity. Foucault again pondered upon the incommensurability of word and image in his analysis of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. However, as Rosalind Krauss observed, he cited the blank border on the page of an illustrated manuscript as a place which served as the 'common frontier' for the words and drawings which occupied the centre of the page (Krauss 1994: 328). Foucault wrote: 'It is there, on these few millimetres of white, the calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification' (Foucault 1983: 28). Never-theless, even if the systems of word and image are linked at 'the deepest epistemic level', as Krauss (1994: 327) put it, the unmarked blankness of the border is, on the shallow level of 'the calm sand of the page', an area of ambiguity (Foucault 1983: 28).

Both Derrida and Barthes foregrounded ambiguity in their analyses of visual representation. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Derrida used the example of the *parergon* to address borders and ambiguity in painting. Jay summarised Derrida's argument as follows.

> Arguing against the integrity of the work of art (the *ergon*), he showed that it is always polluted by its framing contexts (the *parergon*), so that any purely aesthetic discourse cannot itself avoid intermingling with those it tries to exclude – ethical, cognitive or whatever. Nor can works of art themselves purport to represent the truth in an unproblematic way, say through mimesis of a real or ideal realm. For they are always penetrated intertextually by other impulses that deprive them of their putative disinterested, autonomous status.
>
> (Jay 1994: 516)

For Derrida, therefore, it was in the polluting margins of visual texts that ambiguity was located, and where deconstruction took place. For Barthes, ambiguity in visual representation was more alluring. In *Camera Lucida* he confessed to an intense investment in the visual promise of the photograph. Ambiguity was implicated in this promise. As he said, 'I felt, by the strength of my "investments", their disorder, their caprice, their enigma, that Photography is an *uncertain* art, as would be (were one to establish such a thing) a science of desirable or detestable bodies' (Barthes 1988: 18). In his compulsion to name what it was about the few photographs that 'pricked' him beyond the point of his simply liking them to the point where he loved them, Barthes identified what he called the *punctum*. He explained that the *punctum*, which is not coded, is distinct from the *studium*, which is coded. This uncoded detail, he explained, has the power of expansion and enhancement, which is often metonymic: 'I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value' (Barthes 1988: 42). Barthes identified his own 'madness' in the ambiguous relationship between perception and time in photography:

> The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there', on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality.
>
> (Barthes 1988: 115)

The ambiguous absence/presence of the object or model is interpreted thus as a premonition of its death. Reference has already been made to Barthes in Chapter 2 with respect to this aspect of ambiguity in Jane Burton's photographs of nude women.

The above writers are only a few of those who addressed ambiguity in art, or visual representation. Ambiguity was a puzzling aspect of perception for Gombrich, and for Foucault it was a spatial interruption in a representational system of visual signs. For Barthes it was a temporal one and it had an additional psychic dimension associated with grief and fear of death. This aspect of Barthes's speculations has been linked with the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, who, as already shown, also distrusted vision. As a consequence of this negative construction on the sense of sight, Jay included Barthes, as well as Foucault and Derrida, with the many other French philosophical writers of this century who have participated in the 'denigration of vision'. This antiocularcentric discourse, as Jay called it, was a reaction to the Cartesian privileging of sight and its close relationship with cognition, which underpinned Enlightenment thought and modernism. It was paralleled by and implicated in the discourse on ambiguity that I have just described. Since there would be little point in my competing with Jay's concise but lengthy summary, I will reproduce it here:

> Although definitions of visuality vary from thinker to thinker, it is clear that ocularcentrism aroused (and continues in many quarters to arouse) a widely shared distrust. Bergson's critique of the spatialization of time, Bataille's celebration of the blinding sun and the acephalic body, Breton's ultimate disenchantment with the savage eye, Sartre's depiction of the sadomasochism of the 'look', Merleau-Ponty's diminished faith in a new ontology of vision, Lacan's disparagement of the ego produced by the mirror stage, Althusser's appropriation of Lacan for a Marxist theory of ideology, Foucault's strictures against the medical gaze and panoptic surveillance, Debord's critique of the society of the spectacle, Barthes's linkage of photography and death, Metz's excoriation of the scopic regime of the cinema, Derrida's double reading of the specular tradition of philosophy and the white mythology, Irigaray's outrage at the privileging of the visual in patriarchy, Levinas's claim that ethics is thwarted by a visually based ontology, and Leotard's identification of postmodernism with the

> sublime foreclosure of the visual – all these evince, to put it mildly, a palpable loss of confidence in the hitherto 'noblest of the senses'.
> (Jay 1994: 588)

In the area of the visual arts, the reception of French thought, beginning in the 1970s, was manifested in the work of

> film critics like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Duane, yoking together apparatus theory and the feminist suspicion of the male gaze, art historians like Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, rebelling against the fetish of opticality in traditional modernist theory, students of photography like John Tagg and Abigail Solomon Godeau, rejecting the formalist defence of photography's claim to aesthetic value, [who] were all inspired to one degree or another, by the French antiocularcentric discourse. By 1990, Frederick Jameson could effortlessly invoke its full authority in the opening words of his *Signatures of the Visible* . . .
> (Jay 1994: 588–99)

The rejection of painting and related art practices in post-1970s feminist art production must be understood as a recognition of the effect in visual art practices of this antiocularcentric discourse. It was also a contribution to it.

In spite of his tracing of a prejudice against vision in recent French thought, Jay did not underestimate the benefits that this bias produced for art and theory. I want to add that similar and related benefits derived from the analysis of ambiguities in visual art. Such analysis resulted in re-orientations, changes of emphasis and transferrals of interest, which followed from one matrix of impulses, drives and social relations to another. It gave rise to new articulations of space, time, chains of connection, historical rules of formation and networks of power, all of which constitute or interconnect with fields of vision. In the case of Barthes and Derrida, for example, their speculations on ambiguity in visual art contributed to what Krauss called a 'paraliterary' genre which was ' "about" its own strategies of construction, its own linguistic operations, its own revelation of convention, its own surface' (Krauss 1988: 293). In the late 1960s and 1970s, feminism instigated this change of focus in the visual arts, thus producing a variety of critical strategies. Pollock cautioned against 'fantasies of looking' associated with visual art, for example, whereas Krauss pointed out the need to focus on art's own strategies of construction, in visual and material terms.

Ways of not seeing

The female nude in art was an important reference point in feminist critiques of art history in the 1970s, when the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement had gained momentum. As discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the 1980s pornography debate, the more immediate concern of feminists, generally,

was the 'degrading' way the female body was visually represented in the popular media, including advertising, magazines, TV and pornography. In these images, any ideal beyond the aim of controlling female sexuality for the commercial exploitation of male desire appeared to be absent. Feminists set about retracing the connection between these media representations of the female body and the tradition of the high art nude, showing how the two traditions were inextricably linked. Sexuality thus became the catalyst for collapsing the distinction between high art and popular culture, a process that is a hallmark of postmodernism. On the other hand, by building up an armature of theoretical frameworks with which to deconstruct gender, and by eschewing certain modes of art associated with vision, feminist art professionals in the 1980s were also responsible for preserving this distinction.

Feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s, such as that of Chicago, Santoro and Schneemann aimed to 'demystify' patriarchal conceptions of the female body by experimenting with body art and vaginal iconology. They set out to create alternative 'positive' images of the female body by making 'visible' those parts that had been censored in traditional art. From the outset the visual explicitness and biological emphasis of these works was troubling to many feminist critics because of the way their visibility was, or could be, misconstrued by a 'patriarchal' viewing public. At that time, there seemed to be a strict division between the unacceptable public exhibition and the acceptable private expression of sexuality, and between art and pornography. Hence, there was a real danger that the boundary crossing would go unrecognised as such. As Lucy Lippard famously remarked, 'It is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult' (Lippard 1977: 125). The untheorised collapsing of public and private in the body art of Chicago and others was mapped onto the generally unquestioned association of women with their bodies, which were seen as 'natural', reproductive organisms, rather than as persons owning their own sexuality. The traditional conceptualisation of woman's body, it was argued, automatically precluded its opposite, that women are intelligent, thinking persons. Griselda Pollock summarised the reductiveness of vaginal imagery's synechdochal depiction of the female body, when she said, 'In some ways (these images) merely perpetuate the exclusively sexual identity of women, not only as body but explicitly as cunt' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 127).

Although Pollock acknowledged that body art and vaginal imagery served a useful, expressive purpose for women, she and other feminists, being fearful of more insults, judged the possible misrecognition of these feminist images to be too great a risk. Pollock recommended a drastic solution for feminists, when she suggested that the project of producing positive images of women be abandoned:

> . . . within the present organisation of sexual difference which underpins patriarchal culture, there is no possibility of simply conjuring up

> and asserting a positive and alternative set of meanings for women. The work to be done is that of deconstruction.
>
> (Parker and Pollock 1981: 132–3)

This advice not only discouraged, but effectively prohibited feminists from creating 'a positive and alternative set of meanings'. Furthermore it prescribed the method by which traditional meanings, or meaning itself, should be dismantled. By 'deconstruction' Pollock meant that

> In art practice, women can engage in work to expose these ideological constructions by questioning the traditional institutions of artist and art, by analysing the meanings which representations of woman signify and by alerting the spectator to the ideological *work* of art, the effects of artistic practices and representations.
>
> (Parker and Pollock 1981: 133)

Although deconstruction was not the only critical framework available to feminist art historians, it did recruit the vast majority of artists and critics whose works were published and exhibited in 'avant garde' venues during the 1980s, thereby including publishers, curators, art-buyers and museums in its sphere of influence.

Feminists such as Pollock and Roszika Parker realised the importance of developing John Berger's argument that sexualised images of naked women in both art and advertising were used as commodities of exchange within Europe's male-dominated, bourgeois economy. They shifted attention from the function of idealism in representations of the female nude, to that of ideology, from 'being-looked-at-ness' to semiotics, psychoanalysis and analysis of the male gaze, and from art as the expression of a particular individual, or a particular culture, to art as a social practice.

> Art is one of the cultural, ideological practices which constitute the discourse of a social system and its mechanisms of power. Power of one group over another is sustained on many levels, economic, political, legal or educational, but these relations of power are reproduced in language and in images which present the world from a certain point of view and represent different positions of and relations to power of both sexes and classes.
>
> (Parker and Pollock 1981: 115)

Hence Pollock and Parker and other feminist academics, particularly in England, built on Marxist, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theoretical frameworks to produce more sophisticated radical strategies for a feminist intervention in art history and contemporary art practice. Their presence in universities challenged the intellectually stagnant traditions of liberal art scholarship, bringing art history

courses dramatically up to date with developments in other areas such as social theory, film theory and literary theory. The impact of poststructuralism on feminist art practice in the 1980s, like that of Barbara Kruger, encouraged feminists to dismantle representational processes, such as the male gaze, and to develop psychoanalytic theories that advanced an understanding of women's bodies in feminist terms. Pollock's advocacy of deconstruction contributed to and was reinforced by these developments in contemporary art. Hence, in 1992, she was able to describe the achievements of feminist artists over the preceding fifteen years in terms that justified her earlier advice.

> What has characterized a diversity of feminist modes is a refusal of an exclusive 'visuality', with its fantasies of looking, and a concurrent exploitation of a wider range of semiotic forms which call upon other drives, such as the invocatory, and other sign systems, including writing/inscription, incantation, rhythm, memory, echo.
>
> (Pollock 1993: 147)

In stylistic terms, this feminist strategy that Pollock identified paralleled the transition from late modernist formalism to poststructuralist modes of post-modernism. It shadowed the arguments of anti-pornography feminists, reflected the French denigration of vision, a Kristevian turn to 'other drives' and modes of signification, and was reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's advice that to function politically an artist must change the means of production.[1]

Nevertheless, a closer examination of Pollock's remark might show that she glossed over ambiguities in the relationship between vision and historical manifestations of 'visuality'. Her expression 'refusal of an exclusive "visuality"' implies the questionable claim that the sense of sight plays a less important role in the reading of other sign systems, such as writing/inscription. Conversely, it suggests that other senses and their related 'drives' are not implicated in visual experience as it is manifested in earlier, modernist modes, particularly painting. Put another way, the relationship between vision and the manifestation of visual experience in art, in its various modes, is more complicated, ambiguous and open to non-visual inflections than Pollock's distinction suggests. For a start, she used the term 'visuality' in an ambivalent way. In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay defined 'visuality' as 'the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes', indicating that visual experience is mediated by conditions such as time, place, society and culture (Jay 1994: 9).[2] Although Pollock used 'visuality' in this way to indicate 'the sexual economy circulated through paintings and photographs of the man artist in his studio with his woman model', she also distinguished this particular and exclusive 'visuality' from 'other sign systems' (Pollock 1993: 147). The basis for this distinction seems to be the primary role that 'visuality', as distinct from, say, 'aurality' or 'tactility', demands of the sense of sight. Furthermore, she added a derogatory psychic dimension to this 'visuality' when she referred to its 'fantasies of looking',

which she opposed to 'other drives, such as the invocatory'. One might argue, however, that modernist painting invokes other senses besides vision. It has often been suggested, for example, that 'synesthesia' or the confusion of the senses is a corollary of manifestations of visual experience in Impressionist painting. One might equally argue that visual experience manifested in the 'mode' of Santoro's photographs of vaginal forms can invoke other senses, such as touch, and that Chicago's vaginal images, such as *Peeling Back*, 1974, call upon 'other sign systems', such as rhythm (Plate 17).

As outlined in Chapter 2, psychoanalysis and the theory of the male gaze were crucial to feminist deconstructions of 'fantasies of looking' in the 1980s. The point I want to stress here, however, is that Pollock was inattentive to ambiguities in art and visual representation, in that she was blinkered by a

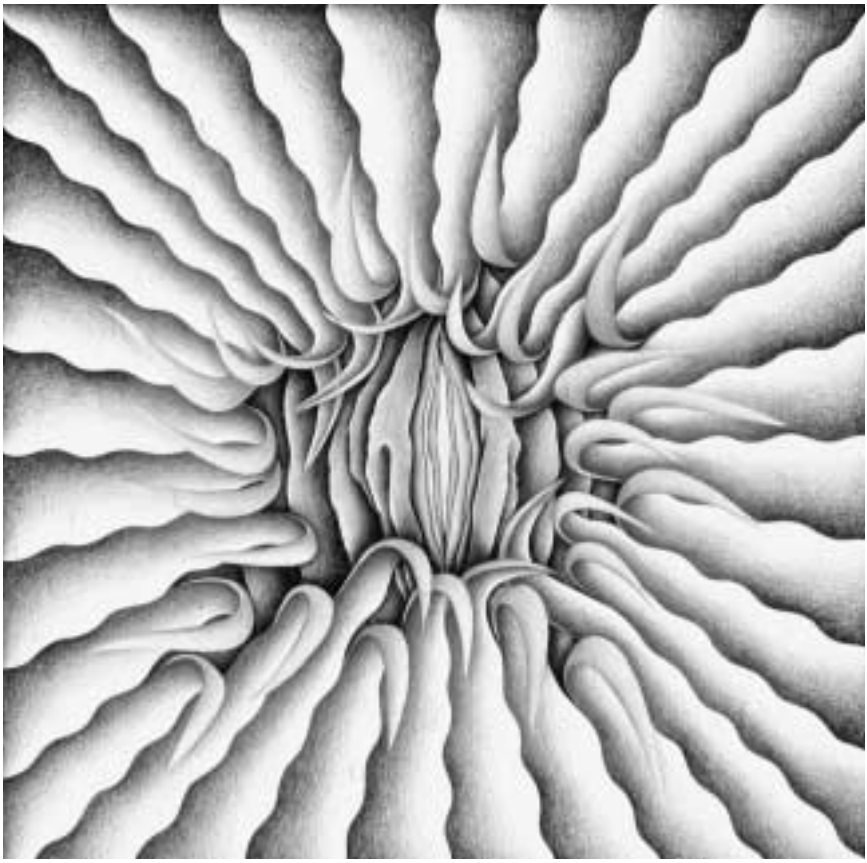

Plate 17 Judy Chicago, *Peeling Back* (detail from *Rejection Quintet*), 1974, prismacolor on paper, 101 cm × 76.2 cm (collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). Photograph by Donald Woodman.

restrictive notion of gender and an associated unconcern for the way that material aspects of art signify visually. These aspects of her analysis raise questions about whether certain feminist art practices were rejected unfairly, and whether or not an antiocularcentric approach was the most effective means of countering the fact that visually explicit representations of the naked female body continued to proliferate in popular culture. Over the past twenty-five years, advertising, the very area in which the insult to women inherent in visual representations was first identified, has won recognition for itself as a respectable area of popular culture, partly *because* of its erotic ocularcentrism. Ironically it has achieved this status by employing a strategy of feminisation. Feminist deconstruction seems ill prepared to deal with this new form of visual representation or to judge whether it is exploitative or not.

As a way of illustrating this paradigm shift in 'fantasies of looking' in advertising, or marketing as it is now called, it is instructive to return to an early example used by Pollock in her ground-breaking article, entitled 'What's Wrong With Images of Women?' In this article, which was first published in 1977, Pollock declared the 'impossibility of challenging existing imagery without an adequate theory of ideology and representation' (Parker and Pollock 1987: 133).[3] She contested the then prevalent notion adhered to by many feminists, that representations of women were reflections of reality, and that as such they constituted a neutral register of 'images of women', each of which could be judged as good or bad, according to 'realist' criteria. Such images included 'women working', or 'older women', for example, as opposed to 'fashion advertisements'. Pollock proposed instead 'the notion of woman as a signifier in an ideological discourse in which one can identify the meanings that are attached to woman in different images and how the meanings are constructed in relation to other signifiers in that discourse' (Parker and Pollock 1987: 133). She described the feminist strategy of male/female reversal, using as her example the substitution of a nude young man for a nude adolescent girl who featured in an advertisement for the pharmaceutical company, Bayer.

The reversal, entitled *Test-tube baby*, 1973, was reproduced in the 1973 *Women's Report* (Plate 18). It was intended to expose the 'notion of woman as body', which had come to signify 'sale', and the 'basic asymmetry, inscribed into the language of visual representation which (such) reversals serve to expose' (Parker and Pollock 1987: 137). The advertisement was accompanied by a text, which was reproduced in the reversal, but which substituted the feminine pronouns in it with masculine ones. It read as follows:

> Adolescence – a time of misgiving. Doubts about the site offered by parents to build a life on. Both head and heart subject to the tyranny of hormones. Youth under stress in search of an identity. B . . . is there to help *him* through this period of self-seeking. With textile fibres and dye-stuffs for the fashionable clothes *he* needs to wear . . . With raw ingredients for the cosmetics *he* uses to create *his* own

Plate 18 *Test-tube baby (and reversal)*, 1973, black and white photographs (Bayer advertisement and feminist reversal, reproduced in Pollock, G., '"What's Wrong with Images of Women"?' in R. Parker, and G. Pollock (eds), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985*, London, Pandora, 1987, figs 1 and 2, p. 132).

> personality. And simple remedies too. Like Aspirin . . . for the pain *he* will experience.
>
> (Parker and Pollock 1987: 133)

The humour of the reversal of gender arose from the anomaly of a man being described in this way. Obviously, in 1973, the reversal was incongruous enough to be very funny. Analysing contemporaneous advertisements featuring men, Pollock showed that the 1970s 'man' was 'active, self-contained', and did not 'engage with the gaze of the spectator' (Parker and Pollock 1987: 134). As with his Classical prototype, Apollo Belvedere, it was impossible to link his presence with 'sale', since 'What is absolutely lacking is any conceivable position of ownership or possession offered to the spectator' (Parker and Pollock 1987: 135). By contemporaneous standards, therefore, the image of the man in *Test-tube baby*, as a 'flowering . . . bud-like creature', was cause for laughter (Parker and Pollock 1987: 134).

Twenty-five years later, however, the reversal was no longer funny. When viewed in the company of male models of the 1990s, there was nothing especially remarkable about the nudity and insecurity of the man in *Test-tube baby*,

or about the implication that a man's body may be the object of sexual desire. He bears comparison with the model on the cover of *The Face*, for example, who was one of several androgynous-looking male models, all wearing make-up, who were featured in a 1995 'fashion special' edition (Plate 19). The feature article, by Nick Compton, entitled 'Likely Lads', was promoted on the front cover with the by-line: 'Forget the new man. Here come the new boys'. Inside the magazine it was revealed that the cover boy's name was Jesse. In another shot of him inside the magazine, Jesse's vulnerable, half-naked body was displayed for the viewer's delectation in a pose that could be traced to Dionysian prototypes in the paintings of Caravaggio or the sculptures of Michelangelo. The link with male prototypes in art history is little more than arbitrary, however, for Jesse's pose and seductive eye-contact with the spectator are immediately recognisable as ways in which women have looked down the

Plate 19 *The Face*, front cover, August 1995, 2, 83.

camera for over a century in order to signify 'sale'. As Compton explained about the latest fashion in desirable males: 'They're self-absorbed, masturbatory, but daring you to join in' (Compton 1995: 43).

The most striking anachronism that *The Face* advertisement exposes in the Bayer advertisement, however, is not the joke on gender, but the assumption that the viewer/buyer is a caring parent. The girl's nakedness in *Test-tube baby* might have signified 'the notion of woman as body', but its overt aim was to signify adolescent dependence on adult protection. As an adolescent, therefore, the girl no more signifies the body of 'woman' than Jesse signifies the body of 'man'. Few advertisements for teenage products today are directed at parents, and if they are, their appeal is usually just as ambiguous, but more sexually confronting than the Bayer advertisement. *The Face* aimed to sell teenage products by blatantly eroticising the relationship between the model and the viewer. Whether male or female, adult or adolescent, parent or boy-self, the viewer/reader/buyer of *The Face* entertains erotic fantasies about boys for whom he/she may buy clothes. At the same time, this viewer is not obliged, symbolically speaking, to care whether the boy (or girl, for that matter) suffers pain, or needs guidance and help through the difficult years of his adolescence. According to Catharine Lumby, the 1990s teenager was more 'media savvy' and sexually precocious than previous generations (Lumby 1997: 72). This implies that the teenaged reader enjoys the fantasy of erotic encounter with the model, but also knows very well that the image of 'boy as body' functions as part of a marketing transaction for expensive clothes.

Compared with *Test-tube baby*, *The Face* advertisement points to a libertarian democratisation of sexuality and, by implication, to the dissolution of gendered distinctions. It also exemplifies a victory for advanced capitalism. The fact that *Test-tube baby* no longer works as a joke, therefore, does not mean that Pollock was on the wrong track in 1977 when she recognised a complicated alliance between art, sexuality and capitalism in visual representations of the female body. Nor does it prove that an uneven distribution of power between men and women in Western society does not still exist. The failure of Pollock's example today does show, however, that the extent to which she focused on the distinction between the social roles of 'woman' and 'man', led her to overlook other ways in which sexualised or gendered codes were ambiguously present in the visual image of the Bayer advertisement. Maternity, for example, was a crucial area of contention in feminist debates between essentialists and constructivists during the 1970s and 1980s. The fact that, in the earlier advertisement, the viewer/buyer is assumed to be a parent draws attention to Pollock's indifference to this, as well as to feminism's current failure to take a unified stance with regard to the sexualised representation of children and adolescents. On the other hand, one could use Pollock's example to disprove her case that the positions assigned to 'man' and 'woman' are socially constructed, since an important implication that Pollock missed in the original Bayer advertisement is that the girl menstruates, is menstruating, or will soon

start to menstruate. This can be inferred from the advertisement's emphasis on the body, the crouched pose and the reference to 'the pain *she* will experience'. Obviously, a man does not and will never experience this bodily process. In fact menstruation may be one of the few differences between the lived, bodily experiences of 'man' and 'woman' which is biologically determined, a fact which undermines rather than reinforces Pollock's constructivist claims. A closer analysis of Pollock's example reveals, therefore, that in pursuing a semiotic reading that leads to more complex social meanings she missed important, visually presented cues that undermine those readings.

In her deconstruction of the trope of the female model in modernist painting, Pollock was again insistent on a dualistic reading of gender and social relations, and, in the process, was at least partially inattentive to formal aspects of the art she criticised. In *Old Mistresses*, and again in a 1992 revision of the earlier text in 'Painting, Feminism, History', Pollock described the semiotic structures that constitute Matisse's *The Painter and his Model* (1917). She argued that these structures present 'a social and a sexual hierarchy' in which male sexual, social and cultural dominance is achieved at the expense of the objectified female body (Pollock 1993: 138). In the 1992 revision, she described this matrix as 'triangulated', consisting of 'the painter's body, the feminine body and the contestation of both through feminist discourse and practice of "the woman's body"' (1993: 141). Pollock's 1981 reading of the picture's signifying systems falls short, however, in interpretation of the 'materiality' of the sign, or, in more traditional terms, at the level of style. Her description of the man as 'nude' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 123), or 'possibly nude' (Pollock 1993: 137), and of the woman as 'a lumpen, shapeless figure' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 123), betrays a disregard for, or misreading of, the degree and function of abstraction operating in Matisse's work. If one examines the painted figure of the artist, it is highly unlikely that he is naked. His leg is shaped as though he is wearing trousers and a shoe, and it could be argued that, except for the fact that the woman is wearing a dress, she is no more lumpen or shapeless than is the man.

Certainly abstraction may be a way of concealing and/or revealing ideological meanings, but for an interpreter to correct or ignore that abstraction by attaching to each form the meaning of a 'realist' image, as Pollock did, is to set up a 'straw' argument. The human figures in Matisse's painting are depersonalised, having been rendered with the same degree of generalisation and abstraction as that which describes the mirror and the view out the window. It could be argued, therefore, that on the level of style, at least, the picture signifies an indifference to gender. This does not contradict Pollock's conclusions, for, as she explained later, indifference to gender is a feature of modernist discourse that serves to perpetuate the marginalisation of women. Her 1981 deconstruction of Matisse's painting, nevertheless, misses important ways in which visual forms can signify, and the potential of ambiguity in art.

Having deconstructed the modernist trope of artist and model and shown how the strategy of male/female reversal cannot undo male dominance, Pollock

argued that it is impossible for a woman artist to paint a male nude and thereby to reverse the unequal power relations between 'man' and 'woman'. She used the example of Sylvia Sleigh's *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971), which is based on the composition of Velázquez's *The Toilet of Venus* (*c.*1650). Pollock made the point that, because of the social power that accrues to men in contemporary culture, a male nude is almost always a portrait and never a 'generalized' body. She gave little credit, however, to the fact that Sleigh *combined* two different genres, the portrait genre and the trope of 'artist and nude model'. In other words, Sleigh's painting is not simply a reversal of sexes within the framework of the academic nude, it is principally a portrait. Therefore the effects of singularity in *Philip Golub Reclining* are intrinsic to this genre, not the inevitable consequences of a male-dominated society.

My review of Pollock's examples has shown that, in spite of a justifiable fear in the 1970s and early 1980s that body art would exacerbate voyeurism, her reasons for rejecting the *possibility* of 'positive' or 'alternative' visual representations of the female body are unconvincing. I have suggested that this is due to her refusal to see the possibility of a positive 'visuality' in the ambiguity of these images. The shortcomings of Pollock's deconstruction, however, are not necessarily an indictment of poststructuralist techniques in visual analysis. As Rosalind Krauss pointed out in her book on Cindy Sherman, deconstruction can and should account convincingly for the way visual and material aspects of art are made to signify. Krauss described Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* in this way, explaining that they were simulacral rather than representational, thus defending them against critics who saw the work 'in terms of the characters in the film stills, the stars, even the actresses, the various types of abused women' (Krauss 1993b: 21). These critics, suggested Krauss, should instead consider 'that the signified might be a function of how (Sherman) in fact constructs them' (Krauss 1993b: 21). In arguing thus in her book on Cindy Sherman, Krauss defined a difference between her application of poststructuralist theory in art criticism and that of British film theorist, Laura Mulvey, whom she accused indirectly of being 'trapped by the very lure of meaningfulness' (Krauss 1993a: 195). Krauss directed her criticism more generally to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze:

> We have seen this in the analysis of Sherman's art through all types of mythic consumption, including that of the theory of the Male Gaze as production of the eroticised fetish. In all these there is the continual rush towards the signified, the refusal to follow the signifiers, the steady consumption of the mythic production of meaning.
>
> (Krauss 1993a: 195)

Krauss thus shifted attention from questions of ideology to the formal aspects of signification. Her emphasis on the signifier rather than the signified distinguished her poststructuralist approach, not only from that of Mulvey, but also

from the feminist criticism of Pollock, who, as I mentioned, was one of the first to adapt Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to the analysis of art. Hence, Pollock's inattention to ambiguity in her earlier examples might be seen as an effect of the tendency to consume 'the mythic production of meaning in art' that Krauss identified.

Although the differences between Pollock's and Krauss's approaches to deconstruction should not be exaggerated, they have contributed to several overlapping and often confused debates about feminist art in the 1980s. Summarising some of these, Janet Wolff attempted to go beyond 'the "eighties" issue of theory versus experience', an opposition which she said disguised 'a more complex scenario, in which a range of binaries converge into one' (Wolff 1995: 15).

> Four of the primary oppositions in play are: 'scripto-visual work' versus painting; deconstruction versus celebration; theory versus experience; elitism versus accessibility. Others, often also deployed as if equivalent to these, include: theory versus practice, and postmodern versus modern. In the first place, these are not even necessarily binary oppositions; for example, there is no real reason why scripto-visual texts cannot employ painting (though they have for the most part been photographic works). More importantly, these are not at all the *same* oppositions. For example, painting does not ensure accessibility; not all theory is deconstructionist (or elitist); experience is not necessarily manifest in painting; and so on. What happens then is a kind of slippage, as a result of which a composite hardline case is made; against 'British feminism', for example.
>
> (Wolff 1995: 15)

Although Wolff was here defending British feminists, to some extent, I have suggested that Pollock's hardline case against the body art of Chicago and Santoro risked a similar sort of 'slippage'.

In her later essay, 'Painting, Feminism, History', Pollock revised and implicitly modified the antiformalist implications of her earlier criticism of vaginal imagery, asserting in retrospect that

> Feminism and politics have common-sensically been associated with the content of art, not with formal issues. But this is a misapprehension. Judy Chicago, for instance, wanted to create not merely a feminist iconography but a visual language, a semi-abstract imagery based on the metaphor of female sexuality.
>
> (Pollock 1993: 146)

Despite this concession to the possibility of feminist meanings in Chicago's 'semi-abstract' visual language, however, Pollock then repeated the 'commonsensical' reasons for rejecting the work, claiming that the content 'seemed too

limiting and indeed dangerous' (Pollock 1993: 147). Ironically, the refusal of what was perceived to be a masculinist content ('the equation of woman with body, and sexuality with the genitals'), and a masculinist style ('based on the metaphor of female sexuality') was a symptom of the same technique of repression operating in the masculinist tradition of 'all those nudes without pubic hair or any indication of genitals' (1993: 146). In other words, deconstructive feminists and the old masters were united in refusing the visual representation of 'female sexuality', be it metaphorical (Chicago's vaginal imagery) or synecdochal (the [absent] pubic hairs of the traditional nude). In both cases this refusal prevented consideration of how the 'identity of women', if it is not 'exclusively sexual', might otherwise be constituted.

While it may seem irrelevant and unfair to dredge up these old examples, it is important to reconsider them. As criticisms, they provided the unstable grounds on which Pollock and other deconstructive feminists dismissed certain feminist art practices, which may have been developed in useful and interesting ways. Many feminist artists in the 1980s who were engaged in painting or photography, which referenced the female body or was in some way 'representational', felt justifiably slighted by deconstructive critics. Despite the insights afforded by Pollock's and Krauss's art criticism, therefore, they do not alter my case that the proposal to produce positive representations of the female body was, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, put prematurely and dogmatically to rest. Young artists, such as the women whose work was discussed in Chapter 2, may not have read Pollock or the work of art historians who shared her views, but the legacy of feminist deconstruction persists in many areas of postmodern art practice. The fact that women artists in the 1990s reinstated the nude in their art to produce positive images of the female body, even if critically, or in order to invoke its abjection, indicates uneasiness about that legacy.[4] It suggests that the old, unanswered questions about ambiguity and vision, sexuality and body ideals had risen from the grave, demanding to be reconsidered in the context of the social and cultural conditions of the 1990s.

New ways of seeing

Boundaries between private and public expressions of sexuality, and between art and pornography still existed in the 1990s, of course, but perhaps they were not so clear, or had shifted, or were simply less able to be policed than they were in the 1970s and 1980s. In any case, the transgression of them was more readily understood as a strategy of identity politics, or as 'queer'. The increased production of pornography for women led to the explosion of many myths, or binaries about gender categories and sexual preferences. In her studies of pornographic film, Linda Williams argued that, as a result of women's participation as both producers and consumers in the industry, the hierarchies governing traditional phallocentric distinctions encoded in pornography were breaking down. Although Williams adopted a Foucauldian perspective on the

historical 'implantation of perversions', she differed from Foucault in that she foresaw 'a general movement toward a degendered libido' (Williams 1990: 274). Arguing that the psychoanalytic notion of the fetish is very important in this, in that anything can substitute for the erotic object of desire, Williams traced the genealogy of, for instance, the 'money shot', which for many years was the central and constantly repeated motif of the 'stag movie'. The fact that 'the money shot' had been largely displaced in more recent films, she suggested, indicates that such erotic fantasies and the values inscribed in them are not fixed and timeless. Williams argued that an effect of women's increased participation in the industry, therefore, might be that pornography that does not devalue the female body is possible.

In certain respects, however, a degendered libidinal economy confuses rather than clarifies feminist arguments against the violence of pornography. Della Grace's photograph of lesbians performing a mock rape, for example, caused a controversy amongst feminists in Britain, forcing acknowledgement that the taste for violence, penetration and voyeurism in sex, or in sexual fantasy, at least, is not exclusive to men.[5] Also categorised as 'lesbian art', Linda Dement's photographic series of three images entitled *Self and Gun* (1989) introduced a sadomasochistic theme into female 'self-portraiture' (Plate 20). The surreal, artificially lit, darkly shadowed and spaceless compositions show a severely fragmented woman's naked body with a gun lurking menacingly amidst a jumble of jewellery, masks, sharp instruments, broken shards of glass, nails, pins, torturous instruments and other grotesque objects. In an artist's statement Dement wrote: 'The content of my work is highly personal and corporeal. It is to do with my own experience, memories, aggression, flesh, desire, madness, bloodlust and fantasy' (Dement 1996: 84). Dement's confession of violent impulses was not an endorsement of male aggression in pornography, but a way of disrupting conventional expectations of femininity. As she said, 'to make personal, bodily, feminine work and to reinsert this work into mainstream culture, into art discourse and into society, is a political act' (ibid.). Part of that which made Dement's 'feminine work' so effective in the 1990s, however, is its visually explicit, ambiguous eroticism, and the challenges that it presents to antiocularcentric feminism.

The charge of 'essentialism', which was so inhibiting to artists in the 1980s, no longer seemed particularly relevant or useful to artists in the 1990s. Although Zoe Leonard's vaginal imagery is reminiscent of that of Chicago and Santoro, for instance, it emerged from a contemporary perspective on sexuality that had changed markedly from that of the 1960s and 1970s. In her 1992 Documenta 5 installation, Leonard reinstated vaginal imagery as a protest against the fact that the conservative organisers of Documenta had invited an insultingly small number of women artists to participate in the exhibition (Plate 21). Her celebration of female sexuality was also a rebuff to 1980s anti-pornography feminism. She explained her position in an interview: 'I'm sick and tired of this constant analysis that women have always been trod upon, and that we're always sexually used for a male fantasy, and that we're always objectified, which

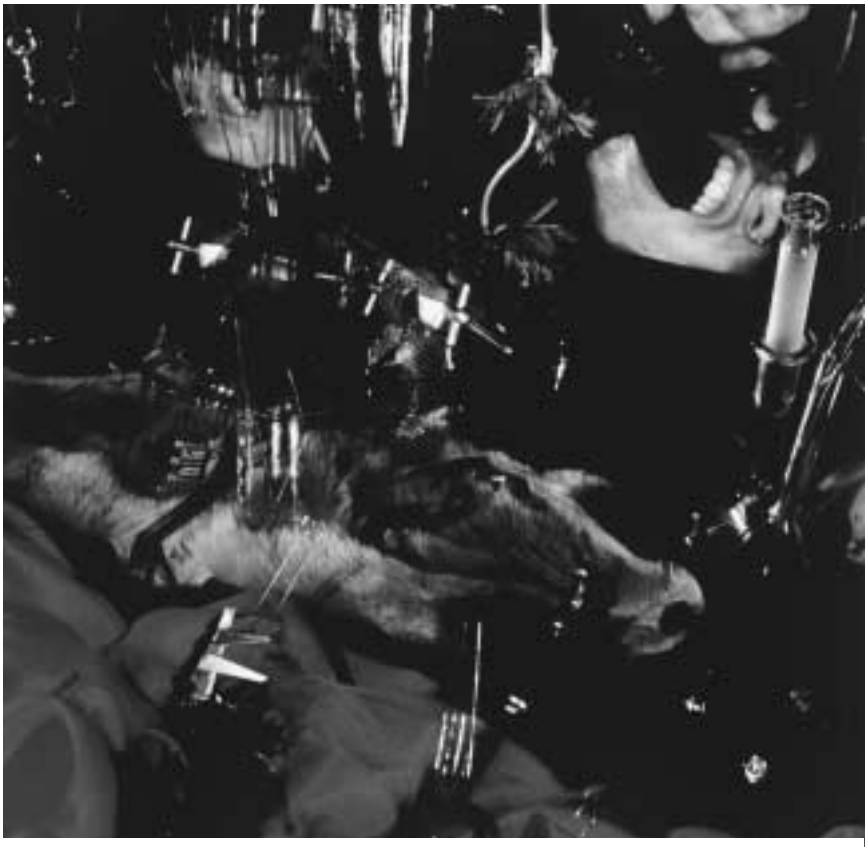

Plate 20 Linda Dement, *Self and Gun*, 1989, colour photograph, 20″ × 40″.

we are, but we also have our own sexuality' (Katz 1995: 138). Leonard's installation was situated in the Neue Galerie, Kassel, Germany, which was decorated with seventeenth-century portrait paintings, all painted by men. She removed the portraits of men from the historical collection and placed her own black and white photographs of women's crotches in between the remaining portraits of women. In her photograph reproduced here, for example, a hand masturbates a vulva, while in the adjacent painting a seventeenth-century lady fondles her hair and veil in such a way as to reveal her naked breast and shoulder. Thus the frankness of the photograph shows up techniques of erotic titillation in the history of painting. At the same time, it sets up an imaginary dialogue between Leonard's candid sexuality and the ambiguous seductiveness of the painted image, as well as with the fictional eroticism of the woman it pretends to represent. Leonard elaborated on this last aspect when she said:

Plate 21 Zoe Leonard, *Untitled Installation at Neue Galerie, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany*, June 13 – September 20, 1992. Photograph by Marcus Tollhopf. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

> And there's no reason to say that some woman, some big German Contessa back in the 17th century couldn't have had a wonderful, fulfilling sex life of her own, that she could have had a lover, she could have been a dyke, she could have jerked off a lot. She might have been miserable, but she also might have been really happy. And that these women actually owned their own sexuality.
>
> (Katz 1995: 138)

Leonard's assertion of polymorphous sexuality was also evident in her artistic strategies. As a lesbian, she used friends as models, juxtaposing her own sexuality with that which she judged to be the ambiguous sexuality of the historical female 'subjects' represented in the paintings. Leonard thus liberated the visual image, to some extent, from the tyranny of the male gaze, while contributing a new aesthetic perspective on female sexuality.

The antiocularcentric tendencies in 1980s theory and the refusal by post-structuralist artists of modernist 'visualities' were superseded to some extent in the 1990s by new speculations in feminist art on the relationship between painting and perception. In Susan Norrie's case, this did not entail a return to representational modes. Her installation, entitled *Inquisition* (Plates 22a, b, c, d), is a subtly feminist revisioning of the minimalism proposed by Ad Reinhardt's

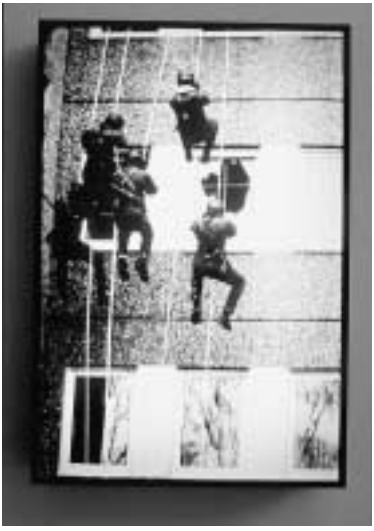

Plate 22 a, b, c, d Susan Norrie, *Inquisition*, 1996 and 1997, exhibited as a series of 8 at Mori Gallery, and then as a series of 7 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. *Inquisition/one*, glass beads, wood, lacquer and glass, 161 cm × 61.7 cm × 19 cm (collection of Mori Gallery and the artist). *Inquisition/four*, oil on canvas, wood, lacquer and glass, 86 cm × 61.3 cm × 10.1 cm (collection of John Cruthers and Elaine Baker). *Inquisition/five*, sepia toned and gelatin silver photograph, fibre based paper, wood, lacquer and glass, 50.5 cm × 40.5 cm × 4.5 cm (collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales). *Inquisition/seven*, light-box, photographic transparency (collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney).

last series of black paintings. *Inquisition* was shown at the MCA, Sydney, in 1997, and, according to Susan Best, who wrote the catalogue essay, it elicited 'seeing' from the spectator, rather than 'reading' (Best 1997: 23). As such the installation was an oblique challenge to Derrida's antiperceptualism and to his line that anything that comes under the rubric of 'vision' is a textual construct. The seven paintings in Norrie's show were repetitions of black, or black and white, and were set in box-like frames with highly reflective glass that obstructed a clear view of the works beneath. Only visible in the reflective surfaces of one another, they were a play on the 'unreproducibility' of the crosses in Reinhardt's work. As Best explained, Norrie's series addressed the viewer's capacity to switch between different visual modes, such as scanning, reading, glancing, and in this way paid attention to different temporalities of viewing and the conditions, such as exhibition space and historical context, which make them possible. At the same time it stimulated affective responses in the viewer that enabled a 'reattachment to life and all its vicissitudes' (1997: 25).

Connotations of the female body, in Norrie's paintings, provided the key to this 'reattachment'. The painted surfaces evoked the sensuousness of fabrics – reminiscent of Victorian, feminine adornment – which were displayed, separated and contained in their exquisitely crafted boxes. As Best noted, Norrie manipulated the thick, black paint to suggest ruched ribbon, 'jet' beads and painstakingly concertinaed pleats, thus elaborating on the 'expanded perception' that restriction makes possible. Added to these textural and sensuous effects are the funereal associations of black and a sense of uncanny danger that is repeated in the photograph of *Inquisition/seven*, in which an anti-terrorist team is shown scaling a building. Best noted that the sense of danger is not an effect of the mission of the men. It derives instead from the reflection of one of the men in the window of the building, which is like an ominous black hole punched through the surface of the image, and which thereby disturbs the sureness of vision. Hence, the uncertainties underpinning vision and the ambiguity that they produce, provided the basis of Norrie's feminist critique. It is only by contemplating this ambiguity that one can admit what Best described as 'the undertow of the lifeworld within the contemplative space of the picture frame' (1997: 25).

In art, ambiguity is less a foreclosure of meaning than a denial of fixity, and less a naming of nothingness, than a negation of naming. In visual art it can be a site for literary production, but more importantly for the feminist art practices examined in this chapter, it also admits the possibility of a positive 'visuality'. As Jay said in his conclusion, 'if the still faintly visible positive side (of the enLIGHTenment) is not forgotten, it may be possible to salvage something from the debris' (Jay 1994: 593). Mine is not a proposal for the resurrection of disused styles in art, or for the use of certain media in preference to others; nor is it a refusal of postmodernist 'modes' of feminist art production. It is rather an acknowledgement that ambiguity is always present in the perception or reading of visual art, and that it is often, although not

always, an adjunct to the close relationship between reading and vision. As a pretext for *positive* representations of the female body, therefore, and to borrow Foucault's phraseology, this book posits that ambiguity is the space where visual art promises to achieve its splendour.

5

GENDER AMBIGUITY

Having successfully framed the ambiguity of premodern and modern art in negative terms, feminist deconstructive critics in the 1980s failed to find a positive direction in the ambiguity of contemporary feminist art. Feminist art in the 1970s and early 1980s was concerned mainly with gender, and critics such as Parker and Pollock in *Old Mistresses* (1981), and Nead in *The Female Nude* (1992), demanded that there be evidence in the art of a clearly political position on this issue. As will become clear in the first half of the present chapter, the ambiguity of some of the art, such as performance body art, and of popular representations of the female body, such as those of Madonna, tested the relevance of these gender-based frameworks. Critics constructed their readings of contemporary culture along the lines of a sadomasochistic binary, with 'victim feminists' on the one hand and capitalist 'powermodels' on the other. In their own terms, these readings were often convincing, but they dismissed the feminist intentions of the artists and the way their art was oriented towards a positive ideal. By the late 1980s, poststructuralist discourses on hyperreality and embodiment had repositioned deconstruction to adjust to a paradigm shift in art practice, as well as in feminism, both of which complicated questions of ambiguity. Nevertheless, deconstructive critics still deferred to ambiguity and, on the whole, still did not envisage a positive direction for conceptualising the female body in art.

Perhaps the most positive perspective for feminism to be gained on ambiguity, sexuality and the body derived from Judith Butler's speculations in the early 1990s on gender identity. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler developed the theory that gender identity is 'performative', and that it is constructed through a series of 'reiterative' and 'constitutive' acts. Using the example of drag, she argued that 'performativity' occurs as a parody of identity as an ideal, and that as such it opens up new possibilities for a feminist critique. The second part of the current chapter considers aspects of Butler's theory, and queer theory in general, as well as ways they might be applied in the analysis of gender ambiguity in visual representation. While referring to art by Linda Sproul, Jane Trengove and Della Grace, it posits that while gender and sex are performative, gender performativity

in visual art or performance is to some extent *represented*, and often according to a feminist ideal.

The postmodern body in performance

The ambiguity in performance body art and its construction of meanings or enactment of critique through performance was problematic to some feminist critics in the 1980s and even in the 1990s. In a similar vein to Pollock's disapproval of the body art of Chicago and Santoro, Lynda Nead argued that performance body art failed as a 'deconstructive strategy' (Nead 1992: 70). This led her to labour distinctions, arguing for instance that performance body art asserts the female body as 'pure matter', and that it 'does not deconstruct the gendered terms of the mind/body dichotomy; it simply inverts them' (1992: 69–70). Here Nead applied Derrida's advice on deconstructive reading practice, which Elizabeth Grosz summarised as follows:

> Derrida's reading strategies involve *both* reversal and displacement together: the dichotomy must be reversed (showing that the terms are not logically necessary or unalterable in their hierarchical relation); and the repressed must be displaced, not *out of the structure altogether* but by positioning it within the core of the dominant term, as its *logical condition*.
>
> (Grosz 1989: 30)

For Nead, therefore, it was not enough for performance art to invert 'form' and 'matter'. The artist needed to demonstrate how form was dependent on matter as its logical condition. The starkness of Nead's judgement on performance body art reflected her conviction that feminist art is 'necessarily deconstructive', as well as her complicity in the way that deconstruction reinscribes the terms it dismantles (Nead 1992: 62). As Hal Foster explained, 'a convention, form or tradition, etc., *is* only deconstructed from within. Deconstruction thus becomes reinscription, for there is no "outside". . . . That is, there is no way *not* to be in a field of cultural terms, for these terms inform us presumptively' (Foster 1992: 197).

Nead's criticism of performance body art reinscribed the mind/body dichotomy in the manner that Foster described. Her conclusion, however, pushed the process to the point of strain, for while this binary structure informed her reading 'presumptively', evidence of it, in the pattern of a simple reversal of its terms, was not always clearly present in the art she criticised, particularly performance body art. Nead herself explained that 'The representation of the female body need not imply an exclusive commitment to the "Nature" or the "Reason" side of the binary opposition' (Nead 1992: 70). Nevertheless, her criticism that performance body art made such a commitment indicates her disregard for the ambiguities of the art.

The performances of American artist, Karen Finley, for example, were the subject of feminist criticism because she presented her body in a variety of shocking and degrading postures, as obscene, or as an object of abuse. By 'shoving yams up her ass', for instance, she was said to be reinforcing patriarchal, pornographic stereotypes. At the same time, however, Finley's angry, incantatory monologues invoked uncomfortable connections to capitalist techniques of seduction and commodification, and to sexual violence, including incest and child abuse. Her speech took the form of discontinuous narratives, incomplete protests and expletive eruptions, uttered in a trance-like state, in the first person, but not fixed to a single voice. The processes of each performance compounded this fragmentation, as meanings projected onto Finley's body-in-performance by spectators became meshed with the broken codes of her text. Her body-in-performance absorbed, scrambled and redirected these codes, conflating the psyche with the flesh, and the space of the museum/stage with that of the self. Finley thus performed as a body that was both inscribed in and produced by contemporary material and discursive practices. In other words, she enacted the 'postmodern body'.

According to this view, instead of *simply* asserting her body as 'pure matter', Finley foregrounded ambiguity. The two-way, multi-laned traffic in significations that was entailed in her performances collapsed distinctions, such as form and matter, rather than inverting these terms. By shocking her audience she urged recognition of the way binaries, such as virgin and whore, or art and obscenity are regularly hierarchised, and how as cultural distinctions they are habitually enforced. At the same time she registered resistance with her own body-in-performance to the way such enforcement entails abuse. Above all, she demonstrated how, as a woman, she was constructed to some extent by pornographic representations of women that circulate in patriarchal culture. To give the matter/form dichotomy a postmodern inflection, therefore, it could be argued that Finley showed, through the ambiguities of performance body art, how the lived experience of the body is dependent on 'representation' as its logical condition.

Due to its peculiar ambiguities, therefore, performance body art in the 1980s could not be reduced easily to text-based, dualistic formulas. Nor could it be judged according to criteria applied either to late-modernist 'images of women', or to body performances in the 1960s, such as those of Carolee Schneemann. To be of use as a critical technique, deconstruction needed to acknowledge the impact on feminism of cultural and historical changes that had occurred over the past fifteen to twenty years. Theatre critic, Elinor Fuchs, probed the ambiguities of Finley's art, for example, by explaining them in terms of a paradigm shift in feminist conceptualisations of the body. Fuchs began her article with the observation that 'Schneemann's sacred body has been replaced by the obscene body – aggressive, scatological, and sometimes pornographic' (Fuchs 1989: 33). Fuchs explained the 'staging of the obscene body' in terms of Georges Bataille's advocacy of transgression, which is a technique of erotic boundary crossing aimed

ultimately at political reform. By this strategy, suggested Fuchs, performance artists switched attention from a notion of 'sacred femininity' to the way in which the embodied subject negotiates cultural constructions of (female) sexuality as surface appearances. In addition, Fuchs showed how these artists also forced recognition of the ambiguities that occur at points where (female) sexuality, pornography and feminism intersect. Describing the 'inching together of opposed feminine categories', such as 'woman as constituted in male pornographic discourse', and 'female subject' (1989: 53–4), Fuchs concluded that this 'semiotic merger' might produce 'the unrepresented but present terms of a new construction' (1989: 56). Despite Fuchs's optimism, however, the ambiguous status of those terms ensured that she did not indicate a starting-point for 'a new construction'.

While Fuchs's analysis of the 'postmodern body' in performance art was convincing, her prognosis for feminism was disappointing. According to Fuchs, the ambiguity of performance art was 'more a groping symptom of cultural change than an aesthetic or political program' (1989: 54). In this way, she positioned ambiguity psychically and historically in relation to the body, but defused the art's potential for feminist critique. Even as 'postmodernism of resistance', Finley's performances were imbricated in the binaries they critiqued, and they manifested an expectation, due to ambiguity, that opposition as such would be only *partly* successful. Nead's perception that performance body art reinforced cultural stereotypes, for instance, was endorsed by the frequency with which Finley's art elicited both abusive name-calling from men in the audience, and disapproval from some feminists. By the same criteria, the claim that Finley's performances were feminist critiques could be supported by evidence of her feminist/socialist intentions. For example, in an interview with Richard Schechner, Finley said, 'Female oppression is everyday, it's the anchor I have to society' (Schechner 1988: 154). Furthermore, she outlined the effect she hoped her art would have on society: 'I think I stir people to be responsible for what's going on in their own personal lives, in their one-to-one relationships, interweaving this into the whole society's corruption' (Schechner 1988: 153). However, the way in which performance art absorbed meanings projected onto it by spectators ensured that Finley's stirring, or the politics that it represented, had become obscured.

Deconstruction dismantles texts or sign systems, and shows how they work, regardless of authorial intention. Nevertheless, consideration of Finley's intention came to be especially important in assessing her performances, as she had to defend herself against verbal abuse, media distortions of her art, and ultimately the withdrawal of funding that occurred when the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) censored her performances. An effect of this public pressure to be accountable for the 'content' of her art was that interviews with Finley were underpinned by a notion of 'reality' that contradicted the more extreme positions of postmodernism. This notion, for example, did not fit the paradigm of art-as-simulacra, according to which the image 'bears no relation to any

reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1992: 256). Referring to her father's suicide, Finley said, 'That put an effect on me that reality is stronger than art. And it makes me interested in real time. When I'm performing, real time is stronger for me than theatre pretend-time. . . .' (Schechner 1988: 157). Finley thus represented herself as an old-fashioned humanist for whom the relationship between reality and representation was unproblematic: the body was a material fact and representation was a reflection of it. This view contradicted the logic of the 'postmodern body' in her performances, but it informed the ambiguity of those performances with a feminist intent. Whether or not Finley's art was properly deconstructive, therefore, it would have been churlish to stigmatise it as not feminist. If one accepts that during her performances her feminism occupied a significant position within a field of conflicting and discontinuous significations in relation to the body, her project can be seen as following a particular trajectory, rather than collapsing in on itself. Finley's outrage can then be mapped onto this trajectory in anticipation of a representation of the female body that might escape abuse. While this is only one step towards the articulation of a positive conceptual ideal for the female body, it is a crucial one.

The inability to articulate 'new terms' in relation to the body was a feature not only of deconstruction but also of postmodernist art and therefore a challenge for feminism generally. For feminist performance art, postmodern ambiguity raised questions about the legitimacy of distinctions between art and popular culture. This in turn invites comparison between performance body artists and the 'powermodels' of popular culture, such as Madonna. In the 1980s, Madonna was of particular interest to feminists, many of whom saw her commercial success and her subversive manipulation of feminine stereotypes as advancing the interests of feminism. Unlike Finley, who 'stirred' adult club-audiences and the art establishment, of whom a large percentage were men, Madonna made a strong impression on the lives of a generation of female, teen-aged fans. She employed 'simulated' and consumerist techniques of seduction in a way that symbolised self-determination, empowerment and pleasure. As Susan Bordo explained, Madonna presented 'a sexuality that defied rather than rejected the male gaze, teasing it with her own gaze, deliberately trashy and vulgar, challenging anyone to call her a whore' (Bordo 1995: 268). Madonna explored possibilities for enhancing those symbolic advantages, moreover, by cross-dressing, enacting ambiguities of identity and suggesting a diversity of sexual practices including masturbation and lesbian sex. In these ways, noted Bordo, Madonna demonstrated a 'new, postmodern imagination of human freedom from bodily determination' (1995: 245).

Finley, by contrast, invoked the repellent effects of 'patriarchal' and 'capitalist' abuse to the female body and expressed pleasure in her own sexuality only through her bodily resistance and perhaps her sense of humour. While Finley's feminism emerged from the vestiges of a realist aesthetic that conceptualised gender along heterosexual lines, Madonna's 'post-feminism' was

inscribed in a fantasy of sexual freedom, including hints of ambiguous sexuality. That fantasy was deeply complicit with commercial concerns, and for precisely this reason its subversive ambiguities and positive symbolisations were widely disseminated. As Bordo pointed out, market imperatives informed Madonna's 'plastic' aesthetics of the body, and over time the singer's body conformed increasingly to patriarchal standards of normalisation, through her self-imposed but culturally induced regimes of diet and strenuous exercise. Despite the internal ambiguities of Madonna's video, *Open Your Heart*, its 'postmodern conceits', suggested Bordo, 'facilitate rather than deconstruct the presentation of Madonna's body as an object of display' (1995: 274).

The above feminist debates about constructs of femininity in 1980s culture reveal the limitations of a gender-based, binary critical framework, and the impossible expectation that art, and political feminist art in particular, be unambiguous. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the struggle of feminisms for credibility during this period was also an effect of the democratisation of sexuality and the embrace of ambiguity by capitalist marketing. With advances in gay and lesbian studies and academic research into sexuality, the future for feminist analysis of the body appeared to lie, as Suleiman opined, 'in the direction of blurred gender boundaries' (Suleiman 1986: 4).

Performativity: towards a new sort of feminist art?

Linda Sproul is a performance artist who, for some years, developed themes related to gender and sexuality in her work. *Which Side do you Dress?* (1992), for example, was a performance that explored the effects of binary structures associated with gender. Organised into two consecutive parts, enacted as 'Victor' and 'Victoria' respectively, the show featured Sproul fabricating two different scenarios for ambiguous gender identities. As Victor, Sproul performed in a man's blue suit that was transparent, thus giving reign to the idea that sexuality is constructed on the surface of the body, in the interstices between skin and clothing. In this emblematic way, sexuality could also be seen as a process in formation, in which bodily pleasures were as involved with sweating and the growth of hair as with the joining of seams and pleating of tucks (Plate 23a). The suit was made of chiffon, with a metallic sheen that lent an aura of erotic beauty to these surface processes and interactions. The gaze of the distant spectator played its part in constructing gender and identity. It knew that it was being tricked by the presence of punning signs for femininity, such as the nearby slide projection of an advertisement for an electric blanket, which said 'Linda's Hot' (Plates 23b, c). Alternately, she allowed her gestures to slip off balance, from a balanced patriarchal semaphore that aimed to track and control all actions to a 'feminine' gesture of compliance. Victor's archetypal, manly poses and ritualised gestures were copied from the field umpires of the cricket and football field, while a super 8 film of the Australian Rules football Grand Final played on the screen (Plate 23d). Excited rather than daunted by these

Plate 23 a, b, c, d, e, f, g Linda Sproul, *Which Side do you Dress*?, 1992, performance at *Experimenta*, Melbourne. *Victor (detail)* (photograph by Colin Bogaars). *Victor 1*, *Victor 2* (photographs by Evan Clark). *Football Film/blowing whistle* (photograph by Heidrun Lohr). *Victoria with hurricane lamp* (photograph by Heidrun Lohr). *Victoria with audience members* (photograph by Lyn Pool). *Victoria swinging from rope* (photograph by Heidrun Lohr).

contradictions, perhaps, the gaze of the spectator thrilled at being able to see through the acts and surfaces that constituted 'the man', to the mocking 'woman' who performed those acts and wore those surfaces like a series of costumes. At the same time, however, Sproul's performance forced recognition of the ways in which gender is constructed through a series of gestures, poses and acts.

In the second half of the performance the suit was discarded, and as the audience was drawn further into the act, its apparently unitary gaze was interrupted. With the change, another ambiguous gender identity took form – Victoria, a nightclub stripper with S & M accoutrements, including stilettos, nipple clamps, choker, ostrich feathers, a plait of false blonde hair and chains. Dressed thus, with a large, black satin cummerbund ending in a giant bow around her waist, Sproul carried a hurricane lamp, as though making her way through a turbulent night (Plate 23e). Against the sound of Yoko Ono's 'Why', played very loudly, Sproul moved among the audience, the members of which were lined up, facing

Plate 23b

Plate 23c

Plate 23d

one another, on either side of her. She touched some of them suggestively, inviting them to perform pornographic or familial gestures, forcing them to confuse the two (Plate 23f). Mounting a podium, she performed a 'bump and grind' striptease to the sound of Ray Charles, for the 'external pleasure' of the viewer. She then caressed her own body, erotically, as though her pleasure enabled her to be oblivious of the audience's presence. The embarrassment caused by this obvious fantasy underscored how the enactment of gender involves not only the internal production and dissemination of semiotic codes, but also interaction between bodies at specific times and locations. Indulging this fantasy, to the accompaniment of an operatic duet for sopranos from *Norma*, Sproul suspended herself from a rope, above the audience, suggesting fantastic bodily freedom from social constraints (Plate 23g). She then handed around enigmatic cards that resembled Victorian calling cards, on a platter. The same size as business cards, they were imprinted with memorial phrases, such as 'Ever-remembered' and 'Words Cannot Express', as though the purpose of the gathering was to mourn the death of gender stereotypes. Poking fun collectively at such normative ideals was exhilarating like the shedding of a business suit. For Sproul, it was a way of stirring up 'gender trouble' and of upsetting the 'heterosexual matrix' in a group of white, middle-class Australians.

Plate 23e

The blurring of distinctions between sex, gender and identity that occurred during Sproul's performance was a foregrounding of ambiguity which, like that of other postmodern 'texts', appeared to sideline a role for feminism. Sproul's performance was hermeneutic, not deconstructive, but if it can be seen also as a parody of the way gender identity is constructed, Sproul's performances can be understood as a form of feminist critique. In considering this proposition, an analysis of Judith Butler's theory of subversion, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism*

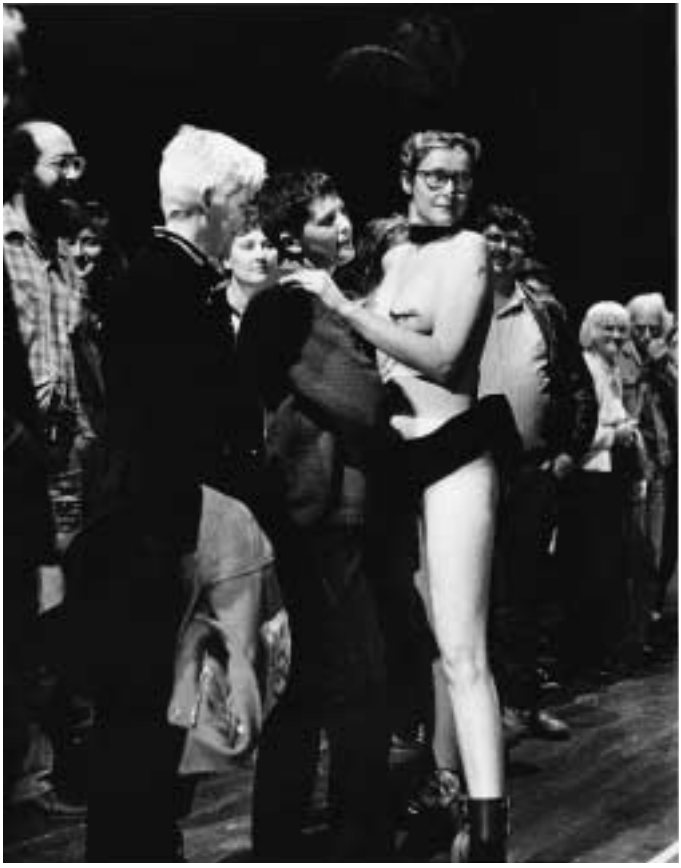

Plate 23f

and the Subversion of Identity, provides many useful insights for feminist art practice and criticism. Butler explained that

> The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate.
>
> (Butler 1990: 148)

This foundationalist frame, argued Butler, is a 'heterosexual matrix' that 'fixes and constrains . . . subjects', by means of categories such as 'women' and 'lesbians'.

Plate 23g

Butler outlined a feminism that was accordingly deconstructive, and she argued that the 'performance' of gender by 'marginalised sexual identities' was inherently subversive of gender identity as an ideal. Whether butch, femme, bisexual, transgender or transvestite, these so-called identities 'troubled' gender's 'heterosexual matrix', if not the heterosexual/homosexual binary that the latter implies.

Butler began her book by deconstructing the writings of Freud, Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva and Wittig, and exposed, in each of these texts, assumptions that naturalised heterosexuality. She thus posited language and discourse as

foundational. As Bordo observed, Butler was in this sense 'very much more the Derridean than the Foucauldian, even though Foucauldian language and ideas dominate in the book' (Bordo 1995: 291). Bordo argued consistently (although not convincingly, as I will show) that this was a shortcoming of Butler's otherwise brilliant book. She said that for Butler the body is a textual surface 'whose meanings can be analysed in abstraction from experience, history, material practice, and context' whereas for Foucault the body is produced by many different inter-related historical practices of which 'discourse' is only one (1995: 292). Despite Bordo's allegations, however, she conceded that Butler's deconstruction was also 'constructive' (1995: 289). It was backed up by a theory that, as Butler said, pointed towards a 'new sort of feminist politics . . . that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal' (Butler 1990: 5). Such a feminist politics, I suggest, might also contribute to a 'constructive' perspective on ambiguity and the representation of the female body.

Before developing this view, however, it might be instructive to consider Butler's argument in relation to Sproul's performance, which, as I have suggested, can be seen as a symbolic illustration of the self-producing processes that Butler outlines. First Butler argued that sex is not an interior 'truth' but a repetitive and 'performatively enacted signification' (1990: 33). Sproul's performance in the transparent suit can be viewed as a metaphor for this process of signification. The socially-framed and enforced 'appearance' of a man in a suit stood for the male sex, and was revealed through the transparency of the suit to be the illusory effect of a reiterative series of 'constitutive acts'. In other words, it showed that gender identity was 'performative' and not the 'expression' of a fixed and inner core of identity. This leads to Butler's second claim, that once such signification 'is released from its naturalized interiority and surface, (it) can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings' (ibid.). Thus, through the 'performativity' of gender – Butler used the example of drag – the usual binary conceptualisation of gender can be subverted.

Again, Sproul's performance in the transparent suit can be seen as a playful metaphor for this process. It illustrated Butler's claim that '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*' (1990: 137). While dressed and acting *as if* she were a man, Sproul simultaneously revealed how acting or imitating gender stereotypes constitutes also the 'fabrication' of gender identity. This raises the possibility that Sproul might just as easily have acted *as if* she were a woman performing gestures associated with femininity. In this case, however, cultural expectations of the audience would have assisted in conflating the signs of sex and gender, thus reducing the tension between them and cancelling the effectiveness of Sproul's parody of gender norms.

Butler stressed that the process of repetition in the making of 'gender itself' (as opposed to art, presumably, or even drag) does not entail choice or agency.

This is because 'there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have' (1990: 148). Therefore, the task for feminism, according to Butler, was 'not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself' (ibid.). Butler's advocacy of resistance through the textual displacement of normative structures, and her denial of a prediscursive reality, are familiar strategies of Derridean deconstruction. However, her proposal that gender be considered a '*corporeal style* . . . which is both intentional and performative', imported a notion of mental cause that may appear to contradict this logic (1990: 139). *Performativity* is defined as historically effective in that it 'suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' whereas *intention* suggests an abiding self or mind that is conceptually oriented towards an ideal (ibid.). As it happens, that ideal, as Butler defined it, is literally self-defeating.

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts . . . [t]he abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'.
>
> (Butler 1990: 141)

Therefore, the 'possibilities of gender transformation', according to Butler, do not lie in stressing the intentional or conceptual orientation towards a normative ideal, so much as in the parodic exposure of that ideal as 'a politically tenuous construction' (ibid.). In this way, argued Butler, the ideal is 'relieved of coercive force' (1990: 15).

Butler's theory of the 'performativity' of gender and especially her example of drag have been famously misunderstood as advocating the wilful performance of gender. In her later book, *Bodies That Matter*, she tried to counter this tendency by emphasising the processes and temporal conditions that produce gendered subjectivity.

> . . . performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular act or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.
>
> (Butler 1993: 95)

In the case of 'self-presentation' in art, however, the processes of production respond to different temporal contingencies, psycho-cultural constraints and norms. Sproul's performance as I have described it, for example, was a *representation* of self-presentation, and her body was a *symbol* for the possibility of a subject. During the performance Sproul's body acted as a sign for the subject in formation. Although her performance entailed some repetition, its ritualised aspect was emblematic and finite and the onus of constraining it was shared between the artist and audience within a fixed time and space. This disparity between the performativity of 'gender itself' and Sproul's performance produced ambiguity. It obscured the point of Butler's argument by appearing to give visible substance to the subject, thus appearing to determine it in advance.

It is important to note that, in her definition of gender parody, Butler linked 'performativity' and intention, as they relate internally to a spurious or 'failed' ideal. This relationship produces ambiguity for the reader, which in turn prompts consideration of how well 'the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings' is culturally received, and whether, in this external context, it is successful in subverting stereotypes. If the body performing gender is regarded as a deconstructive text, then within that text the terms for defining sex and gender according to the 'heterosexual matrix' remain ambiguously present. As with all postmodern texts of resistance, therefore, ambiguity obscures the effectiveness of 'performative' displacement as a technique of subversion. Bordo insisted, for example, that

> subversion of cultural assumptions (despite the claims of some deconstructionists) is not something that happens *in* a text or *to* a text. It is an event that takes place (or doesn't) in the reading of the text, and Butler does not explore this.
>
> (Bordo 1995: 292)

This is a valid point. Butler did not deny that 'performativity' might be misconstrued. However, neither did she entertain the possibility that, due to mitigating circumstances, spectators might miss the 'subversive play of gendered meanings', and that they might therefore read the terms of those meanings as re-inscribing normative structures. I want to suggest, for instance, that such a 'misreading' might have occurred, symbolically, when the spectator of Sproul's performance in the transparent suit delighted in recognising the 'woman' beneath the masquerade, thus 'naturalising' the sign. Although Butler did not consider the parodic 'performativity' of gender in terms of its reception and cultural context, she admitted 'Parody by itself is not subversive' (Butler 1990: 139). She stressed that 'there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony' (1990: 139).

Butler's suggestion that the effectiveness of parody, as a subversive technique, is measured by laughter invites a semantic, psychoanalytic perspective,

rather than one that focuses on a social, historical or material context. It invites analysis of *how* laughter works rather than who laughs, when they laugh or how hard they laugh. On this point it is instructive to consult Freud who described the 'mechanism of (parody's) production of comic pleasure' as follows:

> Parody and travesty achieve the degradation of something exalted by destroying the unity that exists between people's characters as we know them and their speeches and actions, by replacing either the exalted figure or their utterances by inferior ones.
>
> (Freud 1976: 262)

Here Freud posited the existence of a prediscursive unity, although not necessarily an essential core of identity for 'people's characters'. He distinguished between self-representations ('people's characters as we know them') and the stylistic means by which such representations are produced (gestures, acts). Hence, parody for Freud mocks the pretence of a particular identity by degrading the style of that identity's *re*-presentation.

Butler's poststructuralist version of parody is closer to Lacanian than to Freudian psychoanalytic theory in that it deconstructs 'identity' *as a category and as an ideal*. It provokes laughter by exposing the groundlessness or failure of identity as well as the vanity of 'self-presentation' or 'corporeal style'. Evidence for this failure can be found in 'the arbitrary relation between . . . acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity . . .' (Butler 1990: 141). While explaining this, Butler challenged Frederick Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche, and his claim that 'pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor'. She argued that:

> The loss of the sense of 'the normal' . . . can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal', 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.
>
> (Butler 1990: 138–9)

Butler concluded that, in this respect, parody is an imitative process that mocks the notion of the original, and therefore does not lose its sense of humour (1990: 138–9).

Nevertheless, getting the joke is perhaps not as easy as Butler implied. As I have already suggested, the spectator of Sproul's performance in the transparent suit might have succumbed to the 'normal' view of the female body as flesh and blood, contained within its cultural suit and corresponding to a given male gender and sex. Such a reading symbolically reinscribes the 'heterosexual matrix' and prevents the final laugh that, according to Butler, is induced by parodic 'performativity' of gender (1990: 139). In this case, the spectator does not attribute

the arbitrariness of style to the failure of the 'the original'. Instead they attribute failure to the 'person' or 'subject' who has demonstrated an *inability* to copy 'the original'. Again, Sproul's performance makes this risk visible.

Another reason for missing the joke of performative gender parody may be that, instead of producing laughter, the realisation of the failure of 'normal' or 'original' gender identity might equally occasion grief or alarm. Bordo argued, for example, that gender performativity seemed 'far less destabilizing of the "binary frame" of gender than those identities that present themselves not as parodying either masculinity or femininity but as thoroughly ambiguous with regard to gender' (Bordo 1995: 293). Ironically, Bordo's account of her own reading of a 'thoroughly ambiguous' identity was based on a misreading of Butler. According to Bordo, her 'disequilibrium' at the unexpected revelation on stage that Madam Butterfly was a man

> was the result, *not* of my having been made parodically aware of the gap between illusion and 'reality', but because precisely in the absence of that awareness, I watched 'femininity' segue into 'masculinity' without a clear and distinct boundary to mark the transformation.
>
> (Bordo 1995: 293)

Now, as I have just demonstrated, parody according to Butler makes one aware of the gap – *not* between illusion and 'reality', but between illusion (produced by self-presentation, or corporeal style) and the ideal of a unified and original identity. The experience that Bordo described, therefore, demonstrated 'precisely' that gender parody *is* effective in the way that Butler described. In other words, Bordo's observation that 'the familiar dualities (the "binary frame") had been forced to yield to an unclear and uncharted continuum' was equivalent to 'the realisation that all along the original was derived'. The point of difference that the Madam Butterfly example did bring to light, however, was that instead of laughing on realisation of her mistake about the ideal of gender identity, as Butler would have done, Bordo was 'quite shaken' by it.

Bordo's principal case against Butler was launched on the grounds that 'subversion is contextual, historical, and, above all, social' (1995: 294). On this point she supported her argument convincingly with evidence that some drag-performers, female impersonators and many transsexuals subscribe to 'highly dualist gender ontologies' (1995: 293). Bordo argued that 'Lesbian butch and femme identities, too, are frequently read by heterosexuals as proof of how irresistible masculine and feminine roles are – an irresistibility they then go on to attribute to the "naturalness" of heterosexuality' (1995: 294). Consideration of these readings, expressed by both marginalised sexual identities and those who fail to apprehend the gaps and failures of gender 'performativity' in others, throws doubt, I agree, on the efficacy of Butler's project. It leads to the suspicion that her advocacy of a 'variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite' might have

the effect of destabilising 'the very "subjects" that it hopes to represent and liberate' (Butler 1990: 5).

Queer art

Efforts to situate and assess Butler's proposal of a 'variable construction of identity' in the context of contemporary gender politics have been most successful in the domain of queer theory. Although *Gender Trouble* is framed principally in feminist terms, it has lent prestige to and has become perhaps the most influential book in this area. Derived in part from Butler's proposal that gender is 'performative', 'queer' has been theorised, not as an alternative sexual identity so much as a critique of identity. Annamarie Jagose explained queer's transformation from being a term of abuse or slang.

> In recent years 'queer' has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies.
> (Jagose 1996: 1)

Nevertheless, it is through analysis of contemporary *uses* of 'queer' that a contextualised response to Butler's proposal can be gauged.

Artist, Jane Trengove, questioned the usefulness of queer's 'neutral gender' on the grounds that in her view it reinforced, or runs the risk of reinforcing male dominance in the domains of queer theory and queer popular culture (Tunnicliffe 1997: 2). Her installation entitled *Sex Fluffies,* 1996, contested the current vogue for 'queer' (Plate 24). Using her art to reduce 'the body' symbolically to metonymic object-parts, Trengove displayed two, pink, fluffy, 'feminine' toys on a gallery plinth. Resembling a kitsch pair of slippers, one of them is constructed around a darker pink latex glove that gaped invitingly, and amidst the fluff of the other a shiny bead can be found. A printed text instructed the spectator to 'stroke . . . blow . . . squeeze . . . enter', thus acting as a supplement to the erotic dialogue between these ludicrous, genitalised monuments. By constructing both of the *Fluffies* as objectified signs or symbols for the female body, Trengove celebrated same-sex practices and female identity. Her refusal of a realist mode underscored her satire on the exaggerated 'feminine' codes of male 'camp', as well as on discourses on the 'female fetish'.

Trengove, who is an artist in her forties, willingly positioned herself on the mature side of 'a gay generation gap'. On the other side of this metaphorical space, as Jagose explained, 'queer has been appropriated by a new generation, which recognises itself in that term without equivocation' (Jagose 1996: 104–5). In defence of queer theory, Jagose argued that 'Because the word (queer) indexes – and to some extent constitutes – changed models of gender and sexuality, semantic struggles over its deployment are far from pointless' (1996:

Plate 24 Jane Trengove, *Sex Fluffies*, 1996, down, wool, latex, wood, size variable (collection of the artist).

105). According to this view of queer as a process in formation, the polarisation entailed in the 'gay generation gap' gives a false sense that queer signifies one group, as a fixed 'sexual identity', at the expense of the other. Jagose expanded this point in the final chapter of her book:

> If the dialogue between queer and more traditional identity formations is sometimes fraught – which it is – that is not because they have nothing in common. Rather, lesbian and gay faith in the authenticity or even political efficacy of identity categories and the queer suspension of all such classifications energise each other, offering in the 1990s – and who can say beyond? – the ambivalent reassurance of an unimaginable future.
>
> (Jagose 1996: 132)

By 'energis(ing)' queer theory, in other words, gay and lesbian politics, too, contribute to the production of that which Butler described as a 'radical proliferation of gender', which displaces gender norms, and makes it impossible to predict future configurations of sexuality (Butler 1990: 148).

There was much interest shown by artists of the 1990s in gender presentation and sexuality. Often the term 'gender ambiguity' was used to describe the focus of this interest. However, the term can be misleading. As Jennifer Blessing

explained in her catalogue essay for the exhibition, *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography*:

> Current theoretical conceptualizations of identity recognize both the inability to escape the binary system and the desire to corrupt it in a pleasurable way. Occasionally these pleasures, these troubled genders, are described as ambiguous, yet they seem to be anything but. Mixing gender codes does not so much result in uniform blurring, which presupposes a kind of equal distribution of gender effects yielding indeterminability, but rather a variety of specific, readable, and nameable performances. In other words, a gender-ambiguous subject is never invisible; it announces the juxtaposition of codes in one subject. (Blessing 1997: 13)

Here Blessing was referring to self-presentation. The visual *representation* of a gender-ambiguous subject, however, throws the onus of reading or deconstructing gender onto the spectator only after the artist has intervened in its construction, and the model has completed her performance. When ambiguity occurs in such a representation, therefore, it is a visible effect of the mixing of gender codes as well as an effect of the ambiguities that occur in the processes of visual representation.

Della Grace's photograph of 1991, entitled *Jack's Back* (Plate 25) is a portrait in the tradition of Mapplethorpe that plays on the tension between self-presentation and representation. Della Grace subverted the gaze of the spectator by manipulating the expectations that underpin gender stereotypes. She photographed the butch model, Jackie, from behind, thus hiding Jackie's breasts from view. The army pants and butch pose, including subtle gestures such as the stiff way the left hand with its heavy watch grasps the discarded shirt, enhanced her shaved head and muscular physique so that she could easily have passed for a male model in a gay magazine. By using these techniques for display, Della Grace exploited the gap between self-presentation and representation, thereby assisting Jackie in her 'performative' parody of gender identity. In her commentary on a photograph of Jackie in sailor's pants and hat, from the *Jack's Back* series, Judith Halberstam observed that, in Della Grace's many studies of female masculinity, the artist 'always grants her models dignity, power and beauty, even as she exposes them to the gaze' (Halberstam 1997: 185). In this way, it might be argued, ambiguity is inflected towards a positive conception of the female body.

If *Jack's Back* upsets the gaze, however, then Grace's *Hermaphrodite Torso*, 1998, proves the gendering function of the gaze to be totally groundless (Plate 26). This photograph features the frontal view of a naked, young, adult body from below the neck to the top of the thighs. By excluding the model's head, arms and legs, the photograph invites the spectator to consider that part of the body that is defined by the visible appearance of the genitalia, and which,

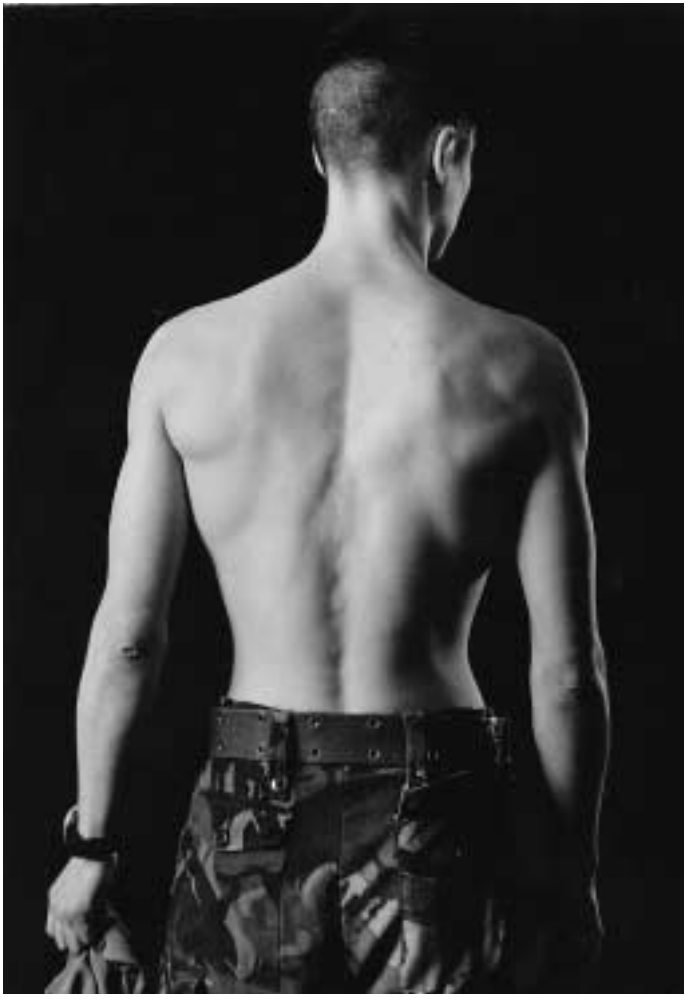

Plate 25 Della Grace, *Jack's Back*, 1991, black and white photograph, 19.5 cm × 28.5 cm.

because of these bodily signs of sexuality, is conventionally covered by clothes. It is a traditional technique used in erotic photography to depersonalise the model, and accords with the scientific fantasy of discovering the 'truth' of woman's sexual pleasure. It produces an erotic fragment, like the *Venus de Milo*, which caters to the fantasies of the fetishist. More recently the technique has been applied to the photographing of the male body for gay magazines. The hermaphroditic features of the model in *Hermaphrodite Torso*, however, confound expectations of gender.

Plate 26 Della Grace, *Hermaphrodite Torso*, 1998, black and white photograph, 12 cm × 16.5 cm.

The only sign of performativity in this picture is a softly scribbled pattern across the chest, which appears to be a game of noughts and crosses using symbols that resemble those for male and female. It is a game in which there are no winners or losers, since the signs are not properly formed, have been defaced and are inchoate. As an inscription on the body, it is a self-reflexive gesture, and a pattern of aesthetic adornment, both of which derive erotic power from ambiguity. This ambiguity is compounded by photography's fiction of actuality, which is undermined by the fact that it is not clear whether the pattern is on the surface of the body, or superimposed on the photograph. Thus, by implicating herself in the ambiguity of these representational processes, Grace suggested that, in terms of gender, the subject was indeterminable. This

in turn raises the question of whether 'this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender' (Butler 1990: 7). Sex is a function that is psychological and biological in ways that cannot be completely disentangled, and, as Elizabeth Grosz noted, there is a remarkably high incidence of hermaphroditism in the general population. Grosz added that 'The morphology of external genitalia does not provide a clear-cut delineation of the differences between the sexes, even if it does provide the primary criterion used for determining the sex of the neonate' (Grosz 1994: 216–17). *Hermaphrodite Torso* subtly delineates the structure of this dilemma, the imprecision of the criterion and the instability inherent in sex. At the same time, by granting the model 'dignity, power and beauty', it announces ambiguity as an erotic space and a positive outcome for the body's participation in gender games.

However, the foregrounding of gender ambiguity complicates feminist strategies such as a revisioning of the female body in art that might counter processes of 'normalisation' in contemporary Western culture. Such processes can be observed in the fact that the popular media, especially in the areas of advertising and fashion, facilitated the new generation's 'recognition of itself' in the term queer. My example of the models in *The Face*, in Chapter 4, demonstrated this. While the 'queering' of fashion and advertising may be construed by some as a benefit that commodity capitalism provides for marginalised sexual identities, it also stymies feminist resistance to and criticism of capitalist techniques of seduction, which might serve ultimately to oppress many women. For feminist artists, the dominant role played by the visual media in promoting these techniques is especially challenging. The male models in *The Face* were eroticised according to a tradition that equated the female body with the object of 'the gaze'. As I explained earlier, these male models were *feminised* through the deployment of visual codes of seduction, such as gestures, expressions and partial nudity, and with the aid of techniques of display – such as lighting, cropping and point-of-view. These codes and techniques were traditionally assigned to female models. Nowadays, female models are still photographed according to these conventions. They are *masculinised* symbolically, perhaps, in that they wear 'boyish' clothes, short hair and stand with legs astride. These symbolic gestures, however, are hardly new in women's fashion and have lost their subversive impact.

Other feature-articles in the fashion issue of *The Face* featured female models. One advertised transparent underwear and included details that particularised (if not essentialised) the female body – details such as skin blemishes, nipples and pubic hair. Another played on the theme of masquerade, featuring a heavily made-up, blue-eyed model posing as a coy, Japanese woman in clothes styled along traditional Japanese lines. A third advertised a drag act, the 'all girl' transvestite group called *Dis-Gyze*. They too were dressed in kimonos, although less coy, as one caressed the breast of the other. Common features of both male and female models in *The Face* were emphasised, such as their waif-like thinness and demeanour – a cross between 'come hither' and 'in ya' face'. The point of 'queer' is its openness to the proliferation of gender. However, if

presented with a choice between 'identifying' with any of the gender categories above – the girl in boyish garb, the androgynous waif or the femme in ethnic gear – a 'butch', for example, would have difficulty finding sympathy for her type of 'masculine' looks. As Bordo noted with respect to Madonna's efforts to become slimmer, the commercialisation of her ambiguous sexuality forced her ultimately to respond to a patriarchal standard of beauty. That is, it dictated a requirement that if she is female, the visual object of desire should be 'feminine', in spite of her provocative ambiguities. *The Face* and other magazines cater to this as well as to the increasingly urgent imperative in contemporary culture for the appearance of extreme youth.

This leads to consideration of a more disturbing development that coincided with the co-option of queer into fashion: the fact that the current 'taste' for gender ambiguity has been translated, in many instances, into a justification for the eroticisation of children. The models in *The Face* stand pigeon-toed and have urchin hairstyles, but according to the reassurances of the accompanying text, they are under-developed young men who, despite their androgynous appearance, are very attractive to women and keen to remain so. Increasingly, however, pubescent and pre-pubescent children are eroticised in advertisements, through mainstream, commercial techniques for display. The widespread use of these techniques blurs distinction between art, fashion, advertising and pornography. Queer theorists acknowledge that the issue of 'inter-generational sex' is a thorny one and, more particularly, that 'deviant' heterosexual practice poses a challenge for 'queer'. As Jagose argued:

> queer raises the possibility of locating sexual perversion as the very precondition of an identificatory category, rather than a destabilisation or a variation of it. While this allows hypothetically for a collectivity comprising all forms of non-normative sexuality, the open-endedness of queer neither forces coalitional alliances nor rules out negotiations with the ethical.
>
> (Jagose 1996: 113–14)

According to this description of queer, therefore, it is open to 'negotiations' about whether or not the eroticisation of children in advertising or art is ethically acceptable. Furthermore this 'open-endedness of queer' admits the 'straight queer', a phenomenon that Jagose defended, despite its unpopularity amongst many members of the queer community. It is an open-endedness, which, echoing that of Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, might enable a feminist revisioning of the female body based on a 'variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite' (Butler 1990: 5). I shall return to some of these issues in the Conclusion.

Meanwhile, Butler's theory clearly has implications for a feminist approach to art that involves the female body. Bordo summarised the usefulness of what she called 'the performative approach'.

> Whether or not one is willing to go so postmodern as to deny *all* interior determinations of identity, the performative approach is enormously insightful (and pedagogically useful) as a framework for exploring the ongoing, interactive, imitative processes by means of which the self, gender (I would add race as well), and their illusions of authenticity are constructed. What cultural gestures are involved in the performance of masculinity, femininity, hetero-sexuality, maternity, paternity, whiteness, blackness? How is authenticity 'fabricated' and conveyed? How is the 'binary frame' (of race as well as gender) enacted and regulated?
>
> (Bordo 1995: 290)

Bordo concluded 'these questions can be concretely explored by students through examination of the everyday artifacts of culture such as advertisements and commercials and through critical reflection on their own interactions with each other' (1995: 290). In other words, it is a useful approach to the analysis of the cultural formation of identity, from a range of points of view. As such, it can also be used as a framework for the analysis of feminist art.

I have argued that, if a positive direction for feminism is to be found in postmodern ambiguity, it is sometimes necessary to consider the artist's intention, or the way ethical issues impinge on art. Such consideration entails acknowledgement that the critical *representation* of self-presentation in art is itself a performance that is orientated towards an ideal, and that this too produces ambiguity. All of the feminist art analysed so far, for example, explored the imitative processes by which the self and gender are constructed. This exploration entailed not only the subversion of normative structures of identity, but also speculation on the possibilities for improved social relations, and for more appropriate cultural forms, including positive representations of the female body. In the case of feminist art, therefore, if not in the performativity of 'gender itself', I propose that the 'constitutive acts' that produce the subject are constrained by an ethical impulse. This impulse, which may be intentional, performative and culturally constrained, competes and sometimes negotiates with the constraining 'taboos and prohibitions' of which Butler spoke. In other words, the ideal of identity in feminist art does not function *only* as a failed 'original'. It functions also as a provisional framework for re-visioning (gender) identity.

Therefore, while not choosing to 'go so postmodern as to deny *all* interior determinations of identity', as Butler did, I am also reluctant to follow Bordo in opposing postmodern enthusiasm for the 'interpretative and creative *possibilities* of cultural analysis' (1995: 290, 295). Bordo argued this on the grounds that 'the actuality and effectiveness of social resistance . . . can be determined only by examining historical situations' (1995: 295). She added that:

> Failure to recognize this can result in theorizing potentially subversive but still highly culturally contained forms of subjectivity as though

> they were on an equal footing with historically dominant forms, romanticizing the degree of cultural challenge that is occurring, and thus diverting focus from continued patterns of exclusion, subordination, normalization.
>
> (Bordo 1995: 295)

Presumably, by 'potentially subversive but highly culturally contained forms of subjectivity' Bordo was referring to marginalised sexual identities that might be called 'queer', for example, and by 'historically dominant' forms to the heterosexist norms promoted through advertising and fashion. By implicitly insisting on the separation of these two categories, however, Bordo failed to see that 'queer' might be able to play a more 'historically dominant' role, if not in competition with advertising and fashion, at least in subverting, containing, informing or perhaps even energising them in a *positive* way. One way of achieving this would be through art practices that are oriented towards the possibility of a positive representation of the female body.

Performativity, femininity, whiteness

As Bordo noted, the performative approach can be applied to the analysis of other aspects of the construction of identity such as blackness or whiteness. The ethnic category of whiteness requires urgent scrutiny in Australia, where Aborigines were given voting rights as late as 1963 and the White Australia Policy restricting non-European immigrants, mainly Chinese, was officially discontinued in 1973. As Richard Dyer pointed out, 'power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior' (Dyer 1993: 142). The power of whiteness thus resides in what is considered to be the norm rather than the ideal.

Since performing *Which Side do you Dress?*, Linda Sproul relocated her gender games in order to consider cultural constructions of whiteness. In *Difficult to Light: The White Woman Variation # 2*, 1996, she put the performative approach into practice as a way of analysing both gender and race (Plates 27a, b, c, d). As an effect of this shift, a new feminist perspective emerged in her work. *Difficult to Light* was an exhibition of large photocompositions of Sproul assuming a variety of standard poses from the photographic tradition of the female nude, or its popular variant, the pin-up. She diligently re-enacted poses made famous by photographic images: the Marilyn Monroe *Playboy* nude, the Betty Grable rear view, Christine Keeler sitting naked astride a chair, and Madonna posing in such a way as to draw attention to her crotch. Each of these images was a milestone in the personalised, erotic representation of female identity. Marilyn was the first well-known woman to be represented naked, and Betty Grable was the first to show her backside to the camera in the popular, public domain. Christine Keeler achieved fame for being involved in a political sex-scandal, not as a prostitute, but simply as a woman who liked

Plate 27 a, b, c, d Linda Sproul, *Difficult to Light: The White Woman Variation # 2*, 1996, series of photocompositions. *as Marilyn Monroe*, *as Christine Keeler*, *as Ellen standing side on* and *as Ellen sitting front on* (photographs by Colin Bogaars).

Plate 27c and d

sex, and Madonna was the first popular singing star to draw attention to her crotch so blatantly. Inevitably, these images assisted in the evolution of the so-called male gaze as it was constructed in photography. By circulating outside pornography, in popular cultural forms such as calendars, magazines, newspapers and record covers, they contributed to the conflation of the public and the private, the general and the particular, the ideal and the everyday. Distinctions faded between pornography and art, intimacy and distance, and the ideal female body became normalised while a group of 'normal' women achieved the status of the ideal. Sproul got the lighting right, the contrast was crisp and clear and she has a slim body, but her careful copies completely lacked allure. There was a tension in her shoulders and toes, and an intellectual look that challenged you to think she was sexy. It made you nervous, especially since she was still wearing her glasses. Glasses helped her to see whereas a pin-up expects only to be seen. Glasses made her look intelligent instead of like a bimbo. And, above all, boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses.

Although Sproul-the-performer seemed to be pleased enough with the cleverness of her parodies – and by the 1990s we all knew they were parodies – she did not delight in their borrowed eroticism, or value their transgressive effect. Almost grumpily, like a plain girl told to stop slouching in the class photograph, she strained to fit the arched and twisted angles set by her chosen idols. There was something flat, too, about the formal presentation of the photograph. The creases in the brilliantly red drapery across which she strained and the surfaces of her skin failed to capture the cosmetic lustre and sensuous fluidity of the Marilyn pin-up. Instead, a heavy, glass surface near each large photograph reflected the spectator, and especially if you, too, were wearing glasses, the business of gazing became a fractured, self-reflective affair. Sproul's failure to repeat the glamour of the 'original' pin-ups drew attention to how the confinement of women's power to the sexual arena, as with these models from popular culture, is generally of dubious benefit to women. Although Sproul found her 'performance' deficient according to the terms of femininity, this was not the only source of her discomfort. As an Australian woman of British ancestry, she is implicated in a colonialist, semiotic regime that maintains its power over indigenous Australians by relentlessly, silently asserting its 'whiteness' as normal.

It was only when four additional panels in Sproul's series were considered that it became clear that this undercurrent of subjective anxiety fed into a more serious engagement with discourses on the female nude. In these photocompositions, Sproul re-enacted the poses of Ellen, a 22-year-old Aboriginal woman who, in 1870, for purposes of nineteenth-century ethnological research, had been made to stand and sit against a measuring stick and be photographed (Plate 28). In the standing poses Ellen was shown naked from a frontal and a profile point of view. The seated poses were also from a frontal and a profile point of view, except that in them, Ellen, who was otherwise naked, was dressed

Plate 28 Photographer unknown, '*Ellen', seated*, *c.*1870, black and white photograph, 16.5 cm × 21.5 cm (Photographic Collection Royal Anthropological Institute, London).

in a skirt. The imperfect representational equivalence of Sproul's white woman brought uncomfortable facts to the fore and the tension in her shoulders and the awkwardness of her scholarly glasses began to appear more plausible. By imitating Ellen's posture, Sproul drew attention to the disparity between two white, patriarchal regimes for regulating the female body through representation: the aesthetic apparatus of the male gaze and the ethnographic, anatomical portrait genre. The first admitted to an economy of erotic desire, while the second pretended to scientific objectivity. Ellen's youth and beauty, unlike Marilyn's or Madonna's or that of a Classical nude, were not accorded formal value in the earlier photograph. The odd fact that Ellen was dressed in a skirt, however, indicates embarrassment and confusion on the part of the photographer and/or the culture of that time, a lapse in consistency, a failure to

maintain a strict division between the two categories. Sproul's contemporary enactment of Ellen's pose emphasised that failure and highlighted the issue of agency and free will from the model's point of view. The artist's participation in the photographic process was voluntary and self-instigated whereas Ellen clearly had been persuaded, if not coerced, into posing for the camera. This revealed the ideological function of photography, which in the nineteenth century was considered to be the ideal anthropometric medium. In Sproul's hands it was used, with all its associated metaphors for black and white or light and dark, to critique that history. The title, *Difficult to Light*, for example, refers to the problem nineteenth-century photographers experienced adjusting the camera to the black skin of indigenous people. Above all, however, Sproul's parodic 'performativity', and her failure to repeat convincingly the constitutive acts of blackness, upset the binary frame of race, forcing embarrassment back onto the white spectator. Symbolically, the presumed authority of whiteness was made strange, and forced to lose ground. The ambiguity produced by this critical displacement was thereby orientated towards a feminist, antiracist ideal.

By positing gender as parodic enactment without commitment to identity as an ideal, the 'performative approach' avoided the binary trap of 1980s feminist deconstructions. Feminist criticism of performance body art was no longer structured, to use my earlier example, along the lines of a sadomasochistic binary that positioned women as powermodels on one side and as victims on the other. As an artistic framework for 'performativity', however, the works of Della Grace and Sproul show that the ideal of inclusiveness and positive erotic appeal for the representation of the female body was still invoked. As Jane Trengove argued, on the other hand, acknowledgement that identity is 'fabricated' was not always regarded as a useful political strategy by those positioned as 'Other' in Western culture. Developing this point of view, among others, the next chapter considers ways in which political and identitarian art navigated the ambiguities of representation according to the feminist ideal.

6

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH AMBIGUITY

Some women who are positioned as 'Other' in Western cultures adopted the project of critically re-visioning the female body in art for their own interests. In the process they reintroduced questions of authorship and identity that deconstruction had once displaced. Chapter 2 demonstrated that the self-presentations of Fiona Foley and Mary Duffy, for instance, invited speculation on the possibility of a more inclusive ideal for the female body than those hitherto offered by Western culture. This speculation entailed a critical reassessment of the relationship between representation and the ideal. This chapter posits that similar processes of reassessment or 're-visioning' of the ideal underpinned even art that did not reference the female body directly. It focuses on the artistic practices of a selection of Australian women who, in response to being positioned as 'Other' in this culture, co-ordinated allegiances to deconstructive feminism and identity politics in their art. The art includes the photocompositions of Destiny Deacon, a site-specific installation by Kate Beynon and a sculpture by Jane Trengove, for example, all of which evoked the female body through its absence from representation.

In the course of analysing these works, it becomes clear that the multiplicity of political allegiances and aesthetic strategies in the works rendered them ambiguous. This ambiguity complicated the already difficult relationship between art and politics. As 'marginalised' peoples, artists such as those above were faced with sometimes painful and compromising contradictions in claiming legitimacy for their art of protest in the predominantly white, middle-class institutions of contemporary art. In addition, they confronted similar difficulties in choosing an artistic style or strategy. Although ambiguity had been foregrounded by post-structuralist theory and by postmodern practices such as appropriation, it had to be manipulated, politically, if the art were to have a political effect. This requirement threatened the work's status as art, as distinct from propaganda. On the other hand, there was the risk that obscurantism would render the art politically ineffectual, or dependent on textual support that shifted attention from the artist's work on the visual and/or formal aspects of the art. For these and related reasons, some artists exploited ambiguity in their art in order to deflect easy categorisation. For example, Tracey Moffatt, whose work will be discussed in the following two

chapters, refused to be ghettoised on grounds of her racial 'identity', or according to generic categories such as 'hybrid' and 'postcolonial'.

In problematising the relationship between 'artist' and 'spectator', however, all of the art discussed in this chapter is inhabited by a productive ambiguity, the effects of which are political. As such, the art of women positioned as 'Other' ultimately enhances the interests of a more inclusive feminism, thus enabling the possibility of positive representations of the female body. Before developing this argument, however, the following overview of a sample of American and British debates about what constitutes an appropriate critical framework for so-called political art might articulate a specific path for the rest of the chapter. During the 1980s, the ambiguous status of 'activist' or 'identitarian' art presented a problem to theorists and critics in these metropolitan centres of the West, where postmodernism was the dominant artistic mode, and poststructuralism was an authoritative theoretical framework. Feminism was implicated in these debates, which, in turn, affected Australian art practices.

Centred in theory

The tensions between postmodern feminism and politics of alterity based on race, class, ethnicity and physical difference, received more direct attention, perhaps, in the areas of feminist theory and art criticism than in visual art practices. Poststructuralism was often a point of contention in these debates. Janet Wolff explained how, during the 1980s and early 1990s, deconstructive feminists who engaged in art criticism were compelled to defend theory against charges of elitism. Wolff, herself, argued in favour of theory 'despite the historical male-centredness and exclusions operating in its name' (Wolff 1995: 17). She explained that theory was important first as knowledge, secondly as critique and finally when it signified poststructuralist theories 'which investigate the cultural construction of gendered identity in language, representation (including visual representation) and psychic processes' (1995: 17). With regard to this final use of theory, however, Wolff cautioned that poststructuralism was not always an appropriate framework for feminist art practices.

> But this does not mean that all art practice has to be 'theory-based' in this way. Art-as-theory (that is, cultural work which participates in the demystification and analysis of gender identity, and is committed to a certain self-reflexivity about the medium itself) is an extremely important feminist project. But it is not the only one.
>
> (Wolff 1995: 17)

Wolff raised this point in relation to the 'eighties' issue of 'theory versus experience' (1995: 14). As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 4, she implied that painting could articulate a feminist theory that is not necessarily deconstructive of identity or self-reflexive about the medium.

The point I wish to stress here, however, is that by the mid-1980s, identity politics in art, such as that based on race, had forced a review of these issues. To clarify this point, it is instructive to return to my earlier example of Lynda Nead's criticism of performance body art. In this instance, Nead precluded the possibility that there may have been other, more productive approaches than deconstruction for both feminist criticism and feminist art practice. Nevertheless her analysis of Lesley Sanderson's self-portrait, entitled *Time for a Change*, 1989, indicated sensitivity to the challenge identity politics posed for deconstruction (Plate 29). Sanderson's painting featured the artist positioned in front of a painting of 'the Oriental woman' dressed in ethnic gear. According to

Plate 29 Lesley Sanderson, *Time for a Change*, 1989, oil on canvas, 240 cm × 350 cm (collection of the artist). Photograph by Neil Conroy.

Nead, Sanderson's painting was a critique of this racist stereotype. Dismantling the stereotype, however, was only a part of Sanderson's work, for as a whole her painting asserted the identity and bodily presence of the artist as Asian and female. Nead explained this in semiotic terms.

> Curiously enough, what we have here, partly, is a return to one of the traditional functions of the female nude, as an allegorical image of Truth. But this return is no simple repetition, for the female body is now explicitly inscribed with the signs of self-determination and the politics of cultural identity.
>
> (Nead 1992: 75)

According to this dual reading, Sanderson did not present her body as 'pure matter'. In other words, Nead avoided the question of essentialism by interpreting the nude as an allegory, and the body as an inscriptive surface. However, in accepting the terms of Sanderson's painting, Nead exposed an irregularity in her own critical method. Sanderson, like Karen Finley, had transgressed the limits of 'decency' and 'decorum', while challenging the traditional stereotypes and ideals of female beauty that defined those limits. She constructed her protest on racial grounds whereas Finley staged hers in relation to questions of gender and sexuality. Oddly, Nead judged that Sanderson's painting was successful, as feminist critique, but that performance body art, as an artistic mode, failed.

I have argued that despite the apparent ambiguity of Finley's performance, her resistant body-in-performance can be read as displacing gender stereotypes. Nead did not acknowledge this level of feminist intervention in the ambiguity of performance body art. According to her readings, it could be argued that the element that privileged the naked body of Sanderson as 'Truth', over the naked body of Finley as 'pure matter', was an effect of the difference between the two representational modes: that is, between painting and performance art. The first produced the body as an inscriptive surface, but the second, in Nead's view, did not. I am not suggesting that it was Nead's intention to favour painting over performance body art as a vehicle for deconstruction in feminist art. Nevertheless, the anomaly in her examples hints at the risk of inconsistency or slippage that is entailed in the application of deconstructive reading practice across a range of visual media, and its confusion with the theory versus experience debate. It does not make the presumption that race and gender, as socially constructed categories, are equivalent, and it shows that Nead did not regard painting, with its alleged visual explicitness and celebratory history, as imbued irrevocably with patriarchal meanings. On this point, her sanctioning of painting was at variance with Pollock's endorsement of a trend towards a 'diversity of feminist modes' that eschewed the 'fantasies of looking' encoded in painting and photography (Pollock 1993: 147). Secondly, Nead's appraisal of Sanderson's nude as bearing the signs of 'self-determination and the politics

of cultural identity' showed that not all aspects of feminist art are 'necessarily deconstructive' in the strictly anti-essentialist way that she had previously insisted it should be. However, since Nead did not examine how these 'signs of self-determination' worked at the material or formal level of signification, the question arises as to whether her critical assessment was prompted by sympathy for the political 'content' or 'message' of Sanderson's art, rather than by the success of its deconstructive strategies.

In order to answer this last question it should be noted that there are various ways in which poststructuralism has informed art practice and art criticism, and that political, or 'identitarian' art has forced recognition of the cultural contexts that might explain these differences. In her book *Feminine Sentences*, for example, Janet Wolff described hostile responses in the late 1980s in America to British deconstructive feminist art, as being constructed, to some extent, along nationalist lines. She explained that:

> . . . some feminist art critics have taken issue with the apparent centrality of postmodernism, particularly in the context of British feminist art. Unlike the United States, where there is a more liberal pluralism of art practices among feminists, postmodern, deconstructive art has become something of an orthodoxy, which is resented as both intimidating and exclusive by artists working in humanist and other traditions.
>
> (Wolff 1990: 96)

Wolff's observation about particular instances of American resentment of British feminist art was no doubt well founded. Whatever the reasons for this hostility towards British art practices, however, the division cannot be accurately mapped onto a general, nationally defined split between deconstructive and liberal approaches in art criticism. Poststructuralism featured prominently and distinctively in the art criticism of American critics, notably those associated with the journal, *October*.

As an editor of *October*, Rosalind Krauss spelled out her poststructuralist approach to identity politics, particularly with regard to race, at an incisive roundtable discussion with other editors of the journal. Lamenting what they perceived to be 'a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified' in contemporary art, the editors focused on the art of the controversial Whitney Biennial of 1993, which had used America's multiculturalism as its model (Foster 1993b: 3). Curated by Elizabeth Sussman, the exhibition foregrounded race, gender and sexual orientation, and favoured young and unknown artists, thus refusing to cater to the fashionable New York art market. Popular and critical responses to the show were often hostile, and the *October* editors expressed their desire 'not to abet (the show's) many reactive detractors' (ibid.). However, the editors argued for more work by the artists on the work, more attention to the 'materials and forms, not in the sense of formalism but

in the sense of signification: how materials signify, in what ways meanings are informed historically and delimited institutionally' (ibid.). Krauss used the example of Lorna Simpson's installation *Hypothetical?* (Plate 30), which she analysed on the 'material level' (Krauss 1993b: 4–6). She explained how it consisted of two different taxonomic spaces: a photograph of the mouth of a black person was positioned on a wall, and a grid of mouthpieces from different kinds of brass instruments positioned on the opposite wall. A newspaper clipping positioned on the wall between the two grids recounted an interview in which black mayor, Tom Bradley, confessed that his response to the Rodney King verdict would have been angry, were he not mayor of Los Angeles at the time. According to Krauss, the way the body was cut up 'racially, ethnographically, and also stereotypically' and counterpoised to the grid of instruments was more theoretically interesting than the political content, or message, of the newspaper clipping. She said Thelma Golden's catalogue essay, too, limited the meaning of the work. Entitled *What's White . . . ?*, it elaborated on themes of black fear and anger, implying that these themes existed in the work as a reflection of the artist's intention. In short, the turn to the signified occurred either as an autobiographical gesture, as, for example, when being an artist of colour became the essential point of connection in post-colonial art, or as the illustration of a set of ideas. These approaches were seen as weak in that theory became either the content of the work, or was merely supplementary to it. Furthermore, by being dependent on theory in these ways,

Plate 30 Lorna Simpson, *Hypothetical?*, 1993, installation. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

rather than engaging with it at the level of the signifier, the work was likely to be ineffectual politically. As Foster said, 'elision of work on the signifier . . . might disable as much as enable a political art' (Foster 1993b: 4). On this last point, however, the participants at the roundtable were divided.

Underlying the *October* debate was a privileging of 'difficult' art that, in terms of its strategies, engaged with poststructuralist theory. As Benjamin Buchloch said, Krauss's position presumes a 'competent reading' audience at all times (Buchloch 1993: 9). Responding to this charge of elitism, Krauss defended her position by explaining that once a work of art enters the public domain it is open to the production of a multiplicity of meanings. To limit these meanings to an account of the artist's intention, to the illustration of a theory, or to the mythic production of the art as she claimed Mulvey did with Sherman, for example, is to foreclose on the possibility of complexity. Krauss also debunked the argument that those who are oppressed on account of race, class, gender or ethnicity are closer to the experience of 'reality', and therefore more able to communicate directly. That view is elitist and potentially racist, she argued, in that, like 'primitivism', it establishes a stereotypical role for the 'Other'.

Before making too much of Wolff's inference that there are national differences in attitudes to deconstructive art practices, it should be noted that the art criticism of Mulvey and Pollock, unlike that of Krauss, perhaps, was usually framed by a primary engagement with feminism. As though in response to Krauss's criticism of Mulvey on Cindy Sherman, for instance, Pollock described Sherman's art as a form of feminist intervention, in spite of the art's having been, as Pollock said, 'assimilated to post-modernism' (Pollock 1993: 154–5). To put it simply, Pollock's description of Sherman's art, and that of feminist artists from the same period, emphasised the political in terms of the social spaces and personnel that the art engaged rather than the visual or formal processes of artistic production.

> Wherever their work is made, the point at which its meanings are produced is a public space where viewers read signs in relation to a wider field of representations and histories, collective as much as individual. While being exhibited, even in an art gallery, such work implies the social spaces and semiotic systems of both culture as a whole, and specific, often repressed or silent constituencies to which the work so calculatedly refers, and which it reworks to produce as critical *presence* in culture as a whole. It is this radical reconceptualization of the function of artistic activity – its procedures, personnel and institutional sites – which is the major legacy of feminist interventions in culture since the late sixties. What distinguishes such practices from the generality of postmodernism is the refusal to abandon a sense of history and political effect.
>
> (Pollock 1993: 154–5)

Pollock acknowledged the public production of meanings, as Krauss did, but stressed that the signifying processes of feminist art 'calculatedly refer' to 'repressed or silent constituencies'. Pollock thus attributed those processes with intentionality, and in this respect her approach accords with Nead's uncritical valuation of the 'signs of self-determination and the politics of cultural identity' in Sanderson's *Time for a Change*.

Nead's approach, too, might also be described as a turn to the signified. Her validation of the politics of cultural identity encouraged her, nevertheless, to depart from the strictures underpinning her earlier focus on gender to address the complex relationship between identity politics, postmodernism and the body, as well as the implications of this relationship for representation and sexuality. By contrast, Krauss's refusal to engage critically with politics at the 'mythic' level of the work aligned her, coincidentally, with the most reactionary critics of political art. In the two years following the 1993 Biennial and the publication of her book on Cindy Sherman, there was a strengthening of resistance in art institutions to identity politics. At the 1995 Whitney Biennial, curated by Klaus Kertess, only about a third of the artists were women, multiculturalism was given a deliberately low profile, and there were no wall texts. The mainstream critics and the public were ecstatic, but as Frazer Ward recorded in his review of the show in *Art and Text*, the art was part of a 'politically bankrupt exercise' in which 'an intelligent harangue would have been welcome' (Ward 1995: 74).

Of course, the *October* editors cannot be held responsible for the contradictions that underpinned their alliance with conservative New York art institutions and audiences in opposing overtly political art. Their emphasis on the polysemic aspect of the sign has produced some of the most sophisticated and insightful analyses of the way politics is implicated in the visual strategies and material processes of art making. Nevertheless, the irony of the debate about deconstructive criticism and elitism, which took place on both sides of the Atlantic, is that it was conducted in the most rarified academic circles, at the 'centre' of Western culture. Just as Janet Wolff acknowledged and defended the exclusiveness of much theory, the participants in the *October* discussion were aware that the majority of America's artists, particularly those who are positioned as 'Other', were excluded from the wisdom of their judgements. The complex signifying processes of art production to which both Krauss and Pollock referred are implicated in and productive of ambiguity, and all of the critical approaches outlined above have been useful in negotiating the ambiguities of modernist and postmodernist art, which occur in relation to feminism. As such they are valuable to the project of re-visioning the female body in art.

With regard to the analysis of art by artists positioned as 'Other', however, debates about style and strategy tended to exaggerate antagonisms or promise false solutions. As Foster said in his summary of the debate about activist versus aesthetic approaches:

> It's not about an easy coexistence of the two. It's about the need to think different practices in different spaces at different times, all in the present. This is not wild pluralism; it is not identitarian multiculturalism either. It is a recognition of the historical fact that practices develop along different lines that are nonetheless always imbricated.
>
> (Foster 1993b: 25)

Foster's historicist perspective on postcolonial and 'identitarian' art acknowledged that different artistic modes and discontinuous art practices are nevertheless implicated with one another, politically and ethnographically. In the following analysis of Australian art practices, I want to suggest, from a feminist perspective, that this historical process also entails a conceptual ideal – not only as a cause of the 'imbrication' of practices, but also as an effect of it.

Marginalised in practice

In countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which are peripheral to the centres of Western culture, artists positioned as 'Other' engaged with the above discourses, through art networks, books and art journals. At the same time, debates about so-called 'advanced art' and identity politics doubly disengaged these artists, since they came from 'postcolonial' cultures that were themselves 'marginalised'. Homi Bhabha's Lacanian speculations on mimicry are particularly pertinent to Australian contemporary art and the ambivalence that informs its dependence on the metropolitan centres of Western culture. Bhabha suggested that

> colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.
>
> (Bhabha 1987: 318)

Bhabha argued that 'The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in "normalizing" the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms' (Bhabha 1987: 318). This production of difference through mimicry in Australian visual culture, and its threat to the colonial authority of modernism and postmodernism, became the impetus for ironising strategies in the recent art of, say, Narelle Jubelin and Lyndell Brown and Charles Green. Their preoccupation with postcolonial themes of cultural hybridity will be discussed in Chapter 8. The cultural critique of urban indigenous artists, however, was generally more specific in that it usually referred, in some way or another, to the 'repressed and silent

constituency' of indigenous Australians, and more ambiguous in that colonial desire, in their experience of it, was subjected to multiple refractions.

By 1995, the year in which political art was considered unfashionable in New York, the small number of urban, Australian Aboriginal artists who worked in a recognisably internationalist mode had only recently found acceptance in contemporary art institutions. Their intervention was therefore less effective and less beneficial from their point of view than the earlier interventions of US 'women of colour' had been for them. In any case, Australian indigenous artists were influenced by Black British artists, African artists, Third World artists and indigenous artists from all over the world, as well as by US women of colour. Their small numbers and the general failure of unitary feminism contributed to the fact that there is not one book on the art of urban, indigenous Australian women. On the other hand, women were very prominent among Australian Aboriginal artists who painted in so-called traditional, indigenous styles, in spite of a gender bias that saw them paid sums that were significantly less than those paid to their fellow male artists. These 'traditional' artists enjoyed considerable local and international success with mainstream collectors, who, like the majority of white Australian critics and commentators, generally projected modernist or primitivist preconceptions about 'style' and 'content' onto the work. For artists working in either traditional or contemporary modes, the most insidious burden imposed upon them was the expectation that they spoke on behalf of a community of Australian Aborigines. This community was largely imaginary, constructed in response to nostalgic and/or commercial demands. The 'traditional' artists consisted of Aborigines in far-flung regions, from different tribes, with not even a single indigenous language in common. 'Urban' Aboriginal artists, on the other hand, formed collectives, notably the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Collective, which produced many solo shows, group shows, and theme shows, sometimes with accompanying catalogue essays written by indigenous writers and intellectuals. Generally, these urbanised Aborigines were thoroughly dispossessed of their tribal lands and often had lost contact with their relatives. Their 'sense of community', therefore, emerged from circumstances that were very contemporary, and their artistic practices either reflected these conditions or focused on reclamation of their 'lost heritage'. Unsurprisingly, there was a wariness and unwillingness on the part of Aboriginal artists to identify with white, academic feminism, with its tendency to homogenise and appropriate. Nevertheless, 'urban' indigenous women artists, including Rea and Destiny Deacon, have forged a prominent visual presence in Aboriginal and feminist politics in Australia, and this presence demands to be interpreted in aesthetic terms. Furthermore, the contribution of these artists needs to be recognised from both a local and international perspective, since the two spheres are interconnected in ways that simultaneously sustain and undermine the hegemonic centres of Western culture. Feminist discourses on the female body in representation are insinuated in these processes of artistic exchange and subversion.

Plate 31 Rea, *Definitions of Difference*, 1994, digital cibachrome print, 100 cm × 70 cm (collection of the artist).

Indigenous women are rarely, if ever, represented in the Australian popular media or advertising, let alone used as models for the ideal female body. Rea, an artist who was associated with Boomalli, drew attention to this fact with her series of six photocompositions entitled *Definitions of Difference*, which formed part of the exhibition, *Blackness: Black City Culture*, 1994 (Plate 31). In two of the photocompositions, a black, semi-naked woman elegantly turns her back to the camera with the fake discretion of a model advertising tampons. The knotted beads in one photograph and the noose hanging around the woman's neck, in the image reproduced here, strike a more discordant note. Rushing to the signified, one might read the presence of black deaths in custody and a history of sexual violence towards Aboriginal women. One might be yielding to obvious symbolism, but the fact that her back is turned, asserting her anonymity, causes discomfort. In a strategy that recalls the scripto-visual, gaze bothering interventions of Barbara Kruger, a superimposed text reads as follows: 'Core or heart: the inner part or heart of a rope: it is formed from a

loosely twisted strand or from a bundle of parallel yarn'. This incongruously technical definition of the word 'rope' mocks the spectator's willingness to read, interpret, name or possess the image that it accompanies. At the same time, it encourages this desire. Although she is black, the woman's face cannot be seen. She may not be an Aborigine. Black models in magazines are usually African American or Caribbean English. She might be one of them. Then again, she might not be a woman at all. She might be a man. One could forget the noose and acquiesce to the flat, shiny surfaces of this shimmering simulacrum, as though it were just another imported advertisement, or a reproduction of a Barbara Kruger billboard. The rope is haunting, for her back, like the back of an early Australian convict, looks vulnerable to flogging. The spectator might ask, 'am I constructed as consumer, sadistic lover, or colonial judge?'. This question leads to the realisation that Rea's eclectic photocomposition, with its postmodern style, is framed in global terms. The jarring symbolism, on the other hand, targets a specifically white, middle-class, Australian audience.

Most members of this audience would have seen images of young, indigenous sprinter, Cathy Freeman, triumphantly holding up the Aboriginal flag immediately after winning the 400 metres race in the 1994 Commonwealth Games. A few moments later she ran with this Aboriginal flag and the official Australian flag together on her victory run (Plate 32). The Aboriginal flag, which was designed in 1971 by an indigenous artist to represent the Aboriginal people's spiritual relationship with the land, is perhaps best known in Australia as a sign of protest. It shows a yellow sphere (the sun) against a background that is half black (the Aboriginal people) and half red-ochre (the Earth), and it is most often seen at rallies and land-rights demonstrations. When Freeman held up the Aboriginal flag at the 1994 Games in Victoria, Canada, it became a symbol of victory, and was seen as such back in Australia and by the rest of the world. When she ran with both flags together, it was interpreted by many as a gesture of reconciliation. Although the Australian media, politicians and the majority of the Australian public supported Freeman's actions, the manager of the Australian team, Arthur Tunstall, tried to persuade Freeman's team manager to reprimand her for not competing under the Australian flag alone. Tunstall, who was unsuccessful in this, became the target of much ridicule for his conservative prejudices, and extensive media coverage turned the incident into a controversy.

After her win in 1994, Freeman, who was Young Australian of the Year in 1990 and Australian of the Year in 1998, became Australia's most popular athlete. She won the 400 metres race at the World Athletics Championships in 1996 and in 1998 became the only person ever to win the event twice. As she became Australia's great hope for victory in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Freeman was subjected to enormous pressure from the media to engage in discourse on Aboriginal politics. Aboriginal activist groups urged her to stage a protest, and even to boycott the Olympics, in order to bring the issue of

Plate 32 Cathy Freeman at the Commonwealth Games, Canada, 1994.

Aboriginal rights to the world stage. Freeman had insisted that her gesture at the 1994 Games was not political but was a statement of her heritage, and she consistently maintained that position. Nevertheless, as Jock Given pointed out in relation to Freeman's win, sport and major games draw together 'key social values about nationalism, winning, "anti-politics" authority and economics' (Given 1995: 52). These values are exposed and played out in 'vast international media events where images, information and opinion circulate and replay across time zones and cultures, disrupting normal media schedules and layouts as only wars and weather warnings can do' (ibid.). By such means, the powerful visual symbolism of Freeman's 1994 assertion of Aboriginal identity might have revealed, to those in the rest of the world who cared to look further, that there are deeply entrenched divisions within Australian society about Aboriginal sovereignty. In a similar but more low-key way, Rea's visual metaphor for racial and gender oppression in *Definitions of Difference* pushed this point, while participating in an international, postmodern style of art.

In a strategy that was in some ways the reverse of Rea's, but which addressed the same issues, Destiny Deacon photographed a beautiful young brown-skinned woman, which she then presented, partly in a spirit of irony, as a cover-image for a mock magazine called *Indigene*, 1997 (Plate 33). Celebratory images of 'woman' had been unpopular in contemporary art, since postmodern feminists had deemed them 'essentialist'. Nevertheless, Deacon's *Indigene* highlights the rigidity with which European, Anglo-Celtic conventions of beauty are maintained in Austrialia. While it could be argued that it is mainly the 'content' of *Indigene* and the 'fact' of its being unique that make the work interesting, its importance as 'work' cannot be dismissed on that account. To insist, moreover, that this work be defined, as either 'activist' or 'aesthetic', is inappropriate, since it is both of these at once. Under Deacon's supervision, the model for *Indigine* is, in a sense, acting out and subverting the Western ideal of white, female identity. Given Deacon's sense of humour, therefore, her 'work on the work' might best be described as 'performative' and/or 'parodic'. Performativity, parody and sardonic humour are evident in all of the photocompositions by Deacon that use live models. *Welcome to my island* (1993), for example, depicts a 'hybrid' Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander woman, performing the gestures and displaying the iconography of a cluster of stereotypes (Plate 34). The 'exotic Islander', replete with oranges, coconut, grass skirt and shell necklace, offers herself and her symbolic attributes to the gaze of the spectator. She stands against the backdrop of a corrugated iron wall, which signifies a humpy. As Marcia Langton observed, the humpy – the name given to makeshift Aboriginal dwellings of the type Langton herself grew up in – had become 'the image at the heart of the fringe-dweller trope in newspaper cartoons and liberal novels . . .' (Langton 1997: 104). The same motif occurs in Deacon's *Last laughs* (1995) (Plate 35). In this photocomposition, three women act out a comic scene based on racial tension. Displaying a black doll, and dressed in 'Koori kitsch' jewellery and mini-skirts, two brown girls

Plate 33 Destiny Deacon, *Indigene*, 1997, bubblejet from collage, 35 cm × 28 cm (collection of the artist).

struggle with a white girl, who sinks defeated between them. The brown girls are laughing wildly, but are clearly recording the event for the camera, as a joke, knowing that the last laugh will not be theirs.

Although humour and subversion are central to Deacon's art, her investment in identity politics suggests that her parodies do not extend to a critique of identity as a category and as an ideal in itself. In other words, hers is not parody in the sense that Judith Butler described drag as parody, where the 'performativity' of drag shows that the ideal of identity is based on a failed reality. While both Rea and Deacon critiqued particular identity ideals, or stereotypes, they maintained an idea of female identity, as a measure by which to defend their own 'realities'. As Deacon said in a recent interview, 'My pictures reflect me. Part of my identity is being indigenous, being lesbian, being

Plate 34 Destiny Deacon, *Welcome to my island*, 1993, laser print, 45.7 cm × 35.2 cm (collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra).

poor, being highly educated as an Aboriginal (person) and not being able to get a job in Melbourne because of the politics' (Murray 1997: 7). For Deacon, identity was a category that reflected a basic reality, and feminism was the framework through which she asserted prominent aspects of her identity and protested against its misrepresentation. Respecting this position, Marcia Langton suggested that Deacon extended her critique of patriarchy to sending up the stereotype of the 'Aboriginal woman' that was constructed by Aboriginal men:

> 'Aboriginal woman' is that Earth mother phantasm of Koori reggae rock lyrics who shot to sub-culture restricted fame with the release of

Plate 35 Destiny Deacon, *Last laughs*, 1995, bubblejet from Polaroid original, 72.5 cm × 59.5 cm (The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s. On loan to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne).

> the song of the same name by No Fixed Address. She personified, for Aboriginal men rather than women, the urban nostalgia for the fantasy traditionalism of a long-gone Aboriginal society, a traditionalism also much loved for quite different reasons by the white intellectual liberal imagination.
>
> (Langton 1997: 104)

According to Langton, Deacon satirised this construction of Aboriginal womanhood when she performed as a comic actor in a TV series in the early 1990s.

However, it is not immediately clear that Deacon's set of two pictures, entitled *No fixed dress* (1997), which was part of an exhibition of the same name, staged during the Melbourne Fashion Festival, also targeted the stereotype of 'Aboriginal woman' (Plates 36a, b). In this show, according to Langton, Deacon and others subverted 'impossibly straight gender images invented by testosterone-driven young Aboriginal men with whining guitars to fill up emotional gaps in their colonially erased cultural memories' (Langton 1997: 101). Deacon may have had this particular constituency in mind, but the

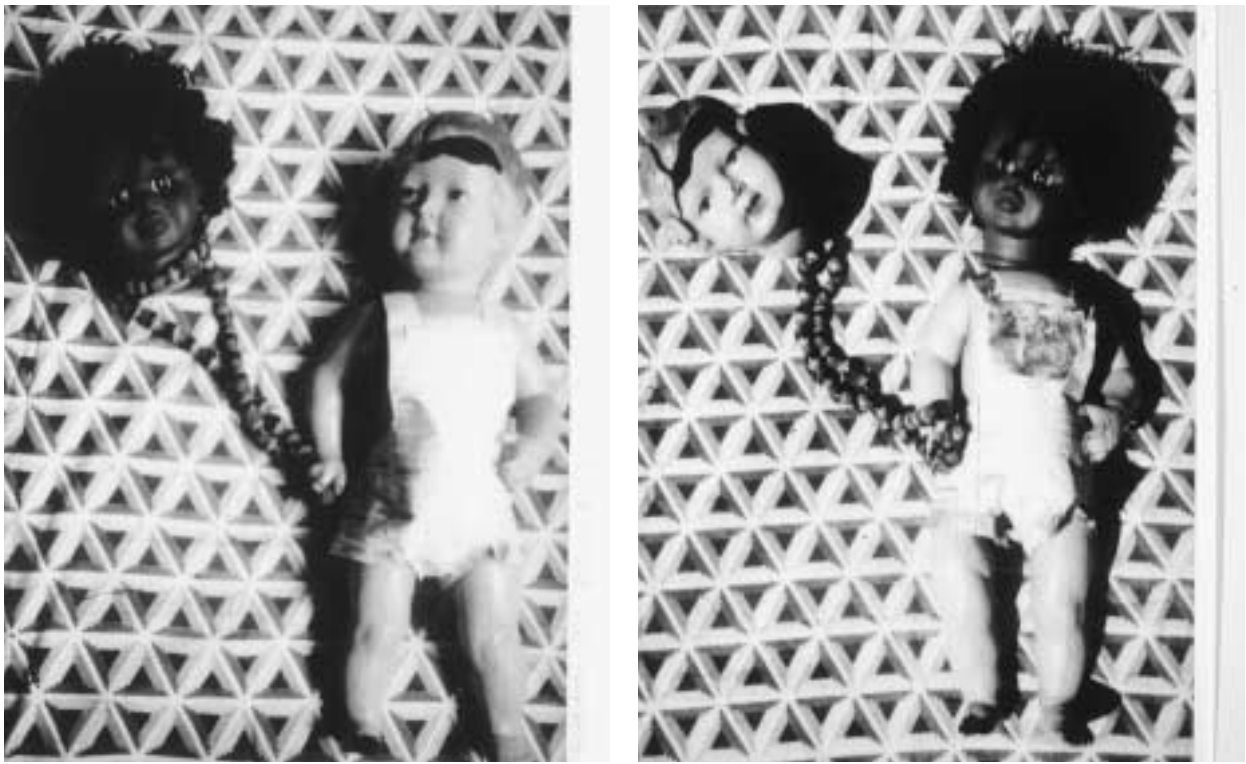

Plate 36 a, b Destiny Deacon, *No fixed dress*, 1997, bubblejet from Polaroid original, 49 cm × 39 cm and 79 cm × 57 cm (collections of the artist and Gabrielle Pizzi).

whimsy and ambiguity of the central image in *No fixed dress* ensured that her critique was by no means obvious or limited to a single-line attack on the fantasies of Aboriginal men. For a start, *No fixed dress* does not feature the female body, as such. It consists of Polaroid photographs of two miniature tableaux, constructed from the remnants of a couple of old, battered dolls. In one photograph, a white doll has been given a black head and 'holds' a Koori necklace, which is connected to the detached white head. In the other, she has a white head, while the head on the end of the string of beads is black. In each tableau, the doll is dressed in a different playsuit made from newspaper, and photographed from above, like a museum specimen, or a police photograph of a corpse, laid horizontally against a backdrop of patterned fabric. Since the signs for Aboriginality and femininity are clear, the swapping of heads suggests hybrid identity and gender ambiguity, which disrupt the 'impossibly straight gender images' invented by Aboriginal men. The composition as a whole, however, has the poetic melancholy of a little girl's fantasy that has been interrupted by something adult, real and possibly horrific.

There is an obvious connection between dolls, social constructions of femininity and the female body, since dolls traditionally belong to and act as cultural and gender models for girls. Langton interpreted Deacon's fascination with dolls, in terms of a shared cultural memory. She wrote that when she (and Destiny) were growing up, golliwogs were the only black dolls, until the 1970s when Black Americans demanded that the toy market produce well-dressed black dolls for girls. Fraser wrote, however, that Deacon confessed to her in an interview: 'I only use dolls because I'm shy getting people to pose for me, and it's too much hard yakka (work). Growing up I never had any interest in dolls. They're not in my nature. I only started collecting them because – what can you say? I felt sorry for them' (Fraser 1993: 11). It was only as an adult that Deacon started using dolls, and even then, she used them in her art in a casual, unpremeditated way. The use of *bricolage*, or 'found objects', particularly white Australia's 'Aboriginal artifacts', such as the black doll, is a favoured artistic practice among urban indigenous artists. This junk and refuse from outmoded, white, popular culture combines an *arte-povera* aesthetic with the redemptive power of history. The anti-racist art that was constructed from these objects, therefore, was inherently critical of the colonial commodification of Aboriginal culture and identity. As Deacon reported in the interview with Fraser: 'Black dolls represent us as people. I don't think white Australia, or whatever you want to call it, sees us as people' (1993: 9). By employing *bricolage* as part of a feminist strategy, therefore, Deacon's critique addressed not only black men, but also straight white men and women, as well as other Aboriginal women.

Deacon used dolls as actors in her tableaux, and as such they became 'stand-ins' for 'real people'. As Fraser explained, 'Since (1991) dolls have appeared often in (Deacon's) pictures, with and without real people, acting out human comedies and tragedies, in a television-style mix of pictures and words, actuality

shots and dramatisation' (ibid.). In *Teatowel – Dance little lady*, 1991/1995 (Plate 37), dolls appear to stand for the racist stereotypes in 'found' tourist artifacts whereas in *Being there*, 1997 (Plate 38) they act out a poignant scenario as urban Aboriginal boys playing with matches. In *Me and Carol*, 1997 (Plate 39), the artist herself was photographed with a particular self-portrait of Frida Kahlo in mind. Fraser, who often collaborated with Deacon, explained that the dolls invoke diminution, infantilisation, substitution and artificiality, as well as a much wider range of meanings. Given this openness, Langton is justified in her readings of a lesbian theme in *No fixed dress*, and of *Me and Carol* as a self-portrait as 'the little girl who is playing with her destiny through playing with her dolls, imagining the future by playhousing all the signs of womanhood around her' (Langton 1997: 104). At the same time, the ambiguities of the tableaux's construction work against a clear or single reading.

The openness in Deacon's art to a variety of readings is not only an effect of the 'work on the work', but emerges from the circumstances of the work's production. Her 'black humour' resonates with casual, sometimes disturbing associations, and her technique contributed to this resonance. Makeshift sets, blurred images, patchy shadows, slight misalignments and odd points of view betray nervous, interrupted attempts at aesthetic effect. This lack of finish can be explained partly by the *bricolage*/TV drama style. At the same time, there is much wit and laughter in Deacon's art that emerges partly from the artist's personality and partly from the communal, sometimes collaborative, and always financially straitened circumstances in which she worked. *Last laughs*, for example, has a snapshot intimacy that arose out of improvisations and play-acting among friends, and it conveys a sense that the performers are not concerned to assert their independence from the photographer. In *Me and Carol*, on the other hand, which was staged with a particular end in sight, Deacon's posture suggests, enigmatically, that she would rather talk to the person on the other side of the camera than to the doll. This sets up an interesting tension between the two on-screen 'performers'. Deacon had only recently come to photography, having trained and worked as a teacher, then as a Commonwealth public servant, a broadcaster, an actor and an activist. She was often asked to perform at political forums and fund-raising functions, for example, and was only sometimes paid for these appearances, and never very much. Furthermore, as Deacon often worked in collaboration with non-Aboriginal writer and photographer Virginia Fraser, and other friends, a sense of community, social interaction and hybridity is strong in Deacon's art.

While social structures and professional practices helped to shape Deacon's work, however, the undercurrent of uneasiness came from a much deeper uncertainty, which sometimes lends an aura of voodoo to the dolls. This unsettling ambiguity in Deacon's art is neither occult nor mysterious. It can be traced eventually to the socio-political sphere, where the dolls signify, not only anxieties about the female body in representation, but also the erasure of indigenous sovereignty by Western law. In that feminism provided a framework for this

Plate 37 Destiny Deacon, *Teatowel – Dance little lady*, 56 cm × 90 cm, 1991/1995, laser heat transfer on linen (The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s. On loan to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne).

Plate 38 Destiny Deacon, *Being there*, 1997, bubble-jet from C-type print original, 55 cm × 81 cm (collection of the Queensland Art Gallery).

Plate 39 Destiny Deacon, *Me and Carol* (a.k.a. *Me and Virginia's doll*), 1997, bubble-jet from Polaroid original, 49 cm × 39 cm (private collections).

signification in Deacon's art, I want to suggest that it also entailed or might enable a re-visioning of the female body according to an ideal that is inclusive of Aboriginal Australians, if not all 'other' races. I do not suggest this in a programmatic way. Nor do I want to imply that Deacon, or any artist, or a group of artists intended to fashion a new ideal. Rather I want to emphasise that the possibility of a conceptual ideal emerged out of the material practices and historical processes in which she and other contemporary artists participated. Having said this, it is appropriate to describe Rea's and Deacon's art as 'deconstructive' (Langton 1997: 100) as well as identitarian, just as Nead described Lesley Sanderson's art as 'deconstructive' and as 'inscribed with the signs' of cultural identity (Nead 1992: 74). As I explained in Chapter 1, Gayatri Spivak recommended that deconstruction be used in this way. She put a post-colonial spin on deconstruction, and as a feminist she asked 'in what way, in

what contexts, under what kinds of race and class situations, gender is used as what sort of signifier to cover over what kinds of things. It really is a discovery which arises through actually attending to texts' (Spivak 1990: 52). Rea and Destiny Deacon asked similar questions to these, by attending to 'texts', such as advertising images and visual stereotypes in popular culture, in which the female body was a site for contesting discourses on gender and race. Their art demonstrated that, although feminism and antiracist politics may be 'very discontinuous', as Spivak asserted, 'each of these things brings the other to crisis' in productive ways (1990: 138–9).

Australia's multiculturalism has spawned many different identity politics, which are manifested in contemporary art in various ways. While Rea's and Deacon's feminist defence of 'Aboriginal identity' corresponded, symbolically, to indigenous land rights claims, it might be argued that a sense of 'homeland' and 'identity' eluded Australia's post-second-world-war immigrants. For example, the recent work of Chris Barry, the daughter of Polish-born exiles, is the culmination of many years of artistic production and research, during which time she contemplated her 'loss' of her family's 'homeland'. Barry became aware that she was grieving for a fictional Poland that was visually constructed in her imagination from old photographs and other remnants that her parents had retained of their past. In her series, *Displaced Objects*, 1986/1996, she 'reworked' some of this memorabilia, deconstructing her nostalgia, by tearing photographs apart, scribbling on them and building them into collages. *Requiem*, for example, emerged after this process, in the form of a melancholy landscape, packed with scraps of culture, with no signs of nature, except perhaps for the longing of two little girls (Plate 40). That these girls might be earlier incarnations of herself stamped Barry's projected fantasy of place with traces of desire and, hence, with the presence of her body. Running counter to Barry's longing for a lost place of origin was the dream she shared with her family of a utopian, antipodean future. Her desire for belonging, and for an Australian identity, was troubled, however, by an earlier cultural fantasy that competed with her own. It was the Anglo-Celtic fiction of *'terra nullius'*, invented by the first white settlers of Australia. The dreams of these exiled Britons, and their desire, had condemned Australia's primal people, symbolically, to perpetual oblivion. Trapped, herself, between two symbolic orders, Barry was forced to realise that there was no 'place' to which she might escape. In her art, the female body was again the site on which the subjective ambiguities of this dilemma were played out.

Another work by Barry, *Looking for the Child*, 1995, consists of countless 'found' items of women's underwear, dyed deep shades of red, then pinned to a large canvas, so that their physical presence extends into the spectator's space (Plate 41). Arranged in a pattern of vertical and occasionally diagonal lines, the items themselves, with their lacy inserts, satin cups and elastic straps, stretch and crumple, with the rich, tonal complexity of a Baroque painting of the Crucifixion, or a forest landscape. Hence, binaries – such as here and there,

Plate 40 Chris Barry, *Requiem*, from the series *Displaced Objects*, 1986–96, C-type print, 270 cm × 270 cm (collection of the artist).

self and place, private and public, viewer and landscape, body and mind, nature and culture – are almost collapsed; and women's underwear – a feminised metaphor for the boundaries that maintain these distinctions – becomes a medium for ambiguous associations and blank affect. In fashioning her art, however, Barry did not yield to namelessness, or to hopeless ambiguity. By rendering the ambiguity of her situation in material terms, she secured a foothold in the present, and at the same time kept the ghosts of those binaries, and her old fantasies about identity, in suspension. Although the body was absent from her work, in the usual sense of representation, traces of its desiring presence, and the possibility of its representation remained intact. This possibility was underpinned, moreover, by a principle of inclusiveness; that is, by an ideal that was not constructed on racist or nationalist grounds.

While bodily presence was crucial as a starting-point to Barry's subjective project, Kate Beynon's installations consisted of imagined fragments of the female body, damaged by the violence and desire inscribed in Chinese histories. Beynon, whose grandfather was Cantonese, deconstructed Ancient narratives of femininity, as a way of questioning her own 'hybrid', cultural identity. Her installation entitled *Old Poem with Unbound Feet*, 1994, at 1st Floor, in Melbourne, was based on a poem about a woman who was trapped in luxury

Plate 41 Chris Barry, *Looking for the Child*, 1995, clothes on board, 240 cm × 175 cm (collection of the artist).

and wealth, and it elaborated on the incidental reference to the woman's bound feet (Plates 42a, b). *Old Poem* consisted of a pair of 'unbound feet' that were made from stuffing, calico, pins and thread, and then displayed on a white podium. A large, Chinese-styled script of an old poem, with characters made of black, chenille sticks, ran vertically down the nearby, white wall. The home-spun texture of the two 'unbound feet', which were stuck together with pins, evoked a grotesque, mutual domesticity. In an installation, called *Shoes for Bound Feet with Unbound Feet* in the Melbourne gallery, Linden, Beynon heaped about 50 'unbound feet' casually onto a long podium that was attached to a wall (Plate 43). A shorter podium was positioned high above it, bearing a tiny, colourful pair of shoes for bound feet. The exquisite craftsmanship of the ancient Chinese shoes drew attention to the monstrous deformity of the swollen, amputated 'unbound feet' below them. By these means, Beynon reinscribed a cruel cultural practice with her own aesthetic and morbid fascination. Her rewriting was self-reflexive, however, and cannot be separated from the fact that she is female, and that her great-grandmother's feet were bound.

Beynon explored related themes in a wall drawing at Sutton Gallery, which critically highlighted the expendability of girls' lives in Ancient Chinese history and customs. Entitled *Li Ji*, 1996, one part of it consisted of a black line drawing in the style of an ancient pen and ink drawing, depicting the image of a warrior girl, called Li Ji, wielding a sword (Plate 44). It, too, was

Plate 42 a, b Kate Beynon, *Old Poem with Unbound Feet*, 1994, installation at 1st Floor, Melbourne. *Unbound Feet*, calico, pins, stuffing, thread (collection of the artist). *Old Poem with Unbound Feet*, chenille sticks, calico, pins, stuffing, thread (collection of the artist).

Plate 43 Kate Beynon, *Shoes for Bound Feet with Unbound Feet*, 1994, installation in *Intimate*, Next Wave Festival at Linden Gallery Melbourne (collection of the artist).

accompanied by chenille-stick-calligraphy, thus invoking the feminine crafts. The drawing illustrated an old Chinese narrative about Li Ji, who, because she comes from a family of six girls, expects that, according to custom, she will be sacrificed. To her parents' surprise and disapproval she volunteers herself to the deadly python that regularly tyrannises the kingdom. Ironically, however, Li Ji kills the python, liberating her kingdom and defying not only her parents, but also the convention of sacrifice. Although Beynon chose the story for its account of female independence and heroism, she could not construct Li Ji as a feminist. After all, Li Ji was rewarded for her bravery with marriage to the King and promotion for her father in the Royal court; a 'happy' ending according to Confucian logic, but hardly a feminist one. Stuart Koop noted this in his review of the show and commented that

> Many contemporary readers will have rushed to the obvious conclusion, finding a protean feminist in the brave female protagonist. It's also tempting to think that the Chinese language was in fact legible. Yet it was precisely the loose fit of meaning and symbol which

Plate 44 Kate Beynon, *Li Ji* (detail), 1996, installation at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, chenille sticks, 100 cm × 24 cm (collection of Monash University, Melbourne). Photograph by Kenneth Pleban.

> accounted for the open texture of the work and proposed the language barrier a matter of form.
>
> (Koop 1996: 85)

Beynon's foregrounding of the arbitrary nature of 'the sign' and the openness of meaning in this work, shows how, once again, ancient complexities of desire and domination forced consideration of the terms of Beynon's interest in them. Her aestheticisation of the calligraphic and pictorial styles betrays their resistance to her probing. An effect of this process, therefore, is the realisation that a more relativist and historically nuanced feminism is required to make some connection between Beynon's ancestral past and her current situation and 'identity'. Beynon left open the possibility of such a feminism, as well as the possibility of an emancipated female body in representation.

As Mary Duffy demonstrated, women with disabilities comprise another group for whom the patriarchal ideal of the female body is problematic. Although responses to this problem vary, I have suggested that Duffy's art, for example, is an argument for a more inclusive ideal. Jane Trengove assumed a similar position in 1998, when she curated a show called *Bodysuits*. In her own work, entitled *Self-Portrait in Bright Blue*, 1997, Trengove displayed her leg-brace, which she said may as well represent her, it is so distinctive (Plate 45). Presenting it like a Duchamp ready-made, she drew attention to

Plate 45 Jane Trengove, *Self-Portrait in Bright Blue*, 1995 and 1997, metal and wool, 70 cm × 30 cm (collection of the artist).

the absence of bodies such as hers from representation, or art. Lending the brace a cheerful, home-craft touch, she decorated it with bright blue wool, softening the harshness of its form through feminised aesthetic processes. When *Self-Portrait in Bright Blue* was exhibited, she included next to it a photograph of herself as a small child enduring corrective treatment for the effects of polio in the 1950s. In the photograph, Trengove's tiny body was strapped into a horribly cumbersome frame, but her body was straining with vitality and her bright face radiated as she smiled delightedly for her mother's camera. This 'evidence' of the child's subjective point of view contrasts with the perception of her disabled body from the spectator's 'objective' point of view, and the harsh social effects of this discrepancy are symbolised by the aestheticised leg-brace. The photograph is not included in this book, for the artist preferred the work to stand alone. Trengove's choice to include the photograph in the exhibition was similar to Lorna Simpson's choice to use the Rodney King newspaper clipping in her installation, *Hypothetical?* The fact that Trengove chose

not to include the photograph in this book, however, points up the optional aspect of this strategy in the work of both artists, and the ambivalence that is central to identitarian, deconstructive art. *Self-Portrait in Bright Blue* is, after all, a witty and powerful icon in its own right, resonating ambiguously with allusions to the subjective pain caused by socially-constructed frameworks that regulate the body. As Trengove observed, 'The leg brace is the device of movement, but because it symbolises a lack it ensures the wearer will not be welcome to move with the rest of the crowd' (Trengove 1997: 5). Trengove's is not an argument against the possibility of a positive conceptual ideal for the representation of the female body, so much as an argument against exclusion, or erasure, on account of difference from social constructions of 'normality'. Implicit in this argument is an appeal to be counted as a healthy, erotically appealing female body.

All of the artists discussed above were concerned to establish the ways in which they, as women, differed from traditional ideals and norms of female beauty and identity, to defend their differences against degrading stereotypes, and to make available new ground for feminist art practices. Their efforts entailed negotiating the ambiguities implied in all of these categories of identity, and in many cases the art that resulted was a testament to and an aspect of those negotiations. Judith Butler saw the mistake in refusing representational politics, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recommended a 'strategic' essentialism, and Donna Haraway cited 'constructions of women of colour' as a text that might provide insight into 'the construction of a potentially helpful cyborg myth' (Haraway 1991: 174). On similar grounds, I have suggested that the above artists have, in steering a course through the ambiguities of art, maintained the possibility of a positive, conceptual ideal for the representation of the female body, based on a principle of inclusiveness.

7

TURNING AMBIGUITY AROUND

Many feminists found that the ambiguities of Dada and surrealist art and film, in particular, provided scope for a productive revisioning of the female body in representation. In the 1980s, postmodern art that favoured the paradigm of art-as-simulacra 'appropriated' images and modes of visual representation from popular culture or the history of art, often upsetting the principles that were inscribed in modernist styles. The image-based media of Surrealism, however, engaged with psychoanalytic theory and provided a rich catalogue of ambiguities relating to sexuality, race, class and gender. Feminists working in traditional visual media, such as painting, sculpture and photography, could inhabit the erotic ambiguities of these earlier art forms while exploring their psychic implications and the 'politics of the signifier'. The art discussed in this chapter includes photography by Jane Burton, Tracey Moffatt and Pat Brassington, paintings by Sally Smart, an installation of post-Dada objects by Susan Fereday and a play by director/playwright, Jenny Kemp. These artists showed how representations of the female body that functioned negatively because of ambiguity, as in surrealist art, could be turned around towards a positive representation of the female body, through being related to a new conceptual ideal. This chapter examines the various ways in which ambiguity was used to effect this possibility in their art.

Freud's analysis of the role of the fetish in terms of the castration complex presents a very specific account of ambiguity. Here, the fetishised object of visual representation – the female nude, for instance, or the pornographic image – functions as a substitute for the imaginary phallus, which the mother lacks. In this sense, the object of desire is ambiguously both absent and present. It was generally agreed among feminists in the early 1980s that the heightened ambiguity of surrealist art, which was discussed extensively in terms of the Freudian, and the later, Lacanian, psychoanalytic models, was used to reinforce a sadistic conception of the female body. However, Rosalind Krauss's 1985 reading of surrealist photography insisted that 'the frequent characterizations of Surrealism as antifeminist' seemed to her 'to be mistaken' (Kuenzli 1993: 22). She made this claim, drawing on the contemporaneous theories of Bataille, defending Surrealism against the prevailing criticism that it was formally regressive.

With characteristic attention to the signifier, Krauss analysed the allegedly 'misogynist' photographic nudes of Brassaï, Ubac, Kertész and the puppets of Bellmer. Drawing on Bataille's notion of the *informe*, she argued that the defamiliarising techniques of surrealist photography, such as solarisation, rayography, negative printing, multiple exposures and doubling served to emphasise the artificiality of the photographic image. Doubling, in particular, functioned as 'the signifier of signification', thus highlighting the fact that the art was a semiological project. As such, according to Krauss, it prefigured deconstruction, and given the prominence of images of the female body in surrealist art, the category of gender was ripe for dismantling.

> It must be seen that in much of surrealist practice, woman, in being a fetish, is nowhere in nature. Having dissolved the natural in which 'normalcy' can be grounded, Surrealism was at least potentially open to the dissolving of distinctions that Bataille insisted was the job of the *informe*. Gender, at the heart of the surrealist project, was one of these categories.
>
> (Kuenzli 1993: 21)

As an example of the kind of 'formlessness' that Bataille recommended, Krauss cited Brassaï's *Nude*, of 1933, in which she said 'The female body and the male organ have each become the sign of the other' (ibid.). According to this view, the ambiguity of the image was an effect of signification rather than a reflection of reality.

Rudolf Kuenzli, by contrast, betrayed his assumption that the image in this work was a reflection of reality. In admonishing Krauss for her silence 'about the violent, sadistic dismemberment of the female image', he conflated 'the image' with 'the body', which he presumed was 'female' and 'real' (1993: 23). If one accepts that the models for these photographs were women, not men, and that the context in which they were photographed was patriarchal, not feminist, then in this sense Kuenzli was correct. However, he also applied a gender-specific notion of reality to the subjective and psychic levels of meaning in the art. Kuenzli argued that 'The trapped, lost subjectivity constructed by the Surrealists is the *female* subjectivity – disfigured, reduced to animal, to Bataille's *bassesse*, the result of the male's fear of castration and his fetishistic disavowals' (1993: 25). His acknowledgement of the image's function as a fetish undermined his case that the image of 'woman' represents a real woman, or women. This is also evident in his statement that 'Brassaï's female nude in the shape of a penis is straightforward colonization, occupation, a refusal to recognize difference' (ibid.). Ambiguity is an effect of this colonisation, and it was precisely in the reading of ambiguity, that Kuenzli and Krauss disagreed. Kuenzli read ambiguity as transparent, negative and the image as gender-specific whereas Krauss read ambiguity as a gender-neutral, deconstructive blur that accompanies the dissolution of

form. Neither critic read ambiguity as allowing a positive representation of the female body.

Hal Foster took Krauss's reading of ambiguity in a more promising direction. He suggested that, in surrealist art, 'figures of woman . . . are often ambiguously reflexive about male fantasies, not merely expressive of them; and . . . the subject positions of these fantasies are more slippery than they first seem' (Foster 1993a: 13). Foster went on to suggest that, although surrealist art such as Bellmer's dolls should be subjected to feminist criticism, 'underneath (the) sadism lies a masochism' (ibid.). This reappraisal implies not only that surrealist art may have produced less overtly sadistic representations of the female body, or of 'woman', than previously had been supposed, but also that these ambivalent subject positions might be occupied by or available to female, gay, lesbian or queer spectators and artists. Whether or not Foster's gloss on surrealist art is entirely convincing, it draws attention to the fact that feminist artists and critics wishing to construct positive representations of the female body need not capitulate in the face of ambiguity, but can exploit it for their own purposes. As Foster pointed out, feminists revived the issues raised by the Surrealists concerning the sexual determination of subjectivity and the social construction of identity, and most of them favoured a psychoanalytic approach. Feminist art historians have argued that constructions of 'woman' by women artists active in the surrealist movement ultimately failed to slough off patriarchal framing. This question is still under review by feminist art historians, and is too complex to follow up here. The reflexivity of contemporary feminists, however, prepared them better to exploit the ambiguity that produced and was produced by the 'slippery subject positions' of surrealist art.

Feminising the surreal

In Chapter 2, I suggested that Jane Burton's photographs of nudes embody the ambiguities of photography itself: nature presented as a sign, the subject suspended in motion and providing an uncanny premonition of eroticism and death. Photography, according to Krauss, provided the aesthetic conditions for surrealist art, and although Burton did not deliberately invoke Surrealism, it is a reference point that her works infer. Her experiments in eroticism were consciously staged in a 'postfeminist' context, in which she insisted on subjective agency. She therefore dismissed the male gaze, strategically, rather than as a fact or as a theory.

A similar uneasiness about reductive feminist politics might be attributed to Tracey Moffatt's series of six black and white negatives on coloured paper, entitled *Pet Thang*. In this series Moffatt herself modelled for the images of a face and a nude that are presented in a style that recalls Surrealism. The title alone, with its Americanised pronunciation, alludes at least in part to her complicity in the commodification of her own image and sexuality. However,

in spite of their mutual, self-reflexive, postfeminist invocations of Surrealism, Burton and Moffatt employed ambiguity in very different ways. Burton's use of a model repeated the subject/object relationship of the Surrealists, but diverged from this paradigm in that she consciously used the model as a stand-in for herself. Her work might be described as symbolically 'performative' or 'parodic' in that her models engaged in a series of acts that were constitutive of an erotic identity, the ideal for which (say, the surrealist female nude) is acknowledged to be groundless or corrupt. By using herself as the model, Moffatt conflated the subject with the object, thereby consciously positing 'herself' as a sign or fetish. In Burton's pictures, the completeness of the figures and their relationship to their perspectival settings provides context, association, memory and the promise of narrative. Moffatt's glimpses of figures, on the other hand, are set against a blank, black ground. They appear to be fixed, static, and without depth or narrative context, except, perhaps, for that associated with the history of styles. They are, in short, resistant to identity, or at least to its past constructions.

The six photocompositions in Moffatt's *Pet Thang* series include images of parts of her body and partial images of a live sheep or lamb, which vary in scale in relation to each other and from picture to picture. In one panel, for example, a vertical, profile view of the artist's head, breast and torso fills half of the composition, and confronts a huge, woolly flank that fills the other half. Two of the other panels consist mainly of the black ground, except for the appearance of a diminutive image of the artist's face in one corner, and some enigmatic part of a sheep that hovers nearby. Another panel is a frontal portrait of a sheep looming from the darkness, and yet another provides a grainy, horizontal, close-up view of part of the artist's face, with eyes closed as though she is unconscious or in a deep sleep. Finally, there is a panel, which, because of its frontality and the relative completeness of forms, appears to be a key to the series (Plate 46). It shows a lamb standing, front-on, lit from the left, and in sharp focus, positioned like an icon at the centre of the top half of the composition. The animal appears to be wearing tiny, black boots. In the bottom right-hand corner, filling about a quarter of the picture space, and in much softer focus, is a frontal view of part of the artist's naked breasts and upper torso. With head thrown back, her chin is stretched up and to the right, obscuring her face from view. The sense of space, in *Pet Thang*, derives from a combination of cinematic effects – glimpses of forms, floating faces, close-ups and serialised points of view. The 'live', comical, 'sit-com' aspect of the lamb in boots, on the other hand, produces an impression of televisual actuality. In most of these photocompositions, the dark ground encapsulates the harshly lit, partial figures, lending them a science-fiction quality, as though they were lozenges of hybrid identities or particles of DNA either floating in cosmic space, or swimming under a microscope. Nowhere is the human body represented in its visual entirety, and the 'glimpses' of anatomy that signify it are ambiguously phallic. One shot of the lamb, a rear-view of its tail, is also

Plate 46 Tracey Moffatt, *Pet Thang, 4*, 1991, black and white photograph, 110 cm × 71 cm.

obviously phallic, and, to push the point, it is not clear that the sheep is completely animal, especially since it may wear boots. The close-up of the phallic woman in profile, as she confronts the woolly flank of the sheep, gives the impression of cells that are about to merge. In retrospect this science-fiction impression is rendered prophetic of recent advances in gene technology, namely Dolly, the cloned sheep that was born a few years after *Pet Thang* was exhibited. Whatever its connotations, the sense of space in *Pet Thang* departs radically from the pictorial space of surrealist photography, and because of this, to some extent, her images elude the negativity of that earlier vision.

In order to consider the relationship between *Pet Thang, 4* and Surrealism more closely, it is instructive to focus on the image of the torso with a stretched neck, since it recalls one of Man Ray's photographs in his series entitled *Anatomies*, *c.*1930 (Plate 47). The latter photograph features a neck stretched as the result of the head being thrown back so that the bottom of the chin is at the highest point of the body, and which, according to Rosalind Krauss, applies Bataille's notion of the *informe*. Bataille said that by lifting the mouth from its usual vertical position to a horizontal position the human being becomes aligned as though it were an animal on all fours. The animal lifts its head, with the mouth, or 'prow', at one end of the alimentary canal and the anus at the other: a formal relation, which, as Krauss said, 'every other animal knows how to read' (Krauss 1994: 156). In moments of pain or ecstasy, human beings (particularly 'hysterical' women, as Krauss notes) 'reassume' this horizontality, either by throwing their heads back or falling: hence all of the falling nudes and uppermost mouths in surrealist photography. Krauss pointed out, most importantly, that

> To attain the formal coherence of the animal's structure is nonetheless to descend into a condition of *informe*. For it is to blur the distinctions between human and animal and thus to produce a formal rupture that goes deeper than any apparent form . . . the *informe* is a conceptual matter, the shattering of signifying boundaries, the undoing of categories.
>
> (Krauss 1994: 156–7)

Here Krauss again emphasised the semiological, deconstructive aspect of surrealist art. Considering Bataille's advice, one might judge that the mouth on Moffatt's nude is not quite uppermost, and there is only a possibility that she might be falling, but the dissolution of boundaries between animal/human, self/other, consciousness/unconsciousness and vertical/horizontal is strongly articulated throughout her series.

Whether or not Moffatt had read Bataille, she clearly, perhaps intuitively, understood the implications of surrealist aesthetics and their difference from and relevance to the postmodern present. Hence Jacques Delaruelle could comment in his lucid catalogue essay for Moffatt's show

> Equally remote from the two poles of documentation and artistic photography, the artist seeks for what is Other, what is not herself: an ecstatic reality. Here a persona, her ego, is caught in a game of metamorphoses, hidden behind disguises, masks and illusions. Different from the Cartesian ego which dominates both itself and the outside world, Tracey Moffatt's self-portrait can easily be read as a deconstruction of personal identity.
>
> (Delaruelle 1992: 50)

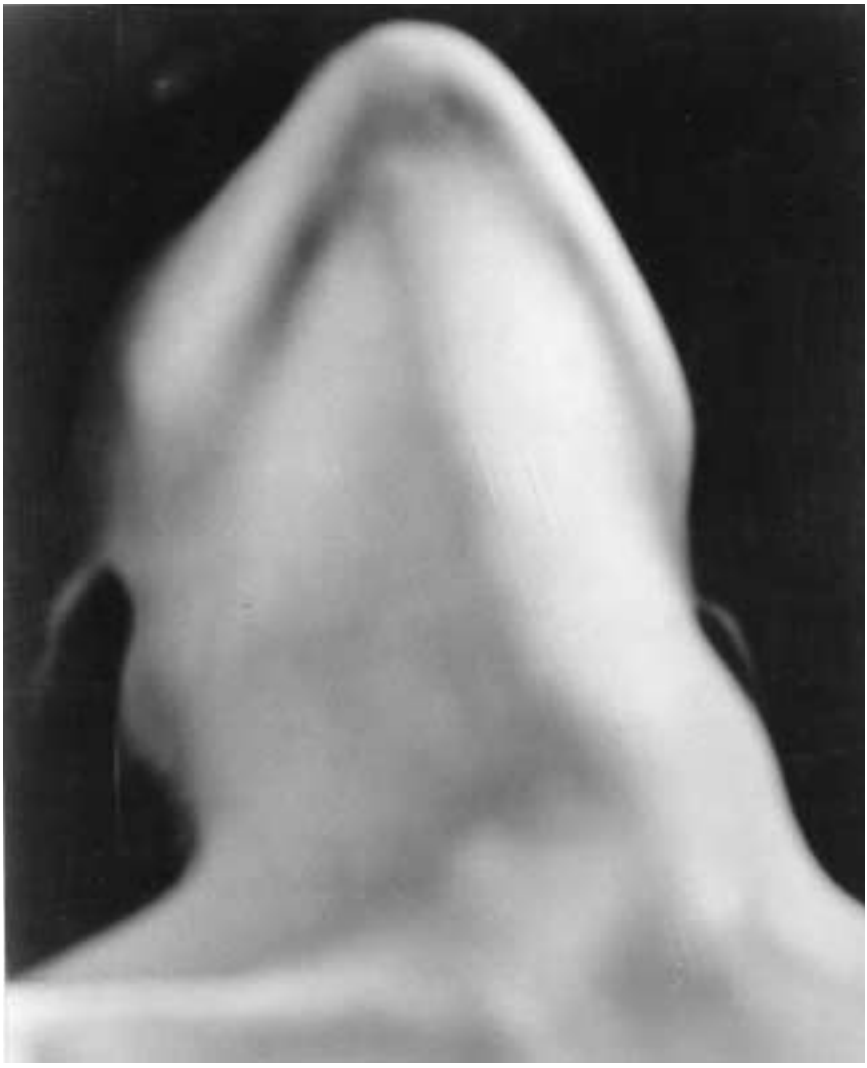

Plate 47 Man Ray, *Anatomies*, *c.*1930, silver print, 9 ½″ × 7″ (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).

According to Delaruelle, in other words, *Pet Thang* was not only 'a commitment to an idiosyncratic world, an oneiric ballet, a fantasy before the word, but (it was) also a visual vitality aiming at the annihilation of consciousness' (Delaruelle 1992: 49). The nihilism with which Delaruelle attributed Moffatt, however, does not quite fit with the vitality that, as he says, is projected in *Pet Thang*, and which also inhabits her other works. Delaruelle concluded his essay with the following speculation:

> . . . it is not a self which is paraded here, but the self-oblivion which has become necessary to live in a world without gravity. Walter Benjamin suggested that an allegory is the petrified image of a ruined world whose unity has been lost. Likewise, the fragments which together compose this sequence are animated by a melancholic passion, a theatre of obscure reminiscence enacted by an isolated subjectivity. Hence, perhaps, the mutism of these images, an extreme reticence 'to speak' which does not only suggest how poorly real reality is, but more importantly, the artist's hunger for a self transformation that can never find its appropriate nourishment.
>
> (Delaruelle 1992: 50)

While astutely characterised as a postmodern allegory, *Pet Thang*'s 'mutism' and 'the artist's hunger for self-transformation' might not signal as bleak a scenario as Delaruelle implied. The mischievous humour of *Pet Thang*, encapsulated in the faintly ridiculous sheep – once a symbol for white Australian economic prosperity, among other things – saves it, to some degree, perhaps, from the melancholy produced by the longings of an 'isolated subjectivity'.

In contrast with Delaruelle's appreciative reading of *Pet Thang*, film critic, Adrian Martin, considered the series to be one of Moffatt's 'jokier' works, which in his view tend 'not to be her strongest and most lasting' (Martin 1995: 28). It is clear that Martin read the work as a rather blunt satire on contemporary feminist theory. He wrote, 'We get the pun, we see the pertinent terms (like "nature" and "culture") locked in mock-dialectical struggle, we note the allusion to contemporary theoretical discourses – otherwise we don't get, see or note anything' (ibid.). Martin's dismissive account of *Pet Thang* minimises the potential of ambiguity in the art. The terms 'nature' and 'culture' are by no means clearly differentiated and although there is humour in the series, including perhaps a satire on feminism, most people would be hard-pressed to get the joke as quickly as Martin apparently did. Martin expressed a preference for Moffatt's 'melodramatic mode', as evidenced in her earlier series, *Something More*, 1988, and in her later series, *Scarred for Life*, 1994. Both of these series consist of tableaux constructed of simulated images from popular culture. *Something More* is an existential drama about hybrid identity and desire and, according to Martin, is 'far from the sometimes puritanical biases of contemporary political art' (1995: 27). It stars Moffatt herself and includes a series of shonky tableaux, saturated with violent and erotic stereotypes in unexpected juxtaposition, based on snippets of autobiography and memories of kitsch Australian TV drama and film. The series is as much about the seductiveness of these images and their elusive eroticism and glamour as it is a critique of the violence of identity categories. *Scarred for Life*, 1994, followed *Pet Thang*, but was a return to the 'melodramatic mode'. Shot in the style of early *Life* magazine photographs of domestic life, it evokes uneasy

feelings about sexual propriety, with implications of abuse and domestic violence. These affects are not expressed according to a script, but occur symptomatically in the works. As such the works are provocative and discomforting, bristling with disquieting resonances that relate to contemporary Australian life, in spite and perhaps because of their 'retro' settings. They are indeed strong works, and Martin's analysis of them is acutely observed, but I suggest that he was mistaken in believing that similar strengths are not evident in *Pet Thang*.

Moffatt publicly resisted identification with feminism and political art. On the other hand, she never dissociated herself completely from these discourses, even though the external pressure from critics to do so was unrelenting, on account of her having an Aboriginal mother. Moffatt explained her position in a newspaper interview:

> I was always very, I still am, kind of political: But I wanted to make my own images, and not work on political documents. I always had my own stories to tell. I remember a few radical Aboriginal leader-types in the early days saying to me: 'Do what you want'. And I just needed to hear that.
>
> (Smee 1998: E3)

Her attitude to feminism was similarly independent, for she said 'I stumbled into feminism by mistake . . . I picked up *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer because I really liked the cover, and it looked a bit rude' (Smee 1998: E3). Moffatt constructed herself thus as accidentally positioned in the midst of discourses on race and sexuality, almost oblivious to their politics, but captivated by the visual manifestation of their erotic ambiguities. However one reads *Pet Thang* – as a dream, a melancholy allegory, a deconstruction of identity, or a joke on all of these – it is both puzzling and arresting. It bears the mark of Moffatt's ability to produce affective responses in the spectator, while deflecting questions of identity outwards, beyond art, beyond society, beyond space and into the future. The ambivalent subject positions of surrealist art provided the starting point for this strategy, and the female body was the site on which it was played out.

While the revival of photography in contemporary art owed much to feminism's revision of Surrealism and its interest in the erotic female body, other media such as painting and performance art were also affected. Over the past two decades, Sally Smart probed the possibilities that Surrealism offers for a painting-based, feminist art-practice. Her exhibition of paintings, entitled *The Unhomely Body*, 1996, drew on the collages of Max Ernst, in a play on the way architectural space is implicated in ideas about and responses to the body. The female body, nude as often as not, features prominently in Ernst's collage-novel, *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1933, which was produced by cutting and pasting engraved illustrations from old, popular books and catalogues (Plate 48). The free association of images celebrates the play element in art, but it also entails

Plate 48 Max Ernst, *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1933, collage (recent edition by Dover, New York, 1976, p. 100).

the dismantling of identity and a critique of representation, since it imitates the arbitrary way media images construct our idea of reality. Smart extended and/or faked these processes in her paintings. Her purpose was to deconstruct traditional conceptions of the mind, body, femininity and reality, on which Ernst's 'surreality' depends.

Each of the large canvases decorating the rooms of the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, in which *The Unhomely Body* was shown, was conceived as a room in itself. Titles such as *The Sewing Room (Prosthetic)* and *The Anxiety Room (Stain)* reflected the fact that the ambiguous relationship between real and representational space extended to a blurring of architectural, psychological and bodily functions. *The Sewing Room (Prosthetic)*, for example, with its feminine associations and colourful remnants of materials strewn daintily across shadowy table-legs and precarious chairs, took on a medical gloss when read against a blood-stained sheet bordered by cupboards that became animated

like extensions to the body (Plate 49a). The painted canvas, with elements of real and faked collage, became a shimmering wall of floating organs, non-functional furniture and decorative patterns, all competing with one another for meaning, eventually reducing each to the terms of the other. The Rorschach-shape, which was repeated throughout the show, was thus the perfect ambiguity, for it can be read as a chance blot of paint, a decorative form, an organ of the body, or as an over-determined, psychoanalytic symptom.

Smart's satire on psychoanalysis plays on the uncanny, a notion which, although not consciously adopted by the Surrealists, is invoked by the marvellous, which is treated everywhere in their art. The uncanny, or the unhomely *(unheimlich)*, as Freud calls it, can occur as a form of absolute terror at the sight of something familiar made strange through repression, for it derives from the ambiguous relationship between the Sex/Life Drive and the Death Drive. Freud cites the mother's genitals as the paradigm of an unhomely place, given that they were the home of the unborn child. In everyday life, the home or

Plate 49 a, b, c Sally Smart, from the series *The Unhomely Body*, 1996–97. *The Sewing Room (Prosthetic)*, 1995, acrylic on canvas with collage elements, 250 cm × 320 cm (collection of the artist). *Unique Interior (with hair)*, 1997, acrylic on canvas with collage elements, 275 cm × 214 cm (collection of the artist). *Bed/Web*, 1997, oil and acrylic on felt and fabric, size variable (collection of the artist).

Plate 49 b and c

house is a common site for experiences of the uncanny, when the subject projects a frightening replica of himself as the alien Other onto the walls and into the spaces that contain him. Freud links this 'doubling' and 'the compulsion to repeat' with primitive beliefs in witchcraft and 'the evil eye'. It can thus explain the artist's compulsion to represent 'reality', and the complex dynamics of 'the gaze'.

Smart set up a series of visual strategies by which she parodied the 'architectural uncanny', shifting furniture and rearranging body parts, flaying wall-paper and hanging strips of skin (Plates 49b, c). Her paintings confused inside and outside, so that what we normally see of the body was partly hidden, and what is hidden was brought to light and hung up for display. By these means she tricked the projected desire of the spectator, and destroyed that deceiving double of reality, illusionism. The repetition of dark stains and mutating Rorschach patterns, like cancer cells out of control, served to accelerate the diffusion of identity and signal the presence of death. Their presentation as monumental, elegantly composed works of art that are strangely beautiful offset this blood-and-guts horror. Smart's feminist intervention was underscored by the 'feminine' connotations of housework and neurosis that she obliquely critiqued, and by the performative aspect of her work. The large canvases were hung as unframed pieces of cloth, interspersed with paper-cut-out organs and furniture, which drew attention to her feminised art-making processes, such as cutting and sewing. A self-portrait of Smart wearing some paper-cut-out organs attached to her work-clothes alluded, punningly, to theorisations of the body, such as Artaud's and later Deleuze and Guattari's 'Body Without Organs', and to technologically assisted ways of seeing the body, such as x-ray photography (Plate 50). It also bore witness to the importance she gave to replacing the voyeuristically constructed female body of masculinist art with the body of an actual woman who sees through that construction and is the agent of her own meanings.

'Writing the body' has been the principal concern of feminist performance artists, many of whom, such as Karen Finley, extended the project into the realm of the obscene, often invoking Bataille and his advocacy of an aesthetic based on transgression. This was not the direction taken by the playwright/director Jenny Kemp, however, whose staging of the naked female body was inspired by the surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux. Perhaps because she came to his work from a background in theatre, Kemp saw beyond an earlier feminist claim that Delvaux's paintings eroticise the viewing process and allow no privacy for his nudes. Kemp accepted the visual realism of the paintings, but interpreted the women as intelligent, meditative and inward looking. Delvaux's brilliance, she believed, lay in the way that he alluded to an inner world of private thoughts by carefully measuring the psychic relationships between people, such as those in *L'Echo*, who inhabited a setting that was, in most respects, the everyday world of public interaction (Plate 51). This was in contrast with the paintings of Dalí, for example, which claim to represent only

Plate 50 Sally Smart, *Self-Portrait (with organs)*, 1995, photograph (collection of the artist).

the realm of the unconscious. Kemp's play, *The Black Sequin Dress*, 1996, developed the theme of female introspection (Plate 52). It begins with a forty-something-year-old woman, Undine, who leaves her domestic life in a council flat to go to a nightclub wearing a slinky black dress. As she nervously crosses the floor, she is gripped by a sudden urge to look backwards, but when she does so, she slips and falls. From here onwards the narrative structure, the identity of the woman, and her anxious journey shatter into fragments, which are then deflected into myth, dream, memory and fantasy. Using devices found in Delvaux, such as doubling (the woman in her various roles is played by four different actresses) and repetition (this scene is repeated many times), Kemp was able to illuminate multiple levels of consciousness and to suggest parallel colliding currents of desire.

Plate 51 Paul Delvaux, *L'Echo*, 1943, oil on canvas, 105 cm × 128 cm (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Nagoya).

Plate 52 Jenny Kemp, *The Black Sequin Dress*, 1996, a play. Actors, from left: Natasha Herbert, Margaret Mills, Mary Sitarenos, Greg Stone, Ian Scott. Photograph by Jeff Busby.

By establishing a dialogue between Undine's inner and outer worlds, Kemp aimed to cancel out the voyeur/victim relationship which many 1980s feminists associated with the representation of the female nude. She saw no risk, therefore, in preserving stereotypes, like the nude, in order to consider them deeply, taking time to tease out lateral, psychic resonances from the woman's point of view. Accordingly, her actresses were slim, fit and able to look good in a slinky, black dress. However, as a departure from Delvaux, they were not young, ideal beauties, and their nakedness was confronting rather than seductive. Only once does a fully nude actress appear on stage. She steps out in high heels, carrying a handbag and chanting a panic-stricken monologue as she re-enacts the first scene, recalling it in terror. To her right, a fully-dressed woman in a black sequinned dress nervously applies lipstick, and, to her left, a woman in a nightdress, waking up after a bad dream, reaches for a glass of water and watches a man slip past with a skeleton. A fourth woman watches from the window of a suburban house. The woman's nakedness in this scene conveys powerfully the absolute shock of finding oneself singular and vulnerable in the external world while having to negotiate a multiplicity of anxious internal demands. Undine's nudity is the ultimate test of this social skill. She does not capitulate in any way, and by fending off terror, insists on the ownership of her body and the dignity of her actions. A later commentary on the event by a male actor externalises our perception of her, but while Undine is on stage it is her interior world which controls her body and the scene.

Like Delvaux, Kemp used nudity to problematise distinctions between private and public, but her art differed from his in that the nakedness of the woman was part of a 'performative' process rather than an illusion. Nevertheless, Kemp did not attempt to seduce or trick the gaze – the apparatus of external, sexual interest of the Other in the female body. Her strategy was rather to bracket this binary of subject and Other, in order to explain the female body/psyche itself as multiple and divided. Undine's nakedness was a symbol for the extreme effort of will that was required in preventing that conflicted, internal world from obscuring the external world completely. It was thus a strategy for preserving the distinction between fantasy and reality, rather than for breaking it down.

The artistic productions discussed so far in the current chapter would not usually be grouped together, either stylistically or thematically. Even as participants in a feminist discourse, the orientations of Burton, Moffatt, Smart and Kemp are very different. While resisting comparisons that might diminish the art's complexity, I have attempted to show how all of them have probed the uncanniness and ambivalent subject positions of certain surrealist art practices. This strategy yielded an intriguing ambiguity in their own art, and cleared the ground for a more positive reading of the female body.

Fashioning the female fetish

In the 1980s there was much discussion about female eroticism, desire and the possibility of female fetishism. According to Freud, fetishism was a male perversion, but as Naomi Schor explained, feminists attempted 'the appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts to ends for which they were not originally intended' (Schor 1986: 363). To some it seemed that perverse tendencies were observable, not only in women with a 'masculinity complex', as Freud termed it, but also in those engaged in what seemed to be 'normal' social relations. Following Sarah Kofman, Schor argued that:

> what is pertinent to women in fetishism is the paradigm of undecidability that it offers. By appropriating the fetishist's oscillation between denial and recognition of castration, women can effectively counter any move to reduce their bisexuality to a single one of its poles. In Kofman's Derridean reading of Freud, female fetishism is not so much, if at all, a perversion, rather a *strategy* designed to turn the so-called 'riddle of femininity' to women's account.
>
> (Schor 1986: 368–9)

Adopting such a strategy, many feminist artists focused on three areas in which erotic desire and constructions of femininity are critical: fashion, pornography and the abject body. All of these areas of cultural production oscillate between celebration and morbidity, and all are highly ambiguous in relation to the body.

Fashion in clothing, with its obvious links to the body, identity, commodification and commercial exchange, was a particularly productive site for feminist deconstructions of 'femininity'. Surrealism, Dada and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provided forms through which many artists articulated this deconstruction. Developing Duchamp's concept of the ready-made, for example, Susan Fereday's series of self-titled, op-shop handbags are a 'scripto-visual', feminised pun on Lacan's notion of the *objet a*. The object of the gaze or scopic drive is the paradigm for the *objet a*, Lacan's formula, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, 'for the lost object which underpins symbolisation, cause of and "stand in" for desire' (Rose 1986: 72). Elizabeth Grosz explained, 'The scopic drive takes the *objet a* as its object. This means that the object is simultaneously part of the subject (e.g. the eyes) and something detachable from the subject, a part of itself not identical with itself' (Grosz 1990: 80). In Lacan's own words:

> The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but insofar as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly separable, and secondly, that has some relation to the lack.
>
> (Lacan 1977b: 103)

As Rose explained, this term was central in Lacan's later work on femininity, in which he stated that the 'whole of (the man's) realisation in the sexual relation comes down to fantasy' (Rose 1986: 72). As the place onto which lack is projected, and through which it is simultaneously disavowed, woman is a 'symptom' for the man, and as such does not exist.

In Susan Fereday's *Object a* installation, the handbag or purse, which the woman sports as part of her identity, and which signifies her femininity, is a satire on this notion of woman as phallic lack, which plays on ambiguity (Plate 53). As Jeffrey Fereday stated, in his catalogue essay:

> The handbag is a fetish object to women, and is also a fetish object of the category 'woman'. Its position as external, as accessory, itself carries implications of design which assert the unconscious contingency which is the place of the female to the opposition (having or not having the phallus) in the ordering of sexuality, here revealed as fetish upon the cost of that order. Thus the purse, which is physically beyond herself, is held as that which remains, the deposition, the proof of castration, that which has been castrated. Or so the story goes.
>
> (Fereday 1993: 3)

Fereday's wonderfully vulvic, disused purses have been removed from the body and (almost) stripped of their former value, as fashion items and as frequently

Plate 53 Susan Fereday, *Untitled*, 1993, from the *Object a* installation, handbags, enamel paint on customboard, each panel 380 cm × 300 cm × 80 cm (collection of the artist).

fondled containers of money and cosmetics. Sanitised, sealed and renovated by a coat of turquoise plastic paint, they are presented as a series of smart new commodities, or precise signs in the company of equally precise words that are related according to some association game. Each word is a noun connoting themes relating to the body, femininity, psychoanalysis and money: 'anatomy', 'theft', 'love', 'hysteric', 'pleasure'. Part of the joke is that, since ambiguity prevails, it is the very *precision* of these categories that is illusory. Having turned that ambiguity around through her witty interventions, however, Fereday points it towards a positive conceptualisation of the female body.

Zoe Leonard's fashion photograph, *Frontal View Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show*, 1990 (Plate 54), and Linda Dement's computer generated, vaginal image, *Fur Gash*, 1995 (Plate 55) transgress the limits between art and obscenity. Furthermore, they upset the presumption that the object of pornography or voyeurism is always a construct of male desire. Leonard's photograph, taken at a New York fashion show, is unlike the morbid mannequins of Hans Bellmer, in that it involves looking up the dress of a 'real life' woman at the centre of a 'kind of a mating ritual' (Katz 1995: 135). Leonard said of the fashion show:

> It's built around sex. It's a mating dance, it's a ritual of adornment for sex, to make yourself sexually attractive. And that's the one place you're not supposed to be looking. You're supposed to be looking at the adornment: and what you end up looking at is this woman's crotch, which you can't even see properly because she's wearing panties and pantyhose over it, and there's all these overlapping shapes of fabric.
> (Katz 1995: 135)

Leonard's precise observation corresponds to and simultaneously denies a Lacanian reading of the show as a symbolic illustration or enactment of the male gaze. By avoiding metaphor and insisting on the specificity of the site, Leonard prevented a multi-dimensional, public ritual from shrinking into a two-dimensional, private fantasy. The model is anonymous, thin, infantilised, robotic. Perhaps no healthier than Bellmer's abused dolls, she is the focal point of ambiguity in a radiant spectacle of spilling, dissolving light. Ambiguity and eroticism are still present, but they are part of the social world, in which art can be seen functioning as a point of commercial negotiation and sexual mediation between bodies, not simply as a reflection of the desiring artist/self, a cultural symptom, or a detached simulacrum.

Similarly, it might be argued that Dement's *Fur Gash* partly untangles and redirects the metaphors implied in Meret Oppenheim's fur cup, saucer and spoon, entitled *Objet (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*, 1936. The absurdity of a cup and saucer made of fur invites a Freudian reading of it as the unexpected return from the unconscious of a repressed symbol for the female genitalia invested in a commonplace object. Dement's *Fur Gash* liberates female desire and erotic imagination from the containing forms of this male-based, fetishising wit, to

Plate 54 Zoe Leonard, *Frontal View Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show*, 1990, gelatin silver print, 41 ½″ × 27 ¼″ image, 49 ⅞″ × 31 ⅛″ sheet (Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York).

Plate 55 Linda Dement, *Fur Gash*, 1995, digital image.

invoke an S/M 'grrrl-style' ambiguity. The background of a simulated, satiny collage of red fabric enhances the labia-like folds of fur, which, in a different light, could be the furry legs of a deadly funnel-web spider, or the tendrils of an octopus closing in on its prey. As such, it reinvokes nature and the dead animal that was sacrificed for its fur, only to reconstitute that world of nature, with its erotic associations, in cyberspace.

Disgust has long been recognised as attendant on the conceptualisation of the female body in surrealist art. It is implied in myth by the atropaic head of Medusa, in Freudian psychoanalysis by the uncanny that is associated with the mother's genitals, and most recently in the abject, the confusion of inside and outside, which Julia Kristeva links to the abhorrence of bodily fluids and waste. Kristeva's poetic, psychoanalytic descriptions of the abject drew on Lacan and on Bataille's theory of sacrifice and transgression. They have suggested a framework for feminist artists to explore ambiguous bodily pleasures and dangers, particularly in relation to maternal loss, and women's experiences of 'disorders', such as bulimia.

Surrealism provided a starting point for Pat Brassington's dalliance with the abject. *Memory: Au Rebours*, 1989, for example, draws on surrealist motifs (Plate 56). In Brassington's hands, however, the association of images is neither automatic, accidental or democratic. One sequence of three photographs of 'found objects' includes an old photograph of the stuffed buttocks of a mannequin with enigmatic ties attached, a bird's-eye view of a millipede shining

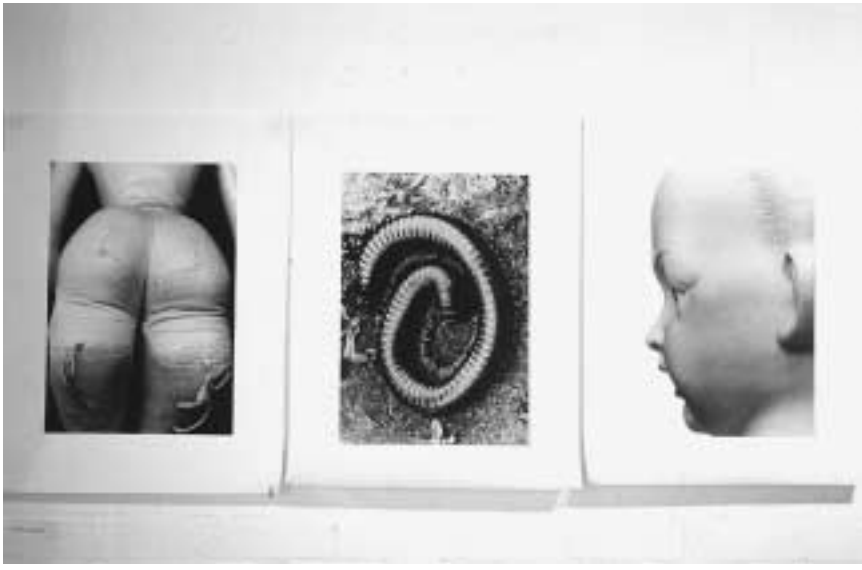

Plate 56 Pat Brassington, *Memory: Au Rebours*, 1989, three silver gelatin prints, 100 cm × 200 cm (collection of the National Gallery of Australia).

on the ground, and a partial profile of a (male?) baby-doll's head. The relationship between these three motifs becomes the focus of fastidious, morbid analysis, which, according to Juliana Engberg, differs from the 'erotic frottage of image on image which created the titillating sensations for the early Surrealists' (Engberg 1994: 12). The close proximity of the hard and tickling insect to human orifices in *Memory* is unnerving. Imagine swallowing it by mistake, or finding it in your pants. On the other hand, the orifices are only imaginary, the soft buttocks and hard, plastic head are artificial stand-ins for human parts, and the blank framing of the images separates them. Even if you accept the integrity of the image-screen, the artist's intervention can be seen in the detailed selection of motifs, and in techniques such as cropping, serialisation, repetition and the grid-like format. By insisting on artificiality while forcing imaginary connections, Brassington's elicitation of disgust draws attention, not only to the constructedness of meaning, but also to its opposite, the compulsive formlessness that underpins erotic desire.

Brassington's installation, *In My Father's House*, 1992, at the Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne (Plates 57a, b), employed similar strategies to those of *Memory: Au Rebours*, but on a larger scale. Recalling André Kertész's *Distortion* series, 1933, three life-sized doors fixed to the white walls of the gallery opened onto separate black and white, collaged images of bodies that appear as looming, distorted phantasms. As a series of false doorways, it played on and mocked the expectations of space and order that one experiences on entering a room. The first doorway showed part of the back view of a fleshy female nude, as though you were looking over her shoulder to glimpse a murky interior, which at first seemed like an ugly carpet, but on closer inspection was not an illusion but a flat, strangely patterned surface. The second showed part of an apparently airborne girl, in an Edwardian outfit, being propelled swiftly and strangely towards the door, and the third was blocked by a close-up view of a naked, lean, back of uncertain gender, with spine and musculature visible beneath the skin. An image of the tongue of an hysteric, which Brassington had cut from a photograph published in an old medical journal, then coloured vivid red and reproduced in scale, was pasted onto the image of the back, echoing its erect and fan-shaped form. By highlighting the flatness of the wall, the pasted tongue exposed the artist's trickery. At the same time, however, it suggested that such artifice barely contained the incestual dread that was implicated in the construction of this unhomely house.

Catriona Moore observed that, in the 1980s, Brassington 'took up Kristeva's concept of abjection to visualise rites of passage in the constitution of the ego' (Moore 1994: 141). The appeal of Kristeva's theory for feminists is that it posits the pre-Oedipal, 'semiotic' modality of the sexual drives, which inhabits a corporeal, feminine/maternal space (the *chora*), as having the potential to subvert all signification. The abject harks back to that space of the undivided mother/child, and since it can never be fully obliterated, forever threatens the unity of the social subject. It is 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What

Plate 57 a, b Pat Brassington, *In My Father's House*, 1992, installation at the Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne, 3 wooden doors, photographic prints, photocopies, fluorescent light fittings, 220 cm × 500 cm (collection of the artist).

does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982: 4). The abject is conceived along the lines of Lacan's 'objet a', but departs from it in that the object of the drives is never fully absorbed into the subject. As the jettisoned object, or what is radically excluded, it draws the subject 'to the place where meaning collapses' (1982: 2). Elizabeth Grosz explained this process

> The *objet a* is a part of the subject which the subject considers detachable. It confronts the subject as alien and external. The erotogenic rim seeks a satisfaction in which the object ideally stops up the lack. Lacan stresses that the *petit a* is not a thing or object but a movement, an activity, the taking in or introjection of the object, its absorption into the subject. This produces satisfaction and leads eventually to the object's expulsion. Abjection occurs when the object does not fill the rim; a gap emerges, a hole, into which the subject, through lack of an anchor into the object, is propelled.
>
> (Grosz 1989: 72–3)

Hence, as Kristeva explained, abjection maintains 'that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out' (Kristeva 1982: 10). Brassington's work, perhaps, is predicated on the dreadful work of this ethereal, weightless disposition.

In Brassington's later prints, abjection informs a more luminous, independent imagination than that of her earlier photocompositions. *Akimbo*, 1996, for example, is an inkjet print, depicting a woman, from the shoulders down, displaying a beautiful, satin dress to the camera, in a gesture that belongs to the 1950s (Plate 58). The sensuous play of tones and highlights across the crumpled surface of the dress is thrown into relief against the darker grey of the arms. In the centre of the image, around the pubic region, which is also the focus of the gesture of display, a small split in the seam of the dress exposes a glimpse of something orange-red, the only colour in the whole picture. This minute, appalling detail enhances the controlled beauty and familiarity of the rest of the image, but also renders it rude and sickening. The garish, brightly-coloured gnome in *Drink Me*, and the purplish, orchid-like flower in *Lisp* are similarly grotesque in relation to the dreamy black and white images of women that they inhabit (Plates 59, 60). These details, it could be said, function as symptoms of bodily dis-ease. Kristeva described the 'symptom' as 'A language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire' (Kristeva 1982: 11). The ambiguity of Brassington's three images, with their mixture of beauty and disgust, might be explained by the qualification that the abject has an aura of the sublime. Kristeva said that 'In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is

Plate 58 Pat Brassington, *Akimbo*, 1996, inkjet print, 140 cm × 130 cm, edition of 5. (Collections of Art Bank, Fremantle Art Centre, Geelong Art Gallery, Northern Territory University).

Plate 59 Pat Brassington, *Drink Me*, 1996, inkjet print, 140 cm × 130 cm, edition of 5 (collection of the artist).

Plate 60 Pat Brassington, *Lisp*, 1996, inkjet print, 140 cm × 130 cm, edition of 5 (collection of Art Bank).

edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being' (1982: 11). Although Brassington did not consciously intend it, her recent work evokes the exquisite tension between these two moments.

Although Kristeva's project entailed the subversion of norms of sexual identity, it was, as Grosz pointed out, never intended to support 'feminist goals of claiming a recognised social position and value for women as women' (Grosz 1989: 99). Disruption of the symbolic order via abjection may constitute the sort of 'revolutionary force' of which Kristeva approved, but it is not 'productive of a new social order', and in her view 'is to be superceded in more far-reaching struggles against the very notion of identity' (1989: 98). Abjection has also been linked with the production of homophobia and racism that occurs in the construction of identity. Hence feminism does not have a particular claim on the abject, even though women have used it in their art in particular ways. As Hal Foster noted:

> In the abject testing of the symbolic order a general division of labor has developed according to gender: the artists who probe the maternal body repressed by the paternal law tend to be women (e.g., Kiki Smith, Maureen Connor, Rona Pondick, Mona Hayt), while the artists who assume an infantilist position to mock the paternal law tend to be men (e.g., Mike Kelly, John Miller, Paul McCarthy, Nayland Blake).
> (Foster 1997: 159)

This gender division is exacerbated by the fact that abject art by women has often been criticised on grounds similar to those used against explicit vaginal imagery in the 1970s. Rosemary Betterton noted, for example, that Cindy Sherman's 'scenario of an abjected self', was produced 'at the cost of invoking a powerful tradition of disgust for the female body already implicit – and sometimes explicit – within popular culture' (Betterton 1996: 136). However, if it were shown that the ambiguous, if not logically impossible, process of naming, performing, discovering and inventing abjection in art was underpinned by feminism, it might also be shown that it was possible only by dint of a positive conception of the female body.

I have outlined such an historical process in which all of the above artists have participated, either willingly or sceptically. It is a process in which political assertions of identity are matched by their simultaneous deconstruction, but which are, inasmuch as they constitute a process that negotiates with ethical concerns, orientated towards positivity. In saying this I am not valorising disgust, as *The New Yorker*'s Joseph Epstein does in conclusion to his review of a book on the subject. Epstein mused comfortingly: 'That one can still find reserves of disgust for hypocrisy, cowardice, and cruelty is no minor matter. Without our capacity for disgust, in other words, we might feel more free but, in the end, be less human' (Epstein 1997: 82). Epstein's comment points up the importance of

developing a feminised conceptualisation of disgust. Otherwise, those who consider themselves to be human might feel free to do so only by maintaining constructions of woman as negatively and horrifically monstrous. Furthermore, the question of whether or not any of us in this technological age is in a position to feel wholly human poses a more fundamental challenge to feminism. Having discredited Humanism, can feminism afford to abandon 'the human', and if so, what then becomes of the female body? These are the questions that concerned many artists in the 1990s, some of whose work is the focus of the next chapter.

8

HYBRID AMBIGUITIES

The globalisation of culture and the proliferation of advanced technologies have further complicated questions of identity and corporeality by producing hybrid ambiguities, in which connections to feminism have become increasingly tangential. As the work analysed in this chapter will demonstrate, there was a discernible move on the part of artists in the 1990s to reposition their art in relation to hybridisation and to new identity categories such as 'cyborg' and 'post-human'. This repositioning in art is not a return to modernist ambiguity, which presupposed a unity of mind as the basis of reality. Nor is it a deconstruction that foregrounds ambiguity while yielding passively to disunity or a negative hyperreality. Instead, it recognises in the production of hybridisation, a corporeal, social reality, and it asserts that ambiguity in art, whether psychic, affective, metabolic, machinic or virtual, participates in that reality. In the process, this repositioning of art practices and theory renders increasingly remote the possibility of a conceptual ideal for the representation of the female body. On the other hand, as I shall argue, it forces consideration of ethical grounds on which such an ideal might be abandoned or renewed, and of the status of 'feminism' and 'art' in relation to such concerns.

The post-human body

There is a growing interdependence between the human body and new technologies, which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two. Post-human is a word that has been used to signify the hybrid results of this process. Put simply, the post-human body is not 'purely' human. It is enmeshed in and inextricable from technologies of science and information. These technologies have the capacity to invade the human body that was, and to transform it beyond its former capacities and its recognisably human form. In the field of medicine, plastic surgery alters the body's natural surface in order to restructure identity; surgical implants replace faulty organs to extend life; drugs expand consciousness; and genetic engineering displaces Darwinian natural selection of the species. In telecommunications, the human body interacts with increasingly intelligent, increasingly autonomous images, while robots perform menial tasks

that once occupied and bored the body for hours every day. The human body that 'was' is now obsolete. The body that 'is' feels very insecure and it can only partly imagine the body that will be.

Like all 'post' categories, post-human encompasses ambiguities. It denotes fragmentation and partiality, but imagines itself to be whole and new. It announces the end of an era and at the same time acknowledges the continuation, or residual presence of that era. It is a term that is used ambiguously by those who proclaim it as evidence for the triumph of culture over nature, while acknowledging that nature itself is a cultural construct. In conservatives it instils a fear of the future, and nostalgia for the past. In progressives it signals disgust at the body's weakness, and inspires a celebration of artificiality. This variation in responses leads to questioning whether these very responses are human or post-human responses, or whether some alternate explanation for the concerns raised by post-human discourse is possible or desirable. For feminism, it was crucial to address these questions in relation to the representation of the female body.

Artistic experiments into the post-human were pioneered in the 1980s by the Australian performance artist, Stelarc, who extended and enhanced the body's performance capabilities, using medical, robotic and VR systems. These systems probed his body, both visually and acoustically, amplifying brainwaves, heartbeats, muscle signals and the flow of blood. Cameras filmed the inside of his lungs, stomach and colon, and he interfaced his body with prosthetic and computer technologies. To accompany his performances, Stelarc wrote artist statements, or manifestos. Their tone was apocalyptic and in his text Stelarc capitalised sentences such as 'Information is the prosthesis that props up the obsolete body ... The cortex that cannot cope resorts to specialisation ... The body must burst from its biological, cultural and planetary containment' (Stelarc 1995: 91).

In accordance with this advice, Stelarc proposed a post-human political credo according to which 'The fundamental freedom is for individuals to determine their own DNA destiny ... Evolution by the individual for the individual' (ibid.). He described the body, with its inadequate immune system, lack of modular design and obsolete reproductive system, as inhabiting an alien biotech terrain, which pulses with artificial signals and visual images. 'Morphing images', he said, 'makes the body obsolete' (ibid.). In his advice to redesign the body, Stelarc posited its physiology as an interface with the world. He claimed that the body was no longer a container around which skin was a barrier, nor a site for the psyche or the social. It was not a subject. It was an object. As such, it was not an object for desiring, but an object for designing. He explained this evolutionary process:

> The psycho-social period was characterised by the body circling itself, orbiting itself, illuminating and inspecting itself by physical prodding and metaphysical contemplation. But having confronted its image of

> obsolescence, the body is traumatised to split from the realm of subjectivity and consider the necessity of re-examining and possibly redesigning its very structure.
>
> (Stelarc 1995: 92)

While thus acknowledging the trauma of the body's split from subjectivity, Stelarc focused on interface rather than identity, and on connectivity rather than mobility. He emphasised the necessity of technology as the means to a more powerful awareness in a post-evolutionary future. This future should not entail closure, he insisted, but should manifest a proliferation of possibilities.

The Third Hand, 1981, was a performance in which he attached an artificial hand to his right arm as an addition rather than as a prosthetic replacement (Plate 61). It was capable of independent motion, since it was activated by the EMG signals of the abdominal and leg muscles, and it had a pinch-release grasp-release, 290-degree wrist rotation and a tactile feedback system for a rudimentary sense of touch. At one stage in the performance, when Stelarc wrote with three hands simultaneously, his body activated its extra manipulator, while his real left arm was remote-controlled into action by two muscle stimulators. Although this was apparently quite a painful experience for the artist, it demonstrated the possibility of a virtual arm that might be able to perform specific tasks.

In a 1993 performance, in Quebec City, entitled *Actuate/Rotate, for Virtual Body Obscure*, Stelarc showed that images, too, could become operational agents. This leads to the prospect of a virtual or phantom body able to perform with other phantoms in cyberspace. While the physical body has organs, the virtual body is hollow, and as such is 'a better host for technological components' (1995: 94). Stelarc's *Stomach Sculpture: Hollow Body/Host Space*, at the *5th Australian Sculpture Triennial*, in 1993, gave a witty twist to this theme (Plate 62). During this performance Stelarc inflated his stomach with the use of an endoscope and inserted a sculpture, made from special implant materials, into the hollow space that was produced. He explained that, 'as a body, one no longer looks at art, does not perform art, but contains art. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture' (ibid.). *Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand*, performed in Tokyo in 1986, amplified the sounds of bodily processes, and operated as an interactive lighting system in which light reacted to the electrical discharges of the body, rather than illuminating the body from without (Plate 63). For Stelarc, what it meant to be (post)human was to be immersed no longer in genetic memory, but to be reconfigured in the 'realm of the image' and in the 'electromagnetic field of the circuit' (1995: 96). While he began his analysis of the body by addressing its social constraints, by the 1990s Stelarc no longer felt compelled to play them out.

Anne Marsh suggested that Stelarc was 'committed to a modernist programme of technological advancement' (Marsh 1993: 112). She argued that, in his performances of the late 1970s, the considerable pain he endured 'while

Plate 61 Stelarc, *The Third Hand*, 1981, performance in Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya. Photograph by S. Hunter.

Plate 62 Stelarc, *Stomach Sculpture: Hollow Body/Host Space*, 1993, performance at *5th Australian Sculpture Triennial*. Photograph by T. Figallo.

Plate 63 Stelarc, *Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand*, 1986, performance at the Maki Gallery, Tokyo. Photograph by T. Shinoda.

pursuing sci-fi dreams on behalf of "man"', was a way of proving that '"I" exist and have control over the fragmented body' (1993: 108). Stelarc's later performances, according to Marsh, appeared to enact the 'Frankensteinian fear of the monster-machine', terrifying his audience and eclipsing consideration of the 'moral and biological position of the subject' (1993: 112). The feminist implications of Marsh's criticism are clear: male desire and a patriarchal vision motivated Stelarc's performances. Whether or not her criticism was fairly levelled at Stelarc, other feminists, such as Nicole Ward Jouve, quoted below, shared the view that cyborgs have patrilineage.

Stelarc dismissed Marsh's claim that his art demonstrated subjective concerns, and stressed that in his performances he constructed, played with and speculated on the body's contestable futures. In his written texts, moreover, he envisaged a post-subjective, non-gendered body that does not necessarily negate other gendered bodies. Responding to this aspect of his work, the feminist performance artist, Orlan, declared a similarity in her own work to Stelarc's forays into the post-human, and to his assertion that the 'body is obsolete' (Orlan 1996: 91). As her contribution to this discourse, Orlan organised several multi-media presentations of operations in plastic surgery performed on her own body, which were broadcast in cyberspace. In order to assess how feminism impinged on these 'operations', it is necessary to situate them in the context of Orlan's career since the 1960s, since all of her performances contributed to what she described as her ongoing project of self-transformation and beatification. As such they articulated an aesthetic programme that spanned a period from the 1970s up until today, and over which she exercised remarkable control by revising its past and promoting its future, rather like a marketing director.

Orlan described her self-transformations as 'woman-woman transsexualism' (1996: 88). Her gender ambiguity in performance was apparently inspired by Duchamp's *Rrose Selavy*, and by the self-portraits and masquerades of the surrealist photographer, Claude Cahun. Hybridity was a prominent theme in Orlan's work, and she quoted Michel Serres: 'The current tattooed monster, ambidextrous, hermaphroditic and mulatto, what can it make us see, now, under its skin? Yes, blood and flesh' (1996: 92). Although she was ambiguous about her gender and sexuality, she allowed no uncertainty on the question of feminist artistic agency. While her operations raised concerns about the implications for gender of the post-human body, her subject was still the female body in representation, and her art was staged as a response to hegemonic, social, cultural and representational structures, including certain feminisms, that regulated that body. Her strategy was always to subvert those structures through blasphemy, paradox and the exploitation of ambiguity in the traditions of Surrealism and Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty'. In addition, she facilitated multiple poststructuralist readings that paralleled and literally augmented her 'operations' (*interventions*, in French), for she read out loud from texts while she underwent surgery.

On one level, Orlan's oeuvre can be read as a deconstruction of the Classical ideal of female beauty. She has had seven operations, each of which was designed to change or rebuild a specific feature of her face, or body. In 1990 her *Successful Operations* painting showed how she would finally change her skin to become spiritualised. Her face would fuse the chin of Botticelli's *Venus* and the nose of Gerôme's *Psyche*, a Fontainebleau *Diana*'s eyes, the lips of Gustave Moreau's *Europa* and the brow of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. All of the models were chosen, not for their beauty, Orlan insisted, but for their legendary exploits. The *La Giaconda*, which is allegedly a self-portrait of Leonardo, added a transsexual element to the mix. A composite, computer-generated image was to serve as a final model for the plastic surgeon, and, as such, bore comparison with Zeuxis's portrait of the legendary Helena, made of the most perfect parts of five selected virgins. Orlan's project was thus an inversion of and variation on the process of constructing a representation of the female body based on the Classical ideal. In the words of Barbara Rose, it was an 'effort to represent an ideal formulated by male desire' (Rose 1993: 84). For Zeuxis to achieve his aim, he had had to regulate the female body through representation according to a conceptual ideal. Orlan fragmented and recombined historical *representations* of the male ideal, and adjusted her own body accordingly, in order to transform herself spiritually. By plundering a history of representations (which had become disconnected from their failed ideal) to produce a patchwork of simulations, she did not propose an alternative to the Classical ideal so much as a travesty of its manifestations in representation.

Orlan's project could be read also as reconstruction. In 1993, she staged her seventh Operation/Performance, entitled *Omniprésence*, with a feminist surgeon called Marjorie Cramer in New York. In the operation she had silicon horns, like the ray-giving sacred horns of Moses, implanted in her forehead. The event was videoed for CBS News, relayed to the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York, and beamed to galleries in Canada and to the Pompidou in Paris where it was watched by a roundtable of uncomfortable intellectuals. Photographs from the operation comprised a subsequent exhibition, entitled *This is my body . . . This is my software (Ceci est mon corps . . . Ceci est mon logiciel)*, which was shown in England in 1995, with an accompanying catalogue of essays and much publicity. There was also an exhibition at the Sandra Gering Gallery of 41 diptychs showing the recovery process of Orlan's face, recorded in photographs over the 41 days after the operation. These images were matched with images of her face morphed onto those of her art historical models, thus emphasising the processes of reinvention (Plate 64). Through self-healing and renewal she underscored the power of her own creative agency.

Orlan insisted on the social and political function of her art. She stressed that it was her aim to exorcise society's programme to deprive women of aggressive instincts of any kind, and that she did this in the spirit of Artaud (1896–1948). As actor, director and poet, Artaud aimed to shock his audience to the point where they were physically affected and forced, through

Plate 64 Orlan, part of a series of 41 diptychs shown at the Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, after Orlan's 7th surgical-operation-performance called *Omniprésence*, 1993, metal and coloured photographs, each 30 cm × 150 cm. Photograph of the installation at Beaubourg by Georges Meguerditchian.

realising the ferocity and ruthlessness of human life, to release their inhibitions. Orlan used a similar technique, but for a feminist purpose, when she forced her audience to experience the pain of viewing the horrific spectacles of surgery. The anxiety she produced in her audience has been the subject of feminist analysis and debate.

Having watched the video of Orlan's operation, Parveen Adams offered a Lacanian reading of the horror provoked by the gap that is opened up between the outside appearance of the body, particularly the face, and the inside that is flesh. She explained that 'anamorphis' is the term used to describe the emergence into focus of a distorted image, which demonstrates that there are two moments of viewing, not one, as it may seem in everyday life. Importantly, 'This is not simply a moment of deprivation; it is the moment which reveals the structure of the illusion of the image and the subject's wishes to respect it' (Adams 1996: 55). In foregrounding this moment, Orlan's operations were not psychotic, concluded Adams, but were 'artistic labour' (1996: 68).

Taking a different stance, Rose asked whether masochism might be a 'legitimate component of esthetic intention' (Rose 1993: 125). She observed that, during Orlan's operations the artist risked 'To at least some degree . . . deformation, paralysis, even death' (1993: 86). It is in respect of this personal risk to her own life that Orlan distanced her Carnal Art, as she called it, from the relatively more palatable body art of other feminist body artists, such as Karen Finley. For Herbert Marcuse, the German-American political philosopher (1898–1979), 'co-optation meant the death of art as a source of opposition to society', said Rose, and it was in this spirit, as opposed to the desire for self mutilation, that Orlan sacrificed herself to art (ibid.). Others have noted a parallel between the art of Orlan and that of Joseph Beuys, who adopted the role of shaman in that his wounds represented the sickness of society as a whole. Orlan was a shaman, Rose explained, in that she 'acts out the madness of a demand for an unachievable physical perfection' (ibid.). As Rose pointed out, Orlan

> uses her body as a medium of transformation. The 'sculpting' or carving up of her body sets up an intentional parallel between religious martyrdom and contemporary suffering for beauty through plastic surgery that writers like Belgian feminist France Borel have identified as the rite of passage of our epoch.
>
> (Rose 1993: 84)

Orlan denied that she conceived of pain as redemptive or as a source of purification, and argued in favour of medical advancements in providing pain relief through drugs. In that she expected her audience to experience pain, however, she also might have expected them to reject the inference that plastic surgery, or even 'aesthetic surgery' as she called it, was a positive option for women. To turn oneself into 'art' according to a blueprint such as that devised by Orlan is, after all, a choice that is undesirable if not unavailable to most women, including artists. To turn oneself into a beauty that is defined by commercial norms, on the other hand, is an option that cosmetic surgery and medical marketing has made increasingly available and desirable to women, although mainly to those who are rich. Orlan expressly opposed the pursuit of normative beauty through cosmetic plastic surgery and, as Rose pointed out, her performances made clear the risks that are involved. The most urgent question her performances raised for feminism, therefore, was why are so many women willing to take those risks, not for art, and perhaps not even in order to attract men, but certainly in order to conform to a commercial norm? Orlan did not answer this question, but, through analogy, demonstrated the appalling, almost incredible commitment with which increasing numbers of women dedicate their bodies to the attainment of normative, commercially constructed body ideals.

As a body modified by new technologies, Orlan was the subject and object, body and text, self and other, of a hybrid identity in formation, which will

not even end at her death. She made plans for her corpse to go to an art gallery and for the process of 'self-transformation' to continue in the hands of an advertising agency. Even though she dedicated her body to the transgression of all boundaries imposed upon bodies, including that between life and death, however, Orlan never discounted the possibility of a conceptual ideal for the female body based on erotic appeal and a principle of inclusiveness. Her conviction that 'art', as a communal project, is a goal worth pursuing was ultimately life affirming and her insistence that she did not experience pain emphasised her pleasure in and her willing pursuit of this goal. The irony is not that her audience experienced pain while she did not, but that even on her death, commercial interests will fund her project. It is this prospect that renders our pain and her life cheap. Since irony and death are rooted in the human, it could be argued, there might be no place for either in a post-human world. Similarly, there might be no place for pain and horror, spirituality or eroticism in the sense that these terms were used to describe her project of 'aesthetic surgery'. Orlan valued these terms and the conditions to which they refer according to her feminist, socialist, anti-establishment principles. She thereby placed herself securely in the 'human' camp, in spite of having demonstrated convincingly that the human body is obsolete. It is in this sense that her art is distinguished from Stelarc's.

Cyberfeminism

While Orlan's theories prompted and were produced in and by her performances, Donna Haraway was a theorist and writer who proposed a cyberfeminist manifesto for artists. She had spent two decades critiquing the gendered construction of Western science, but by the 1990s was looking for a positive direction for feminism. Caroline Merchant and others had demonstrated that the devastating effects of human 'progress' have contaminated even the remotest parts of the so-called natural world. While still mourning the death of Nature, we are implicated inextricably in the processes of advanced technology. Macro-technologies extend far beyond damaged forests into the alluring reaches of outer space, while micro-technologies penetrate deep inside the skins of faulty bodies, shaping, participating in and extending the lives of individuals. Nobody escapes dependence on technology. Each one of us, in one way or another, is an artificially constructed, hybrid, post-human body, inhabiting a post-natural world. On the other hand, subjective agency and therefore human survival has always involved tools and art. Haraway insisted on 'Cyborgs for earthly survival!' and undercut earlier feminisms when she said 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' (Haraway 1991: 4, 181). She saw high-tech as the bright side of this otherwise gloomy narrative, and posited 'an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction' (1991: 150). Haraway and other feminists, such as Rosi Braidotti, hailed this ambivalent role of positive ethical agency on the one hand and uncertain subjectivity on

the other as potentially liberating for feminism. As such, cyberfeminism offers a perverse but utopian vision that foregrounds the imagination, while making an explicit appeal to artists. Haraway saw the union between nature and culture as the basis for a shift in the way we understand ourselves in relation to history and the rest of the world. She said

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology: it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.
>
> (Haraway 1991: 150)

It is this possibility of historical transformation offered by the cyborg that is of interest to feminist artists seeking a positive, political direction for their work, a direction, that is, which might enable more ethical social relations than present circumstances allow.

Following Haraway, Rosi Braidotti added that 'cyberfeminism needs to cultivate a culture of joy and affirmation', and she outlined a case for cyberfeminism in visual art (Braidotti 1996: 24). She explained that, in the 1980s, feminist artists had taken a leading role in exploiting the political potential of cyber art. The high-tech 'continuum' of Laurie Anderson's language games, the monumental accusations of Barbara Kruger's urban billboards and the blunt epigrams of Jenny Holzer's electronic information panels were all enacted in an intertextual cyberspace. In the process, distinctions between public and private space were collapsed, and the personal and the political were confused. Attention was thus deflected from the individual subject as an objectified body to the semantic field in which subjectivity is constituted. Although poststructuralist theory at the time was obsessed with embodiment, claimed Braidotti, in art the female body was seen only if it was appropriated, written on, shown elliptically or presented in fragments. As such it became the oppressed other, injured, symbolically, by invasive systems of surveillance and control. In performance art, female bodies enacted critiques of gender and identity, embarked on transgressive excursions into the obscene, or contrived violent border crossings, and painful transformations. The cyber-body, however, argued Braidotti, is oriented towards a new and positive direction. Science fiction, in particular, has been plumbed for its potential to produce affirmative, desiring, quasi-autonomous bodies, which transcend gender and racial differences. Braidotti extolled the virtues of the new 'figurations', 'fabulations' and 'embodied becomings' promised by cyberfeminism, cautioning against the recreation of 'law and order under the cover of a triumphant feminine' (1996: 25).

Haraway and Braidotti argued that the alliance between art and technology has the potential to produce bodies that avoid the imprint of patriarchal gender

distinctions and ideals. They suggested further that cyber art can and should escape dualistic ways of thinking that are inscribed within some feminisms, including binaries that suppress or exclude differences in race or class in representations of the female body. Cyberfeminism promises to transcend these limitations, by first accepting and then exploiting the fact that we are all cyborgs; that is that we are all in some way or another part organism and part machine, akin to both animals and technology. If we are, the theory goes, then this means that, strictly speaking, we are no longer human, and this further complicates the issue of gender. If we are no longer human then it is not only wrong to describe the categories of male and female as natural, it is possible that gender, as a grammatical framework for classifying human subjects in terms of sexuality, becomes irrelevant. The deconstructivist logic of queer theory, which collapses the gender/sexuality binary, was thus applied by cyberfeminists at the level of metabolism.

Many feminists, however, are wary of the cyberfeminist project. Lamenting the 1990s feminist attacks on 'Woman', Ward Jouve suggested, for instance, that the way Haraway's cyborg was 'freed from all (sullying?) traces of the maternal' was part of an unconscious downgrading by Western societies of 'being a woman, and what is variously called femininity' (Ward Jouve 1998: 18). The cyborg, claimed Ward Jouve, 'is descended from those new romantic heroes, the illegitimate sons or sons rebelling against wicked fathers, who boasted like Rousseau, "if I am not better (than other men), then at least I am other"' (1998: 18, 19). While Haraway herself avoided essentialist terms in her advocacy of a feminist cyber culture, her followers often assumed her war-like tone and adopted 'grrrl power' slogans to invade the Internet in the spirit that Ward Jouve described. The possibility that feminists, or 'as if' women, might lose that battle is underscored by recent developments in mainstream cyber culture, such as the advent in the UK of a 'virtual supermodel', named Webby Tookay, invented to satisfy the sexual demands of men. In her column in *The Guardian* (1999), Charlotte Raven reported that the designer of this 'cyber babe' confessed that 'Like most men, I wanted a woman who would be physical perfection without the mental and verbal grief' (Raven 1999: 5). Raven pondered on why British feminists had ignored this piece of news when it appeared in *The Herald Sun*, and she regretted that feminists were 'tired of going over the reasons why it's wrong' (ibid.).

Young women artists were quick to take up the challenge of new technologies, however, and made the best of the advantage they had over 'senior' men and women to test these feminist dilemmas in cyber space. Linda Dement's *Cyberflesh Girlmonster,* 1995 (Plate 65), for example, is an interactive CD ROM on the theme of the female body, which takes up Haraway's suggestion that cyberfeminists should not be afraid of their 'joint kinship with animals and machines' (Haraway 1991: 154). The CD consists of animated images of parts of women's bodies that are scanned into the computer, then grafted together to form monstrous creatures, set against a black background. The models for

Plate 65 Linda Dement, still from *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, 1995, CD ROM.

the body parts were invited from Dement's audience at the Adelaide Artists' Week of 1994. They were enthusiastic participants, who appreciated the irony of contributing to the medium's processes of fragmentation and fetishisation. These processes included techniques such as montage, replication and kaleidoscopic repetition, and were offset by spoken and written texts. Provocative phrases such as 'suck on my code, baby', underscored the fact that the works are 'about pure sexualisation of technology by women' (Matrix 1997: 2). As well as the separatist logic, Dement's work has a cathartic aspect, which she identified partly as the collective experience of the women who participated in the project, and, on a personal level, as her own expression of erotic feelings about violence, horror and death. This last aspect must be understood in the context of the rest of her work, which is often extremely visceral, and concerned with 'angst and depression' (ibid.). Although Dement described the whimsical aspect of the monsters in *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* as 'Monty Python like' she regarded her work as 'a very serious piece' (ibid.).

Zoe Sofoulis suggested that for cyberfeminists 'ambivalence may be more productive of creative and critical work' than 'the modern machine-woman and the postmodern cyborg', which have been hailed as figures that are 'potentially enabling to women seeking creative involvement with technologies' (Sofoulis 1995: 1). Exploiting ambivalence, she suggested, entailed 'critique of those media while creatively pushing their limits' (1995: 6). Sofoulis praised Dement, accordingly, as a figure of 'transgressive power' (1995: 2). In this sense, then, Dement's work is not as painlessly utopian and forward-looking

as the cyberfeminism that Braidotti envisaged. Although she used technology in a productively transgressive way to forge new, feminised and fantastic constructions of the body, and celebrated new expressions of sexuality and erotic ambiguity, she also preserved the expressive function of art to convey darker emotions and insecurities.

Addressing similar concerns, Patricia Piccinini approached technology from the perspective of a painter coming to terms with the negative social and psychological impact of technology on the body. She argued that 'It's not so much a question of claiming, as Donna Haraway does, that we are all cyborgs. It is more to the point to acknowledge that technology is getting increasingly natural' (Piccinini 1997: 49). In other words, Piccinini's perspective on the interdependence of humans and technology attributed the successes and risks of this relationship to the residual human aspect of the equation, rather than to an evolutionary, post-human destiny. She was therefore not concerned with enacting the emancipated role offered by technology to feminists so much as imagining the way technology-induced changes in nature might affect social relations. Feminism, of course, is implicated in those relations.

Piccinini used new media to satirise the way they served corporate power structures. One of her projects, for example, entailed the promotion of a product called LUMP (Lifeform with Unevolved Mutant Properties), a genetically superior, toy-like monster-baby made from what appear to be surgical off-cuts (Plates 66a, b, c). The name of her company was the TMGP (The Mutant Genome Project), a parody of the Human Genome Initiative. While the level

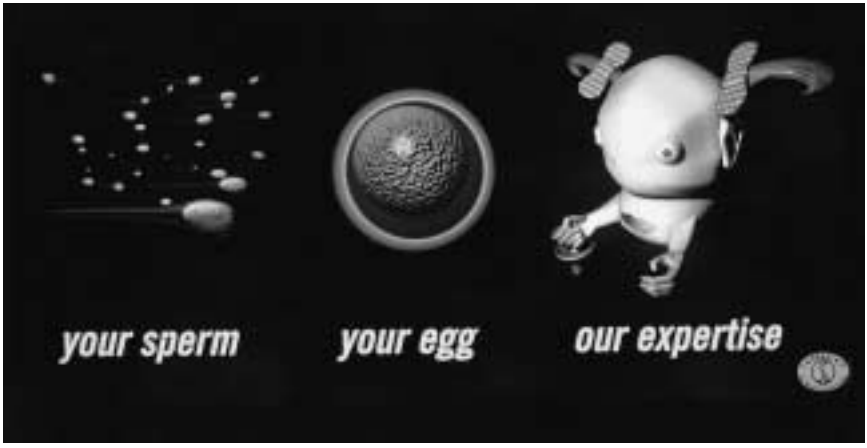

Plate 66 a, b, c Patricia Piccinini, *Love Me Love My Lump*, 1995, installation at The Basement Project, Melbourne: *Your Sperm, Your Egg, Our Expertise*, digiprint, 130 cm × 230 cm (collection of the artist). *First Satisfied Customer*, digiprint, 80 cm × 80 cm (collection of the National Gallery of Victoria). *Love Me, Love My Lump – R.S.L.*, 130 cm × 130 cm (collection of the artist).

of hype directed towards selling LUMP as cute and desirable was almost convincing, it could not eliminate the creature's abject aspect. In this way, Piccinini parodied the way corporate marketing attaches a novelty sales pitch even to embryonic forms of life. She thus implied that trivialising forces such as these might determine our post-human future.

In her installation entitled *Protein Lattice*, 1997, Piccinini reflected on the relationship between medical technology and marketing, specifically in connection with the female nude (Plates 67a, b, c, d, e). The series of nine photocompositions features glamorous, nude models, striking 'soft porn' poses for the camera, as though they were advertising some product, such as jewellery or a car, in a promotional display. Instead, one model allows a bald, pink rat with a human ear growing from its back to perch on her shoulder. Another model cups one of the hybrid creatures in her hands and admires it, while a third sits elegantly on a dark green carpet as dozens of these mutant clones scurry around her. The photocompositions were displayed in two groups of three – one against a bright blue rectangular ground, the other against a red one, and a third against a green one. Beneath them, several television screens showed a video of an animated, constructed environment. In one scene, an ear-rat waits by a feeding-dish in an antiseptic, scientific coop. Then the camera embarks on a journey through a maze, travelling down dramatically-lit corridors, flanked by artificial walls behind which a clone can sometimes be glimpsed, lurking menacingly, the size of a giant, or scuttling, tinier than a mouse, across a path of light. The image of the ear-rat was generated entirely by digital processes, having been modelled with the use of a 3D-computer program, in the manner used for the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*.

In spite of the comic drama of the installation, the image of an ear-rat in *Protein Lattice* is not a figment of Piccinini's imagination, but an image taken from a

Plate 66 b and c

photograph of a real animal that was produced in a scientific experiment. As she explained in her catalogue essay, the creature provided the first publicised demonstration of the new technology of 'tissue engineering'. The process, which in this case was used to supply a boy with a new ear, entailed cloning cells of his other ear cartilage over a three dimensional lattice of biodegradable synthetic protein. A rat, whose immune system had been suppressed, was used to supply the capillary system and blood for the organ. The new, hybrid creature that evolved from this process, however, posed a philosophical problem. Was it a rat or was it human? Piccinini left this question in suspension, but made the point that human loyalty rather than logical necessity constructs differences between species.

> The only thing that makes 'tissue engineering' seem any stranger than 'civil engineering' is a residual humanism of the sort that maintains materiality as a moment of absolute difference between things. With this romanticism set aside, there really is no difference between a person and a rat.
>
> (Piccinini 1997: 49)

In her mock product promotion, Piccinini emphasised this point, for, by presenting the mutant rat and the female nude as interdependent signifiers of eroticism and commodification, she confused sameness and difference.

Plate 67 a, b, c, d, e Patricia Piccinini, *Protein Lattice*, 1997, installation, digiprints and videos (collection of the artist).

A residual feminism can be traced in Piccinini's responses to the story of the rat, for she admitted without irony, but with a touch of bitterness, perhaps, to feeling some sympathy for it, in the same way that she is sympathetic to the models she used for her projects. She explained that both model and rodent are pieces of meat and that as such 'They are organic vessels destined to contain the desires of those who will use them. My sympathy does not run too deep; models get more benefits than laboratory rats and lab rats are often more difficult to like' (Piccinini 1997: 50). It is an academic point that one is forced to concede because of the way women and animals are (under)valued in the world today. In spite of Piccinini's rational tone, therefore, her observation lacks conviction. In her pictures, the close proximity of the hairless, mutant rat to the beautiful, posing nudes triggers moments of horror and disgust that are echoed, like a subconscious reverie, or dream, in the melodramatic maze-adventure playing on the television screens below.

Piccinini's project did not simply foreground abjection. It was structured along the lines of an implicit but rigorous critique of corporate culture. In her essay, she explained that, although everyone she spoke to about the rat with the human ear had heard of it, no one had seen a picture of it. She thought this was telling

Plate 67 b–e

because 'the fact is that if you want to sell a technology like tissue engineering you need to focus on something a little more "up" than mutant rodents' (ibid.). One does not need to refer to Piccinini's essay to see her point. In the processes of making art she located her critique in the gaps between the economic rationalism of medical marketing and the residual traces of humanist concerns, such as feminism and interspecies sympathy. It is in these gaps that the old ideals such as beauty and love, and more recent themes such as abjection and transgression, are uncomfortably transformed by the necessities of the present. Anger has been replaced by uneasy acceptance that such strong emotion has been dulled to the point of uncertainty.

Art and the real

In his catalogue essay, entitled *Post Human* (1992), Jeffrey Deitch considered the impact of technology on the contemporary body, and suggested that art should provide the inspiration for the way we fashion our minds and bodies for the future. As he gave no reason for making this claim, Deitch's presumption that art should provide such ideals for body and mind indicated the extent to which Classical aesthetics, and its moral and philosophical foundations, are inscribed in the contemporary imagination. The various examples of art that Deitch discussed under the title of post-human had a certain stylistic consistency in that it was figurative, but its relationship to the ideal was by no means clear. Nor could it be described as Realism, in the familiar artistic sense, since 'reality', having incorporated new technologies, has changed since the time in which Realism had currency. Deitch's examples included the uncanny bodies and body parts of Robert Gober's mannequins, the futuristic time structures in the art of George Lappas, Wim Delvoye and Yasumasa Morimura, and the animal/human hybrids of Mike Kelly. To these he added the emotionless, robotic and kitsch 'sculptures' of Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy and Jeff Koons, respectively. When describing the art by women such as Janine Antoni's gnawed chocolate and Kiki Smith's sculptures of piteous female bodies, Deitch identified dislocated psychological states that he suggested might be brought about by the advances of technology.

Hal Foster charted the same artistic territory in his book, entitled *The Return of the Real* (1997), and he too suggested that artists in the 1990s re-evaluated the role of art in relation to reality. Instead of prescribing a utopian role for art, however, Foster interpreted it in psychoanalytic terms as being a cultural symptom. Using a generally Lacanian/Kristevian framework, Foster described a turn by artists in the 1990s towards the social site and the body, which he said was prompted by a desire to pierce through the 1980s fascination with representation and simulation. He argued that in Gober's art, for example, the body is relentlessly made present like a 'symptom' of a traumatic event. As art-as-symptom, it announces an accompanying social and psychological dis-ease and implies the presence of 'the real'.

For Cindy Sherman, the exploration of visual and erotic ambiguities in relation to the representation of the female body progressively led her to the production of images that invoke morbidity and disgust. According to Foster's reading of her work from the 1990s, and that of other contemporary artists, this invocation of the abject body arose from 'an impulse to erode the subject and to tear at the screen . . . in the service of the real' (Foster 1996: 149–50). In an essay in Rosalind Krauss's book, *Cindy Sherman: 1975–1993*, Norman Bryson identified the same artistic shift in Sherman's art, which he traced from the series entitled *Film Stills* to the series entitled *Sex Pictures*. He described the transition from the view of reality as simulacrum, and from the 'constructionist' argument, to a view of the body that is more disturbing. He argued that pain/enjoyment, which is located in the body and the real, resists and is therefore in excess of signification. Since there is no place outside representation to which the subject might turn, virtual reality is edged by a sense of dread. Sherman's grotesque mannequins, argued Bryson, are an attempt to colonise this aspect of the real. The art can only hint at the dread, which cannot be named. As representation, it is necessarily inadequate.

Sean Cubitt, too, alluded to a turn to 'the real' in 1990s art, but he described this shift in geographical rather than psychological or subjective terms. Writing in *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, he introduced essays on art and technology, speculating on the effects of globalisation on artists from Third World countries. He posited that 'The contemporary artist works in the margins of a globalisation process which has left behind and out of account the mutual presence of people with the world they inhabit' (Cubitt 1999: 5). Warning against the utopianism of universal language, which communication technologies enable, he argued that as reality is 'by definition that which escapes or eludes discourse' it is also 'the condition of those outside the loop of digital networks' (1999: 6, 7). The contemporary artist intervenes in these processes 'in order to undertake radically new geographies outside the demeaning overdeterminations of an abstract and mechanical cartography' (1999: 5). The artistic shift that all of these commentators describe – the turn towards the body and the social site, and the undertaking of new geographies – was complicated by cultural hybridity.

Hybridity

Hybridity, whose new formations threaten identity categories of race, class, gender, nationality and the body, is an aspect of globalised culture, where boundaries between art forms have collapsed and are in the process of becoming dispersed or realigned. It has long been recognised as an effect of the 'allegorical impulse' behind postmodern art, which blatantly combined genres and mediums that were previously distinct. For example, Tracey Moffatt's series of photocompositions, entitled *Up in the Sky*, 1997, attests to this impulse by blending TV, film and art styles. Structured like an epic film, *Up in the Sky*

alludes to styles in film, especially that of Pasolini's *Accatone* (1961), and it consists of twenty-five images, or tableaux that appear to be part of an obscure narrative sequence. Each image is quite Classical in its independence, and is aestheticised by the use of sepia tones and the softening technique of pre-flashing and offset printing.

Using the actual inhabitants of the place to act out various scenarios, Moffatt juxtaposed nostalgic artificiality with actuality, turning around the machismo of Pasolini's world to evoke the harsh and 'lawless' existence of a Church-dominated community of 'hybrid' unemployed men and whore-mothers in outback Australia. Exploiting the sense of melancholy and danger made available by the vast expanses of sky, arid soil and roads in the desert, Moffatt constructed 'Gothic' scenes of brawling youths, disorientated old men, bullying nuns, female car-wreckers and neglected babies, many of which evoke religious themes from the history of art. In one image, which appears to be a key to the rest, a pretty, blonde, white woman sits by a window of a derelict house (Plate 68). She holds an Aboriginal baby, as three, hurrying nuns approach, ominously and greedily from outside. The image is loaded with possibilities for meaning. Themes revolving around maternity, Christianity and Australian race relations that were foreshadowed in Moffatt's earlier work suggest themselves. The female body is central to these meanings, but Moffatt's romantic tableau, with its artificiality and ambiguity, insists that representation is not a reflection of reality. Its allusions to symbolism, race relations and to feminism are casual, fortuitous, and contradictory. The hints of horror and despair, which announce the presence of the real, are so staged and stylised that they seem to mock the spectator's fascination with them.

In these ways, Moffatt exploited the inadequacy of representation almost to the point of misrepresentation. Homi Bhabha's reading of hybridisation and colonial desire provides some insight into the disquieting effects of Moffatt's photocompositions. His argument that hybridisation subverts colonial authority, occupying a third, displacing space between those of indigenous and colonial cultures, may be read into *Up in the Sky* on several levels. These include the spaces opened up by the false promise of a narrative that is both familiar and alien, the apparent 'lawlessness' of the society that is supposedly represented, and the sense of an unacknowledged place, in which erotic desire erupts in new and transgressive ways. References to the reality of racial hybridity in Moffatt's work complicate the ambiguity produced. Robert Young argued that in deploying the concept of racial hybridity, we are re-using the language of Victorian racialism, that 'in deconstructing such essentialist notions of race today we may rather be repeating the past than distancing ourselves from it or providing a critique of it' (Young 1995: 27). In other words, he suggested, postcolonial scholars are still bound up in 'the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and political trafficking of colonialism was conceived' (1995: 182). In her series, *Up in the Sky*, it is as though Moffatt anticipated that this form of colonial desire would operate in those who view

Plate 68 Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the Sky, 1*, 1997, offset print, 61 cm × 76 cm, edition of 30.

her work. It is as though she recognised their longing for otherness in her art, and teased them for it, with provocative, recalcitrant ambiguity. In this perverse way, discourses on gender, colonialism, race and class hover close to the edges of Moffatt's work, but are never allowed to frame it.

In a different but related way, the collaborative art of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green obstructs an easy reading, while foregrounding hybridity. For a start, their collaboration confounds expectations that ambiguity in their art arises from a 'single order of the mind', and that it is an effect of 'slippery subject positions', or even multiple subject positions. Rather than affirming the death of the author, it bears witness to 'the artist' as a community of authors, and rather than yielding to the polysemic aspect of the sign, it forges a space for reinvention. This change in emphasis leads to consideration of art in relation to concepts such as history, memory, place, which in turn draw attention to the temporal, public and global contexts of artistic practices and the way they are constructed. *The Philosopher* (Plate 69), 1995, for example, is a large oil painting on linen, which combines an appropriated image from a seventeenth-century Italian painting by Guido Reni with an eighteenth-century painting by George Stubbs that is in the National Gallery of Victoria, in

Melbourne. Numerous other narrative fragments are fused punningly and deceptively with these stories of ancient and triumphant passions, into a contemporary fantasy of illusionism, coherence and 'finish'. The fragments include 'tattooed' hands, reaching in from either side of the picture towards one another like those in Michelangelo's *Creation*. There is a crumpled backdrop with the inscription 'industrial sky', a ground that is an early, incomplete map of Australia by the Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman, and a picturesque image of Melbourne's skyline by night, in the form of a tattoo. In this context, the magnificent, bounding, nude figure of Reni's Atlanta, scrambling for the golden apple, no longer functions in the past as a symbol for the ideal female form. Nor is it a feminist deconstruction of that ideal. Instead it is reinvented through hybridisation, not only in the new context provided for it by the current picture, but at the level of authorship, and through its ambivalent reception in the present era of postfeminism. In metaphorical terms, the mythical Atlanta shares part of the same turbulent skyline as Stubbs's ferocious lion devouring a horse – a ghastly contest of animal strength, painted from the artist's memory of an actual event. She traverses a terrain that was unknown to Stubbs or Reni, although Tasman, who was Reni's contemporary, inscribed it with his particular variant of colonial desire. References in *The Philosopher* to this antipodean place, which is now inhabited by Brown and Green, upset the fable that painting

Plate 69 Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Philosopher*, 1995, oil on linen, 122 cm × 122 cm (collection of the artists).

is the symbol of European cultural identity. Hence, Atlanta's formerly dynamic, Baroque gesture is frozen and de-eroticised, like that of the animals behind her, whose deadly embrace has been slashed in half by a feigned rent in the linen. Through such cracks in form and meaning, a sense of new movement creeps into *The Philosopher*, whose title suggests the passive contemplation of abstractions by a genius who is far removed from animal passions. Seeping from the porous borders of imagery, these stirrings gather strength from the deepening of shadows and the streaking of light across fluttering drapery, rippling muscles and thickening clouds. In short, the collision of images in Brown and Green's art is not staged simply in order to collapse the categories of time, place and gender. Rather, the ambiguity that is produced by this process enables scope for new meanings, which, although fortuitous and accidental, are generated, with irony, in the glowing aftermath of the sublime.

The ambiguity produced by the work is not confined to this field of intertextuality, however, for the collaboration of the artists adds a new challenge to the reader/spectator to consider the division of artistic labour between two separate bodies. Does one do the thinking while the other pushes paint around the canvas? Do they divide their time equally to their separate tasks? Do they ever disagree? Are they always equally satisfied with the result? These are questions to which the spectator cannot expect an answer simply from viewing the work, or even by interrogating the artists. Just as the overloading of illusionism on the outstretched arm, to the left of the picture, collapses into formlessness on the ring-covered hand, attempts to decipher the 'hand' of one artist from that of the other are doomed to fail. What the art offers instead is the presence of a 'third hand' that is neither male nor female.

In this way, the collaboration of Green and Brown complicates the 'heterosexual matrix' that underpins the cultural production of identity, and, as such is a reaction against the 'gender feminism' of the 1980s. If their collaboration draws attention to the hybrid conditions of their artistic practices, it also revels, treacherously, in the fiction that painting is a singular unitary vision, based on a dualistic conception of reality. Considering this performative aspect of their work, of their acting as though they are one, the issue of gender is open to interpretation. Robert Schubert's reading of this collaboration as a metaphor for procreation, for example, posited that Green and Brown's strategy was by no means radical, since 'by virtue of the double signature of marriage, they are licensed to procreate'. He admitted, nevertheless, that Green and Brown's 'aesthetic progeny threaten to betray this heterosexual contract' (Schubert 1992: 11). Finally, by reinventing painting as a discursive process of hybridisation, Brown and Green rebuffed the 1980s prejudice against the medium, unsettling the view held by many deconstructive feminists that painting is irrevocably saturated with patriarchal meanings.

At the same time, Brown and Green's frames of reference, which did not include contemporary popular culture, for example, reinvoked the categories of art, art history and the museum. Their series of photocompositions, entitled

Face à l'Histoire 1997, addresses some of the presumptions and exclusions underpinning these categories, as a way of reviewing, among other things, the ten-year period of their personal collaboration. Hence, their joint reconstruction of art historical moments and lost works entailed, not only the deconstruction of the fictions of art history, but also the inevitable and deliberate invention of their own history, or fiction. *Face à l'Histoire* is a six-part series in which each photocomposition elaborates on a particular theme pertaining to cultural memory. The photocomposition reproduced here, cryptically entitled *Face à l'Histoire Part 4: Cape Schank Earthwork*, follows that of alternative art histories and institutions, among which feminism occupies a significant place (Plate 70). Various bits of ephemera, including book covers, exhibition catalogues, an artist's statement and an old photograph of an art performance are displayed before the camera. These bits of 'evidence' function as visual, mnemonic objects, or metonyms for minor narratives that have never been fully articulated in mainstream or neo-avant-garde histories of art. A flier for a Lucy Lippard lecture held in Melbourne in 1982, for example, signals an important moment in feminist debate in this country. It is positioned next to a programme for an exhibition of the 'environmentalist', collaborative art of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, while a classic counterculture text, entitled *the anti-mass: methods of organization for collectives*, is pinned above it. Photographed in cibachrome, these images are fused in a continuous, Caravaggesque surface of light and shadow that resembles that of Brown and Green's paintings. Fluctuating between the visual stasis of the wall grid, bookshelf effect and the episodic dynamism of film, this seductive composition produces meanings that are loose and elliptical, highlighting the fact that the reading of history is always partial, open to negotiation, and underpinned by desire. This manipulative open-endedness is an effect of the artists' efforts at 'intentional undecidability and authorial surplus' (Brown and Green 1997). Nevertheless, there is an element of self-disclosure in this work into which it is tempting to read a relation between the artists' current, hybrid artistic practices and feminism. The feminist project of the 1970s and 1980s of rediscovering the lost women of art history was surely the paradigm historiography of alternative histories, and hence for this particular panel of *Face à l'Histoire*. Furthermore, it could be argued that more recent feminist attempts to deconstruct gender and to foreground ambiguity contributed to and enabled discursive formations in which Brown and Green's hybrid artistic practices partake.

Lesley Sanderson's recent work, entitled *Fabrication and Reality*, 1998, was produced in collaboration with Neil Conroy (Plate 71). It has a clearer link to feminism than Brown and Green's work, in that it elaborates on the themes of the female body and 'cultural identity' articulated in Sanderson's earlier work. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6, Lynda Nead identified 'the signs of self-determination and the politics of cultural identity' in Sanderson's *Time for a Change*, 1989 (Nead 1992: 75). Instead of foregrounding identity as a category for critical analysis, *Fabrication and Reality* plays out the ambiguities in

Plate 70 Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Face à l'Histoire Part 4: Cape Schank Earthwork*, 1974, 1997, cibachrome photograph, 86 cm × 102 cm (collection of the artists).

the relationship between cultural identity, art and the body that were present but unexplored in the earlier painting. At the same time, it situates these ambiguities in a specific, global context. In some ways reminiscent of Susan Norrie's feminist reworkings of minimalism, discussed in Chapter 4, *Fabrication and Reality* consists of a free-standing, box-like structure that contains and frames two rectangular panels. The one on the right is a large-scale, extremely fine pencil drawing of a small part of the surface of a body, which, by means of subtle shading, suggests a fold in the flesh and the substructure of veins, musculature and tendons. Although it was in fact modelled on the 'pulse area' of the artist's hand, it is not identifiable as a particular part, but is suggestive of any number of areas on the body. On the left, a narrower panel consists of a back-lit, stylised drawing on carbon copy paper of the Petronas Towers in Malaysia, currently the tallest building in the world. The Towers appear as a flat pattern, etched against a luminous blue ground. Both drawings, in their different ways, suggest anonymity and specificity, or detachment and intimacy, simultaneously. These ambiguities set up a dialogue between one another,

Plate 71 Lesley Sanderson and Neil Conroy, *Fabrication and Reality*, 1998, graphite on paper, carbon paper, M.D.F., wood, viewing device in the rear of the piece, light, 61″ high × 59″ long × 16″ wide (collection of the artists). Photograph by Neil Conroy.

across the panels, so that the body assumes the building's monumentality, and the glowing towers become erotically charged. Links to the female body and to Asian cultural identity can still be traced in this work, but the emphasis has shifted to the processes of reinvention, including those entailed in artistic collaboration, and to the new spaces opened up by the realities of cultural hybridity in the contemporary world. As such, *Fabrication and Reality* is a subtle, feminised critique of Eurocentrism. Because of its involvement with ambiguity, however, it is also at least one step removed from the female nude, identity politics and questions of subjectivity. This detachment is expressed metaphorically, in the following way: at the back of the box, behind the drawing of the body, there is a tiny viewing lens. The spectator uses this lens with the expectation of viewing a structured 'interior', only to encounter an intense blue light. The light dissolves distinctions between inside and outside, promising new formations that will entice new manifestations of desire.

For artists from a country that could be called postcolonial, such as Australia, the canonical art objects and styles of Western culture – be they modernist, postmodernist, 'reactive' or neo-avant-garde – lose their representational authority. These artists are, in Bhabha's terms, at the margins of metropolitan desire. Australian artist, Narelle Jubelin's site-specific installations and exquisitely

wrought, hybridised inventions highlight the effects of this loss of colonial authority, from a postcolonial, feminist perspective. Her large, sumptuous and monumental pink curtain was produced for an extensive international touring exhibition, entitled *Changing Spaces*, 1996–2000, curated by Mary Jane Jacob. This project sought to rethink how a contemporary international exhibition can be varied, adapted and sited according to the local and national needs of each respective venue. Thus the curtain derives from and cites architectonic and literary works that have a particular spatial, conceptual or historical relation to the exhibition site or museum in which the installation was placed 'and hence rewritten' (Plate 72). As the product of much research, cross-referencing and ironising invention, the curtain is a complex but precise mediation on internationalism, reflecting patterns in migration and the trafficking and distribution of cultural material and styles between the cultural centres of the West and the rest of the world. The artist was careful to acknowledge all those with whom she collaborated, and the title of the work, in keeping with its indexical structure, cites its own conceptual references, two of which are hallmarks of international modernism:

> Narelle Jubelin with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia,
> AND HENCE REWRITTEN
> After Penelope, from Ulysses by James Joyce, Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914–1921 (manuscript copy)
> and after the German Pavilion, Barcelona International
> Exposition by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona, Spain, 1928–1929 (reconstructed 1986)
> and after *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon* by George B. Worgan, letter, Sydney January 20–June 23, 1788; letter, Sydney July 2–11, 1788 (first published 1978)

Jubelin's research into Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's German Pavilion, which was constructed for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, was a way of considering the ethical issues that arise when exhibiting art internationally. A feminist theme is woven into this enquiry. The idea for the curtain came from photographic records of the Pavilion, in which a large curtain was evident, although it was rarely written about. Similarly, the contribution of architect, Lilly Reich, who often collaborated with Mies and is believed to have designed the original, dark red curtain, is scarcely evident in the volumes of discussion about this seminal exhibition centre. Joyce's text, the original manuscript of which resides in Philadelphia, is transcribed in Jubelin's handwriting onto the curtain, in a manner that mimics the bookmatched marble of the pavilion walls. It alludes also to the weaving of the mythical Penelope as she waits for her tardy husband to return home, and to the cunning Molly who, as the narrator, finally has the determining voice. The skilful construction of the curtain celebrates the feminine crafts, and as a seductive mask or form of adornment, the

Plate 72 Narelle Jubelin with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, (*and hence rewritten), after Penelope, from Ulysses by James Joyce, Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914–1921 (manuscript copy) and after the German Pavilion, Barcelona International Exposition by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona, Spain, 1928–1929 (reconstructed 1986) and after 'Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon' by George B. Worgan, letter, Sydney January 20–June 23, 1788; letter, Sydney July 2–11, 1788 (first published 1978)*, 1996, woven rayon, silk-screen texts in bleach and ink, steel armature, dimensions variable. Photograph by Geoff Kleem, Mori Gallery, Sydney, 1996.

curtain, which is made of rayon or fake silk and is reminiscent of women's underwear, stands as a metaphor for femininity. Above all the eroticism of the fleshy, pink curtain, which billows, slightly, with the movement of air as people pass, suggests the female body and sexuality. In Jubelin's ironic, fastidious museum framework it is given the status of an overblown modernist fetish. On the other hand, as Lee Rodney modestly put it, the curtain 'poses an interesting challenge to certain types of feminist deconstruction wary of essentialism' (Rodney 1997: 2). By revisiting moments that have been occluded by the imprint of international modernism on a particular site of colonial culture, Jubelin was able to invoke, retrospectively, the possibility of dissenting voices, and to posit cultural hybridity as a displacing space of unequal cultural exchange.

Transcribed also onto the curtain, the third referent, which consists of excerpts from the letter of George Worgan, a First Fleet surgeon, complicates Jubelin's feminist critique of modernism with metaphors for travel, specifically the first waves of colonialisation, and for the failures of representation that attend it.

The ambiguity that results has been interpreted alternatively as a 'purposefully unclear' proposal for a 'reconciliation' of differences, and as a failure in the work (ibid.). Taking the latter position, Lynne Cooke argued that

> By requiring the viewer to take on board yet another conceptual framework, Jubelin risks overloading her work in ways that seem extraneous and forced. Worgan's contribution, a qualification and elaboration of the other two intertwined discourses, seems fussy rather than enriching, countering not only the elegant clarity of the work and its mode of presentation but also the eloquent mirroring of symmetrically posed protagonists.
>
> (Cooke 1996: 16)

Cooke's response reveals her appreciation for the precepts of modernist aesthetics, such as clarity, eloquence and symmetry, which Jubelin so skilfully mimics. However Cooke's criticism fails to acknowledge that it is precisely at the points of excess and destabilisation produced by the inclusion of Worgan's commentary that Jubelin makes available the possibility of a postcolonial critique. As Charles Green observed, 'Jubelin, like many other Australian artists during the 1990s, projected an unorthodox and distorted image of the West back towards its centres' (Green 1995: 138). This distorted image, one might add, also troubles a feminist perspective that seeks 'symmetrically posed protagonists'.

In responding to the challenges of technology and globalisation, most of the art that I have analysed in this chapter maintained a feminist perspective, or at least alluded to feminist concerns. By addressing contemporary issues, however, it also became part of a general cultural shift from a focus on identity to the stakes entailed in the interface between cultures, the body and technology. In addition to expressing uncertainty about the future, it had to acknowledge that art is always ambiguous and can never adequately *re-present* the body. As a consequence, ambiguity was used in various ways to promote artistic agency and extend the role of visual art as a register of ethical concerns – concerns that feminism found itself unable, or only partially prepared to answer. While Stelarc's work stressed that art could enhance the interdependence of the body and technology by envisaging a non-gendered body, Orlan's and Dement's embodied becomings emerged from specifically feminist programmes that used technology to probe and develop the ambiguities of art in its roles as prosthetic and sexual lure. All three artists exploited ambiguity in art to speculate on the body's contestable futures. Piccinini's mock-media presentations combined new technologies and seductive marketing techniques with a representational style in order to imagine future, hybrid life forms. In her art, ambiguity was produced at the level of affective response to these imagined beings, thus prompting residual feminist concerns about the female body in representation. The resistant ambiguity of Moffatt's art, and the intentional undecidability of Brown and

Green's, deflect identity categories, such as race and gender, from being imposed on their works. This enables the art to foil the colonising gaze of the spectator, to thwart colonialist desire, to upset the heterosexual matrix, to participate productively in the hybridisation of contemporary culture, and to undertake new geographies. Similarly, Jubelin's postcolonial critiques were attempts to resuscitate and develop the ambiguous spaces between competing narratives of identity and place that constitute the world of contemporary art production. At the same time, they anxiously clung to styles and material fragments that were close, symbolically, to an inclusive ideal of a female body that is erotically appealing. In all of the art discussed in this chapter, therefore, the production of a resistant ambiguity was indirectly linked to notions of ethics and social justice.

Terry Eagleton suggested that ambivalence on the question of human rights underpinned contemporary criticism in general, and in order to explain an historical dimension of this ambivalence he outlined two intertwined but conflicting traditions of moral thought. The first was the 'Kantian, liberal, juridical conception of morality', which he said deconstruction incongruously assumes on the question of 'human rights'. Marxism, he said, belonged to the second tradition, that of ancient 'civic humanism', which was concerned with 'the creative unfolding of the individual personality and its social interactions with others' (Eagleton 1998: 219). The two traditions are 'no longer so evidently in conflict', according to Eagleton, since 'The rights that now matter have become the equal rights of men and women to access to the means of their uniquely individual self-realization' (1998: 225).

Whether or not Eagleton's is a convincing explanation of contemporary critical thinking in relation to human rights, it showed that while materialist frameworks balk at the metaphysical aspect of justice, it nevertheless needed to be addressed. I have argued that the artists referred to above were similarly compelled to appeal to a principle of justice, and that they re-evaluated the politics of feminism against this principle, as they construed it in the conditions of the 1990s. Orlan showed, for instance, that to reject 'the beauty myth' on the grounds of its artificiality and to defend the sanctity of the body as earlier feminists implicitly defended it did not hold up in the face of advances in medical science. These advances carry moral weight in that they include positive advantages for minority social groups – advances such as drugs that prevent women from experiencing pain during childbirth, and operations that enable transsexuality for people who feel trapped in a biologically determined sex. Linda Dement showed that women's participation in technology produces fantastic bodies that transcend binaries and point to the possibility of a brighter, erotic future for women. But she also hinted that these interventions are more important as expressions of unresolved 'human' emotions, which could be traced in turn to unjust, social relations in the present. Patricia Piccinini pointed up the potential difficulties for marketing strategists in promoting products that do not have a recognisably 'human' appeal. She showed how old values couldn't be applied to new post-human products,

without very disturbing results. A new morality would have to dispense with those values, but Piccinini implied that at present this would not be acceptable to 'the general public', that without ethical principles that are rooted in and favour the 'natural', corporate marketing appeared to be ridiculous and doomed. She demonstrated, on the other hand, through the example of her own work, that *art* that invokes values pertaining to the 'natural' is most effective as a way of alerting the spectator to the seductive, oppressive and possibly corrupting techniques of medical marketing. Her concerns relate to public debates on the ethics of genetic engineering, embryo experimentation, euthanasia, abortion and animal experimentation. By staging a fictional marketing scenario that was almost believable, Piccinini forced the spectator to reflect on how such debates are implicated in and might disengage themselves from commercial interests if ethical standards cannot be established outside these interests. In short, attention to art's function as a prompt to consider ethics and social justice was a common feature of the art described above. Put another way, this visual art of the 1990s, which inhabited a world of new categories in formation and old ones in dissolution, is distinguished by the care with which it preserves the category of art, as a measure of ethical concerns.

I have argued throughout this book that an evolving conceptual ideal and a concern for social justice underpinned feminist art practices, and that the possibility of positive representations of the female body was thereby maintained. Adherence to such an ideal required belief in the possibility of a link between representation and lived experience, no matter how indirect and partial that link might be, and no matter how obscured by ambiguity it might appear to be. The effort to secure or keep such a link in sight that was demonstrated by some of the artists indicates that the ideal was still not obliterated in the 1990s, and is perhaps waiting to be reinforced. On the other hand, recognition of the necessity to exploit art's treachery for the purposes of reinvention makes this an increasingly difficult task.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this book, I proposed a feminist reading of the relationship between capitalist marketing of 'the ideal female body' and feminist art. Rather than seeing the two in binary opposition, which might suggest that feminism has failed as a counter-narrative, I outlined a cautiously positive approach. I described feminism as an historical process that has developed in visual art according to a principle of inclusiveness and ethical social relations, on the basis of a conceptual ideal of the female body as erotically appealing. I argued that even feminist deconstructive art, which foregrounds ambiguity, proceeded in this way. In Karen Finley's case, I suggested that her socialist intentions, as expressed in her interviews, influenced the ambiguity of her resistance to visual stereotypes of femininity and her staging of the obscene body. Feminism, I claimed, is implicated in the ambiguity of Deacon's art, which alludes to gender and race in the specific context of Australian culture. The surrealist-inspired art of Smart and Brassington flirted with abjection, aggression and the death drive, but through invoking the effects of these, from a feminist perspective, clung to the possibility of a positive conception of the female body. In addition, I embraced Judith Butler's argument that 'performativity' parodies gender identity as an ideal, but I added that as visual art 'performativity' is often orientated towards a feminist ideal. I adopted the critical framework of queer, too, but added the qualification that the principles pertaining to identity outlined above might be invoked in queer's negotiations with the ethical. In today's globalised economy, however, it is not surprising that the commercial connotations of the word 'negotiation' bring us back to the 'ethics' of advertising and pornography and their visual representations of the female body.

The successes of advertising and pornography, more than anything else in contemporary visual culture, have consistently both instigated and undermined feminist criticism of the representation of the female body. The feminist principles of inclusiveness and positive erotic appeal were invoked, initially, in reaction to the exclusionary ideal female body of white Western culture and the negative visual representations, promoted by 'patriarchy' of the female body in pornography and advertising. In the late 1980s and the 1990s this early 1980s feminist criticism was exposed as anachronistic and problematic. The blurring of gender

categories in the eroticisation of male fashion models undermined feminism's criticism of gender roles and stereotypes, and poststructuralism's denigration of vision had lost its authority. Linda Williams demonstrated that the stylistic changes in pornographic films, brought about by women's increased participation in their production, imperilled a gender-based critique of fetishism. Catharine Lumby identified a new generation of media-wise young women who, she claimed, often consume advertisements and pornography for their own sexual pleasure and at no risk to themselves. Parallel to these shifts in emphasis in advertising and pornography, there was a blurring of distinctions in feminist art, as in Finley's foregrounding of ambiguity that exposed the constructedness of the categories of art and obscenity, and Della Grace's endorsement of S/M in her representation of lesbian sexual practices.

The confluence of advertising, pornography and art around the processes of 'degendering' and the democratisation of sexuality posed a new set of ethical problems in relation to visual representation. While the principle of inclusiveness may be extended to older women, on ethical grounds, for example, the increase in child pornography and the eroticisation of children in advertising suggests that this principle should not always be applied. While it is possible to conceive of a society in which sexual relations between children and adults, including incest, might be permissible and even desirable for all concerned, the conditions in which such a society could function successfully do not exist at present. By all accounts, the effects of intense hostility currently shown in contemporary Western cultures towards intergenerational sex can only be damaging to the children and adults who engage in it. On the other hand, there is little if any irrefutable evidence that children who are eroticised in advertisements, and even pornography, suffer harm from the process, and there is less to suggest that the images themselves promote child abuse. The debate is reminiscent of the 1980s 'sex wars' about 'degrading' images of women and pornography, and in some ways it is an extension of them. However, before abandoning or endorsing the current protectionist approach to children, feminists need to consider the differences between a feminist campaign for women's sexual freedom and the proposal to deregulate intergenerational sex.

Ethical questions about child sexuality might be asked in relation to a 1998 exhibition in Melbourne, which was organised around the theme of art's ambiguous relationship to advertising and fashion. Entitled *Hype: Fashion, Art and Advertising*, it featured images from fashion advertisements interspersed with art by Mariko Mori, Patricia Piccinini and Bill Henson, and fashion artefacts such as jewellery. One of the advertisements was a photograph, by Justin Smith, of a young girl taken for the magazine, *Australian Style* (Plate 73). The girl wears on her arm and hand an elaborate bracelet that was made by Sarah Harmarnee, the same artist who made some of the jewellery on display in the show. Harmarnee, who specialises in Gothic-styled jewellery modelled on horses' bridles and harnesses was employed by the prominent fashion

designer, Alexander McQueen. The bracelet in Smith's photograph is a complicated system of black strapping and 'chain mail' silver, featuring a long, black, feeler-like, leather extension to the girl's index finger. Smith framed the photograph so that the top of the girl's head is cut off, emphasising the monumental presentation of her slender body in profile, as she sits in a wrinkly, one-piece swim-suit, and looks almost disdainfully down at the spectator. Her large eyes and childishly slumped posture betray her extreme youth, while she has been posed in such a way as to suggest her willing participation in an S/M contract with the spectator.

In an adjacent room, another item in the show featured a young model: an enlarged, photographic, twin 'portrait' of a thirteen-year-old girl, taken in profile from one side, and in three-quarter profile from the other (Plates 74a, b). The fashion house, Scanlan and Theodore, commissioned the studies from Bill Henson, the artist who represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1996. At Venice, Henson showed large photocompositions that featured naked teenagers in lugubrious, darkly romantic, contemporary settings. For example, one showed a couple in a sexual embrace in a forest at night at the scene of a car crash, while another featured the bloody body of a girl who appeared to have been bashed or raped. Qualities that are reminiscent of the Baroque carnality of these works inhabit the series commissioned by Scanlan and Theodore. In one panel, a chiaroscura backdrop frames the girl as she lifts her chin and looks down her nose at the camera with the hauteur of a young duchess posing for Sir Anthony Van Dyck. In the other, she poses further back from the camera, in strict profile, more like Caravaggio's *Judith* this time. The golden light falls on the back of her head, pony-tail, bent shoulders, arms and folded hands, forming a sensuous pattern of flattened, ambiguous shapes. By using these traditional techniques with great sensitivity and skill, Henson summoned the authority of the history of art to lend grandeur to these images, and he demonstrated, incidentally, that the eroticisation of children in art is not necessarily lascivious, undignified or new.

Scanlan and Theodore commissioned Henson's photographs to mark the company's 10th anniversary, inviting him to dress a model of his choice in their clothes. Clearly, the model is of more interest in Henson's pictures, than the clothes, which are hardly visible, and when interviewed he stressed that he accepted the commission as an artistic not an advertising project. His fascination with the model is even more apparent in another photograph from the series, which was not included in *Hype* (Plate 74c). The girl poses in a dress whose wide, plunging, V-shaped neckline partly reveals her young breasts. Photographed from a frontal point of view, she turns her head away, at a right angle to the camera, as though she is registering disdain for the camera, or experiencing some sort of private agony/pleasure. The chiaroscura lighting and Classical format mark the work as 'art' rather than 'advertising' and shift attention from the licence given to the male gaze to the subjectivity of the model. Similarly, the politics of Smith and Harmarnee's project was complicated by ambiguity. Their

Plate 73 Justin Smith, *Untitled*, 1997, black and white photograph, 119.5 cm × 89.6 cm (*Australian Style* magazine).

portrayal of knowing sexuality is a familiar theme in contemporary culture, in which the presumption of childhood innocence is open to questioning. The fact that Smith tapped into this theme to promote Harmarnee's jewellery might be seen as a development of the Gothic ambiguity of her work rather than as exploitative of the model or of children in general.

Given that 'queer' extends identity categories and blurs distinctions between marginalised forms of sexual identification, the ambiguous sexuality of these and other images in the *Hype* exhibition invoked what might be called a 'queer' aesthetic that is critical of established norms of sexuality. The criticality of this aesthetic was endangered by what Joanne Finkelstein described, in an essay accompanying the catalogue of *Hype*, as 'the hyperbole of the late twentieth century, the distracting, depoliticising intoxicant of media trivialization' (Finkelstein 1998: 7). Finkelstein portrayed the products and function of 'hype' as follows.

Plate 74 a, b, c Bill Henson, *Untitled*, 1997, black and white photographs, 66 cm × 47.5 cm each (collection of Scanlan and Theodore).

> Bricolage and *faux info* are the products of hype. Hype is promiscuous, it joins everything together, crossing the divides between high and low, real and fake, imagery and deception. Hype can make the unattractive, unnecessary and unlikely appear as their opposites, as the desirable and necessary. And vice versa. . . . In its benign form it transforms the grinding monotony of daily life; in its virulent form it reproduces that grinding monotony.
>
> (Finkelstein 1998: 7)

If 'queer' emerged in the context of *Hype* as an effect of media hyperbole and trivialisation, it was also the focus of a curatorial strategy rather than a critique of identity, or a feminist framework for artistic production. The ambiguity of images such as Smith's (for Harmarnee) and Henson's derive their power, nevertheless, from provoking questions about 'performativity' and 'queer' in relation to children. By dint of the economic context of their production and

Plate 74 b

their use of traditional techniques of seduction they invite consideration of the extent to which sex and gender roles are imposed upon children by and for the commercial interests and/or pleasure of adults. If it could be demonstrated conclusively that the eroticisation of children in visual representation *is* harmful, the feminist principle of inclusiveness might need to be limited to the representation of adults, as I speculated above. The ambiguity of the images in *Hype* ensured that such conclusive proof could not be found. More troubling to feminists, therefore, is that this ambiguity, which to some invokes the negative values of past art forms, might be hard to distinguish from the undecipherability of recent feminist or 'postfeminist art'.

The risk of being misinterpreted is not new to feminist artists, and, as was demonstrated in Chapter 4, feminist deconstructive critics in the 1980s warned artists against it and the ocularcentric, artistic modes that they believed exacerbated it. In the 1990s, it was a risk that many artists judged to be worth taking and exploiting, sometimes as a way of reinstating the primacy of vision

*Plate 74*c

in visual art. I have argued throughout this book that it is important for feminists to explain how contemporary art acknowledged this risk and, particularly, how that acknowledgement shaped the art practices of women. As I demonstrated in Chapter 8, the ambiguity of 'postfeminist' art, while being oriented towards a feminist ideal, was often accompanied by the deliberate suspension of overt moral judgement in anticipation of new formations, embodied becomings and unpredictable futures. The way the art was structured to address questions of social justice, however, attests to a vigorous ethical impulse that is probably feminist and wants some stake in the future, whatever it might be.

The anxiety amongst artists in the late 1990s about ethical questions, and the suspension of moral judgement that often characterised their art, reflected and contributed to a general stalemate in feminist debate. Accordingly, disagreements initiated in the late 1980s amongst feminists about the relationship between representation and lived experience remained unresolved. Susanne

Kappeler and Susan Bordo, for example, argued against postmodern feminism in their respective critiques of cultural representations of the female body. Kappeler set out to expose the 'pornographic structures of perception and thought' and insisted that 'Art will have to go', recommending, instead, a feminist cultural practice to be conducted 'in the interest of communication, not representation' (Kappeler 1986: 221, 222). Bordo directed her criticism at constructions of the female body in the popular media, particularly the patriarchal, racist frameworks of advertising images, whose consequences she measured directly in social terms, such as eating disorders. She claimed that there was in the 1920s and 1930s a '"postfeminist" consciousness', similar to today's, which led to the fragmentation of feminism (Bordo 1995: 243). Deconstruction and the analysis of gender in the 1980s and 1990s, she feared, would incur a similar result. Hence Bordo argued

> against proponents of the absolute heterogeneity of culture, that in contemporary Western constructions of beauty there *are* dominant, strongly 'normalizing' (racial and gendered) forms to contend with. To struggle effectively against the coerciveness of those forms it is first necessary to recognize that they *have* dominance, and not to efface such recognition through a facile and abstract celebration of 'heterogeneity', 'difference', 'subversive reading', and so forth.
>
> (Bordo 1995: 29–30)

Bordo's argument was confined to Western cultures, but the results of recent empirical studies suggest that normalising forms of female beauty are even more coercive than Bordo claimed.

It is widely accepted that advertising and the fashion industry in particular play a significant role in promoting the ideal of thinness in women, which has contributed to the growing number of eating disorders in our community. Until recently this syndrome was confined overwhelmingly to women from Western cultures, and yet prompted a great deal of feminist speculation on how it was related to the predicament of 'woman'. These speculations may well have been accused of Eurocentric bias. Mervat Nasser's research revealed, however, that anorexia nervosa and bulimia have become increasingly prevalent in non-Western cultures and amongst men, a trend which she attributed to the globalisation of culture and the media, and to the similarity of economic structures between the nations of the world. Nasser adapted feminist theories that have been applied in the West to these new cases and concluded that the predicament of the latter is remarkably similar to that suffered by people with eating disorders in the West. Hence, she highlighted the need for 'a proper and deeper understanding of what we really mean by that concept called "culture"' (Nasser 1997: 107). Part of such a move towards a 'deeper understanding' might instigate or facilitate the construction of an alternative, positive ideal for the representation of the female body.

Postmodernist feminists argued for a complex and nuanced analysis of pornography and advertising, in which female consumers were accorded a more discerning, productive and pleasurable role than that of passive victim. Although Kappeler and Bordo did not advocate censorship, their single-line attacks on 'patriarchy' were tinged with what Catharine Lumby perceived as the 'moralistic and reactionary strain of maternalism which lies at the heart of pro-censorship feminism' (Lumby 1997: 59). According to Lumby, pro-censorship feminism 'endorses a vision of society in which right-minded feminists will act as de-facto spiritual parents to the rest of us (with the aid of state power)' (ibid.). Arguing against these views, with regard to the issue of teenage sexuality and representation, Lumby suggested that the debate be extended 'beyond the simple victim scenario in which teenagers are constructed as the innocent and asexual potential victims of monstrous paedophiles' (1997: 74). Using the example of a Calvin Klein ad that had been criticised on these grounds, she cited the facts that children *are* sexual beings, and that today's 'media savvy' teenagers experience more sex, at an earlier age than their parents did. Given this, a more useful approach than censorship, she suggested, would be to promote sex education and media studies, and to discuss openly the fears and desires that advertisements, such as Calvin Klein's, promote in adults. In any case, claimed Lumby, from a political point of view, such reactionary feminism is as ineffectual as negative advertising: it is '*at best* defensive', and 'at worst it amounts to free advertising for the other camp' (1997: 74–5). She claimed that 'even a single advertisement speaks in many voices simultaneously and invokes a range of diverse desires (and fears) across the social spectrum' (1997: 74).

In response to Lumby's claims, Marilyn Lake observed that advertising and pornography offend many more women than those who have been influenced by powerful pro-censorship feminists. Lake suggested that

> Rather than dismiss these women as deluded victims of an outmoded discourse, feminist analysis might seek to explain why it is that the language of degradation and danger continues to speak so powerfully to the subjectivities of so many women.
>
> (Lake 1997: 345)

Lake could have added that these women include young women, gay women and women from 'other' cultures, many of whom have probably never heard of anti-pornography feminism.

Furthermore, Lumby did not address convincingly the fact that the 'diverse desires' of which she speaks are provoked by the media for commercial profit and not for education or the public good. It might be a sound principle to examine one's own motives, and Calvin Klein might be exempt from blame on these grounds. But there cannot be any doubt that the media corporations who are paid to display advertisements to the public are not concerned to examine their own fears and desires about child sexuality. Rather it is in their

interests to disclaim responsibility for questionable sexual desires. The development of cable and on-line delivery systems has enabled conventional media owners to profit inconspicuously from pornography, allowing them simultaneously to maintain their image as defenders of public standards. Lumby does not address this or related ways in which unresolved questions about the ethics of pornography lie ambiguously at the heart of global capitalism. Commenting on another of Lumby's publications on the media, Jeff Sparrow pointed out that she 'nowhere offers any discussion of the basic economics of the media' (Sparrow 1999: 85). He explained that

> Lumby is right to assert that the tabloid media is more complex than is usually imagined. But there's a difference between trying to understand the need that the down-market media fills for ordinary people, and promoting the tabloid media as the locus of great deeds of resistance.
>
> (Sparrow 1999: 85)

Perhaps *Bad Girls* did not go so far in promoting the tabloid media as Sparrow here suggests. By denigrating the political activism of a particular group of feminists, however, Lumby tended to trivialise her own politics, as well as those of the younger generation whom she championed. By comparison, Natasha Walter's programme for 'the new movement in feminism' outlined a more conventional political approach. She said the movement's aim was 'to separate the personal and the political, to reinforce women's personal freedom alongside our political equality' (Walter 1998: 141). To achieve this, she said, 'it is not the business of feminism to clear up our mysterious desires. We can only work towards legal and social and economic and political structures that do not automatically weigh against women' (ibid.).

Rosi Braidotti's advocacy of a range of visual art practices and sci-fi art forms was similar to Lumby's position in that it was a feminist attempt to transcend binary frames through imagination and reinvention. As she put it, 'The challenge here is . . . how to combine the recognition of postmodern embodiment with resistance to relativism and a free fall into cynicism' (Braidotti 1996: 12). Accordingly, Braidotti defined feminist agency, at the subjective level, as a kind of gender performativity. She explained that 'Feminist women who go on functioning in society as female subjects in these post-metaphysical days of decline of gender dichotomies, act 'as if' Woman was still their location' (1996: 24). In other words, they 'treat femininity as an option' and 'simultaneously assert and deconstruct Woman as a signifying practice' (ibid.). Donna Haraway made this strategy compulsory when she insisted that 'We must have agency – or agencies – without defended subjects' (Haraway 1991: 3).

There is a knowing ambiguity entailed in these definitions of feminist agency. We are told that cyberfeminist women seek '*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries', but also that they must exercise *responsibility* in the construction of

boundaries (1991: 50). Given that 'responsibility', in this case, is not grounded in the fixity and ideality of metaphysics, the question arises as to how 'as if' women can responsibly construct boundaries in the 'border war' between organism and machine. The answer appears to be that feminist 'as if' women are responsible only to 'as if' 'territories of production, reproduction, and imagination' (1991: 150). In other words, as artists they have access only to optional feminism and to the fantasy of responsibility and to these only if they keep working, creating and reinventing.

While the effects of these strategies may be humorous, joyful and affirmative, the relegation of responsibility to the realms of the imagination puts on hold notions of the real and the human. Questioning these strategies with regard to the female body in representation, Hal Foster asked:

> Is this 'hybrid body' so different from the fantasy of the subject-in-fantasy, of the subject with magical access to all types of sexualities and differences? Because I think we are now confronted with the limits of this model of fantasy, especially as it is recouped in fashion. And again, I would say this about gender performativity, too. Even Judith Butler, the onetime apostle of this position, has now qualified her own enthusiasms, or the enthusiasms that she helped to release theoretically and politically. Or is this 'hybrid body' another type of subject, for which identities have become not like genders to dress up in but instruments or prostheses to use?
>
> (Foster 1995: 65–6)

Lisa Tickner, too, was sceptical of the embrace of artificiality:

> The avant-garde game is to change the field of possibles. The feminist game is to make that changed field *count*. But then, of course, if humanity turns out to be an evolutionary blip in cosmic time, a fragile link between animal life and a disembodied cyborg intelligence, then gender as we've struggled to understand and to live it will go the way of all other conditions the flesh is heir to. It's hard to imagine a world of virtual eroticism, unparented reproduction, and desexualised intelligence. I'm not sure I want to. Is that what women want?
>
> (Tickner 1995: 45)

Haraway and Braidotti's utopianism was based on recognition of the risks that Foster and Tickner outline. It is perhaps telling, therefore, that artists such as Linda Dement, who aspired to this optimism, tended in their art practices to focus on its precariousness. By these means they wanted to preserve the social function of art in order to 'make that changed field *count*'.

In negotiating a path between utopianism and reality, representation and lived experience, or politics and theory, feminist artists who referenced the

female body had to contend with the ambiguity of these categories, as they are implicated in one another and manifested in art. Elizabeth Grosz suggested when she endorsed Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's proposal for the strategic use by feminists of patriarchal frameworks, that the dilemma facing feminists should not amount to a choice between intellectual rigour and politics, but rather should acknowledge that the two are implicated in one another. It is therefore, said Grosz, 'a question of negotiating a path between always impure positions' (Grosz 1995: 56). Grosz's advice was directed at feminist academics for whom the above might have presented itself as a conscious choice. But I suggest that women artists have never imagined that purity was an achievable goal, or that 'negotiations' might be purely political, consciously feminist or merely intellectual transactions. They have always known that the practical, bodily, visual, temporal and spatial processes of artistic production were also involved.

Taking its cue from feminist art practices, this book does not offer a single definition of feminism, but traces various manifestations of feminism, or feminisms in art. It includes art by women, or groups of women, who, by re-visioning the female nude in order to challenge exclusionary stereotypes and representational ideals of bodily beauty, expanded the scope of feminism to include their own interests and differences from established norms. At the same time, it entertains the possibility that women who were doubtful about or disavowed their relationship to feminism, or who worked in a non-representational or antiocularcentric mode, might nevertheless have produced art that was orientated towards a positive conception of the female body. It does not follow from this methodology that the artist's intention is considered to be irrelevant to an analysis of feminist aesthetics. On the contrary, such information usually provides the analyst with a starting-point from which to plot a trajectory through an uncertain epistemological terrain. Hence, wherever possible, I have represented the views of artists on feminism as expressed to me in the course of interviewing them about their work, or as quoted by others. My strategic bracketing of 'the artist's intention' is based on the view that feminism, in a general and pervasive way, was inscribed in the artistic modes and discursive practices employed by artists since the early 1960s. More particularly it was embodied, ambiguously, in the female nude in art, since it is not only of historical importance but also has become a cultural site for, and thus (in its revised form) a symbol of feminist resistance. The induction of feminism into discourse was an historical process in formation that produced what Foucault might have called an epistemic shift, the current effects of which some call postfeminism. The process perhaps explains why many argue that feminism is no longer politically valid or useful, while others see a role for it in the ethical negotiations of 'queer', the anti-imperialism of postcolonial theory, and the 'return of the real' in art.

Although the issues and theories discussed in this book derive from and are central to the Anglo-American metropolitan centres of contemporary art and feminism, Australian artists produced most of the art that has provided the exam-

ples for my analysis. This perhaps requires some explanation. While feminism has made a significant impact on contemporary art in this country, it has been inflected with local variations by Australia's postcolonial and marginal relationship to the 'centres' of Western culture. The peripheral vision afforded by this Australian perspective is an implicit theme that is revealed through the texture and analysis of my examples rather than through theoretical elaboration. It nevertheless affords insights that may be of value to anyone considering postcolonialism, the effects of hybridisation and the globalisation of culture. With this in view, the book includes, wherever possible, art that addressed, was informed by or alluded to the vexed issue of Australian race-relations, particularly those between so-called 'white' Australians and indigenous Australians. In the historical, political, social and geographical context of Australia, it is this issue that most profoundly troubles identity and related cultural constructs, including the female body in representation.

Since this book has been seeking a positive direction for feminism by avoiding the nihilistic relativism that poststructuralist thinking often entails, it has favoured a general analytical framework, which gives credence to certain normative principles, such as justice and inclusiveness, for the representation of the female body. My analysis of contemporary art has revealed, accordingly, that art by women who referenced the female body was oriented, on the whole, towards a conceptual ideal. This has pointed to the metaphysical underpinnings of feminism, but has not disguised the ambiguities and differences with which feminism must contend, and which poststructuralist techniques such as deconstruction have been most useful in bringing to the fore. The theories of Derrida and Foucault, in particular, have been credited, especially as they were applied in the feminist criticism of Nead, Spivak and Butler. Deleuze and Guattari's speculations on desire have been cited for the insights they offer for a feminist critique. Lacan and Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories have been duly acknowledged, too, although mainly as they were referenced in feminist artistic practices rather than as frameworks for visual art criticism, such as gaze theory. French poststructuralist theories have been found wanting however with regard to political agency, visuality and ethics. This book has shown that by the 1990s feminist artists were looking for new ways to address these concerns, and it has maintained that it was only by negotiating ambiguity, according to a conceptual ideal, that a positive direction was found for the re-visioning of the female body in feminist art production. Whether this ideal will prove to be necessary for the survival of feminism or feminist art production is impossible to predict. But if the ideal is to be abandoned, acknowledgement that it has played a powerful role up to this point might clarify what is at stake here, what is to be gained and what lost, what is to be risked and to what ends.

NOTES

1 FEMINISM, AMBIGUITY AND THE IDEAL

1 For the idea of art as a prosthetic and point of mediation between two bodies I am indebted to Elizabeth Grosz's unpublished manuscript, entitled 'Naked'. Grosz's text was presented as a lecture at the *Body* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (12 September to 16 November 1997), and again in revised form, in Melbourne, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1998.

2 RE-VISIONING THE FEMALE NUDE

1 Caroline Williams's feminist parody of Manet's *Olympia*, *Colin Lacan* (1984–6), is reproduced in H. McDonald, *Caroline Williams: Men*, exhibition catalogue, Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Museum of Art, 1991, cat. no. 14, p. 8. For a discussion and reproduction of Basquiat's antiracist critique of *Olympia* see his *Three Quarters of Olympia without the Servant* (1982) in N. Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 172–80.

2 Marcia Langton discusses Australian, raced constructions of the indigenous, black female body in *'Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television': An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of film making by and about Aboriginal people and things*, North Sydney, Australian Film Commission, 1993. For my introduction to Foley's art I am indebted to D. Losche, 'Badtjala Woman – Fiona Foley's *Native Blood* and *Native Hybrid*', in *Colonial Post Colonial*, exhibition catalogue, Melbourne, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, 1996, pp. 34–5.

3 The most recent catalogue of Ribera's oeuvre is *Jusepe de Ribera 1591–1652* (compiled by Alfonso E. Perez Sanchez and Nicola Spinosa), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992 (distributed by Harry N. Abrams). For a discussion of the Spanish fascination with 'the grotesque', see A. J. McVan, 'Spanish Dwarfs', *Notes Hispanic*, New York, Hispanic Society of America, 1942, pp. 97–129.

3 HISTORICAL AMBIGUITY

1 *Black River*, 1993, was produced by Kevin Lucas and Aanya Whitehead. It is an adaptation of an opera, filmed in the style of a 'music feature' – including Maroochy Baroombah and the Bangarra Dance Theatre. It dramatises the events surrounding the death of an Aboriginal boy in custody, and it was winner of the 1993 Grand Prix IM x Opera Screen, Paris.

The findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–1991) were recorded in *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Overview of the Response by Governments to the Royal Commission*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing

Service, 1992. The Commission 'found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody do not die at a greater rate than non-Aboriginal people die in custody. What was overwhelmingly different was the rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came into custody – 29 times higher than the general community (p. 1)'. The *Overview* records that 'The Royal Commission investigated the deaths of 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody. In doing so it established a vivid profile of the lives of those who died – young people for the most part who had experienced unemployment, inadequate education, separation from their natural families, early contact with the criminal justice system, poor health, problems with alcohol, economic and social disadvantage (p. 5)'.

2 *Sirens*, 1994, was produced by Miramax. It is a feature film starring Hugh Grant, Elle Macpherson and Sam Neill. It is, according to its promotion, 'a story of sensuality and eroticism unleashed' at the idyllic retreat of Australian artist Norman Lindsay. Lindsay was famous in the 1920s for his controversial paintings of female nudes.

3 Foucault's claim in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* that a *scientia sexualis* emerged over subsequent centuries was supported with textual evidence, including the famously specific date of 1870 for the 'implantation' of homosexuality into discourse (Foucault, op. cit., p. 43). He provided no comparable evidence, either visual or textual, that bodies 'made a display of themselves', or even for an *ars erotica*, which he suggested had its roots in ancient Roman practices, and also occurred in China, Japan, India and Arabo-Moslem societies (Foucault, op. cit., p. 57). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault had defined painting, as shot through with discursive practices and, thus, as embodying knowledge-power, like a science. This tends to contradict the logic of his distinction between *scientia* and *ars* as they pertain to sexuality.

4 There is a translation of the testimony of the rape trial of Artemisia Gentileschi in M. Garrard, 'Appendix B. Testimony of the Rape Trial of 1612', in *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 403–88.

5 The shortcomings to which I have pointed in Foucault's argument echo general tendencies that have often been noted in his method or in applications of it by 'new historicists'. Judith Lowder Newton explained, for example, that 'Non-feminist "new historicism" . . . in its non-cultural materialist modes, has been widely criticised for its tendency to insist upon the totalizing power of hegemonic ideologies, ideologies implicitly informed by elite male values and often presented as typical of the way culture itself is constructed as a whole' (J. Lowder Newton, 'History as usual? Feminism and the "New Historicism"', in H. Veeser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 166). Jeffrey Weeks, on the other hand, commented on the historical and political uncertainty in much of Foucault's writing. Weeks explained that 'There is, indeed, much that is ambiguous in (Foucault's) work; some of his history can be, and should be, disputed as history; his political friends have sometimes been dubious, and his political positions muted. His work can and should be contested' (J. Weeks, 'Uses and Abuses of Michel Foucault', in L. Appignanesi (ed.), *Ideas from France: The Legacy of French Theory, ICA Documents*, London, Free Association Books, 1989, p. 50). Weeks conceded these weaknesses, however, in order to stress that 'Foucault's answers are necessarily tentative, indirect, oblique', and that 'these are vital questions and are posed more clearly than ever before' (ibid., p. 57).

4 SEEING AMBIGUITY

1 W. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in B. Wallis (ed.) *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Association with David R. Godine, Inc., Boston, 1984, pp. 297–310.

2 In an essay written before he wrote *Downcast Eyes*, Jay described various 'scopic regimes' that have occurred since the seventeenth century, and he recommended acceptance of a plurality of 'visualities' (M. Jay, 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', in H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, New York, Dia Art Foundation in Association with Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1988, pp. 3–28).

3 Pollock's article, 'What's wrong with "Images of Women"?' was accorded great significance by T. Gouma-Peterson and P. Mathews in 'The Feminist Critique of Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, September 1987, LXIX, 3, p. 338. Gouma-Peterson and Mathews cited Pollock's article and Carol Duncan's 'Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Painting', both published in 1977, as 'major breakthroughs in recognizing and articulating the ideological construct of the female in art and the asymmetry of meanings carried by male and female images', and as providing 'a methodology, iconological and contextual, to be used as an analytical tool in further studies of the subject' (ibid., p. 340).

4 Palma Ragno rejected Pollock's reading of Matisse's and Sleigh's paintings, and, referring to the theories of Jessica Benjamin, proposed an 'intersubjective' reading of the works. I am indebted to Ragno for some of her critical insights. P. Ragno, *Webs and Relationships*, unpublished MA thesis, Victorian College of the Arts, 1997.

5 N. Salaman discusses feminist and homophobic responses to Della Grace's book, *Love Bites*, 'Why have there been no great women pornographers?', in K. Deepwell (ed.), *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 119–25.

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The female nude in art

Helen McDonald

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Art is always ambiguous. When it involves the female body it can also be erotic. *Erotic Ambiguities* is a study of how contemporary women artists have reconceptualised the figure of the female nude. Helen McDonald shows how, over the past thirty years, artists have employed the idea of ambiguity to dismantle the exclusive, classical ideal enshrined in the figure of the nude, and how they have broadened the scope of the ideal to include differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability as well as gender.

McDonald discusses the work of a wide range of women artists, including Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Mary Duffy, Zoe Leonard, Tracey Moffatt, Pat Brassington and Sally Smart. She traces the shift in feminist art practices from the early challenge to patriarchal representations of the female nude to contemporary, 'postfeminist' practices, influenced by theories of performativity, queer theory and postcoloniality. McDonald argues that feminist efforts to develop a more positive representation of the female body need to be reconsidered, in the face of the resistant ambiguities and hybrid complexities of visual art in the late 1990s.

Helen McDonald is an Honorary Fellow in the School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.

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Helen McDonald

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PLATES

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