

Hirsute bodies: the reclamation of the feminine in contemporary South African art

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the presence and the significance of hair in the work of contemporary South African artists Penny Siopis, Tracey Rose and Nandipha Mntambo. The use of this material, a substance embedded in the body and characterizing its appearance, is indicative of a desire to validate the material body and reclaim its connection with the feminine. The author argues for a return to the theories of the French Feminists, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who were the initial proponents of the idea of *l'écriture féminine* (feminine writing). The feminine text, which enjoyed currency in the seventies, is again relevant for the analysis of these artists' work in light of their calculated use of hair to both explore and exploit the position of the feminine. The author contrasts the French Feminists' use of strategic essentialism with Judith Butler's constructionist model that forecloses the potential of the pre-discursive outside.

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Introduction

1. Untangling the project's roots

Fair tresses man's imperial race insnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair...

Now Jove suspends his golden scales in air
Weighs the men's wits against the lady's hair;
The doubtful beam long nods from side to side;
At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside.
-Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (online)

In *The Rape of the Lock*, hair, because of its seductive physical appeal, betokens an important site for the regulation of a disruptive feminine sexuality. Initially Alexander Pope uses hair to denote a carnal, ensnaring femininity; yet hair is not a resolved category. Hair can be taken to indicate masculinity, often in order to denote a virile sexuality. This dissertation will argue that because hair sprouts from both female and male bodies its multifarious cultural manifestations – including beards, moustaches, pony-tails, dreadlocks, wigs, plaits and cornrows - give this material unique scope to traverse usually inflexible hierarchical boundaries. Central to the investigation is the ambiguous position of hair on both sides of the binary oppositions between nature and culture, inside and outside, feminine and masculine. I will argue that hair, as an undecideable symbol, is thus able to question the validity of these divisions. Those who wish to escape the fundamental Cartesian hierarchies pervasive in Western society, those who desire to open up an in-between third space, a place of being otherwise, normally struggle to transcend these philosophical oppositions. Hair is a potent symbolic material whose ambiguous status gives it an ability to blur boundaries and facilitate the access to that which falls outside the control of the border – the philosophical anomaly of ‘the feminine’.

Sociologist Raymond Firth comments on hair saying that “it is striking to note how out of this sluggish, physiologically almost functionless appurtenance of his body, man has imaginatively created a feature of such socially differentiating and symbolic power” (1973:263). Above all, hair functions as “a manipulable representation of the entire person” (Firth 1973:296) that is routinely employed in displays of cultural and political acquiescence or rebellion². In effect hair plays an important role in expressions of power and place in society, demonstrating the dynamic interaction between nature and culture.

This dissertation investigates how hair has been exploited by three contemporary female South African artists, Penny Siopis, Tracey Rose and Nandipha Mntambo. Each approaches hair so differently that they are placed in their own individual chapters and the discussion positions each within the context of her personal exploration of hair. Despite the manifest differences, the common thread that binds these artists is their reliance upon the connection of hair to the body, and each focuses on the materiality of a specifically female sexual identity that is produced in relation to the feminine/maternal.

This dissertation analyzes the work of these artists in order to deconstruct the position of ‘woman’ and the space of femininity, whilst simultaneously investigating the manifestation of potential ‘feminine spaces’, the invisible outside to the reign of discourse, which could perhaps be re-created by returning to the original bond with the materiality of the body. I argue that by using hair in their attempt to represent the ambiguous materiality of feminine embodiment, that is culturally both denigrated and deified, these artists engage with the influential notion of *l’écriture féminine* [feminine writing]. This body of theory that achieved notoriety in the late seventies and eighties by urging women to write their own bodies into discourse will form the theoretical basis of this analysis.

L’écriture féminine relies upon the relationship between sexual identity and the body, offering a material basis for difference whilst contesting traditionally denigrating aspersions on femininity. Anxiety around the relationship of the body to the self is

² Examples of this are the role of the Afro in asserting a militant identification with blackness for the Black Panthers, the long unkempt hair of the seventies hippies, or conversely the shaved hair of the soldier or alternatively of the Holocaust prisoner.

manifest in recent theoretical debates. Increasing incursions of media and technology upon the subject's experience of his/her own body threaten the status of the body as a site of experiential truth and material reality. I investigate the need to return to the theory of *l'écriture féminine* in order to contest the recent de-materialization of sexuality in some poststructuralist theory. In addition, in the wake of post-apartheid discourses about identity that interrogate politically promulgated racial and sexual differences, this inquiry challenges the assumptions that expressions of particularized embodiment are reactionary and based in perilous essentialisms. Instead I scrutinize references to sexual difference that reaffirm essential difference in order to promote an independent female identity that is not controlled by the social realm of the Symbolic but ventures outside the linguistic matrix³. A strategic resumption of essentialism that takes cognizance of the complexity and complicity of assertions of identity combats the postmodern tendency to fracture and disperse difference.

2. Woman's 'crowning glory' and 'site of shame'

Hair itself has often featured in discourses of essential identity by itself underpinning the implementation of racism and sexism. Because of this, it has received much attention in sociologist, feminist and black theory as a site for the contestation of these injurious discourses. It is a substance that is always already discursively constructed, playing a role in determining the position of the subject because it allows the onlooker an easy opportunity to read sexual, racial and even political affiliations. Its visibility and malleability means that it becomes a material that routinely performs, but also contests, notions of cultural and sexual identity. It is easily altered – shaped, shaved, or covered – in order to enact cultural identity or to politicize it: “hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and values” (Mercer 1994:101). Hair is a purveyor of cultural rituals.

Particularly important for ritual is the fact that hair is the only prominent feature of the body... which is at the same time capable of painless amputation, infinite manipulation, and endless regeneration... (Levine 1995:85).

³ The Symbolic is based on Freud's post-Oedipal subject's relationship with society. In keeping with Lacan's poststructuralist reevaluation of psychoanalysis, the advent of the Symbolic is co-terminus with the child's recognition of the paternal law, as well as his/her initiation into the structures of representation and language. Lacan posited two prior stages: the Real and the Imaginary which are foreclosed by the onset of the Symbolic. The Symbolic is the structure that underpins society and operates as the realm of representation, using language to position the subject in relation to the paternal law.

A change in hairstyle marks transition of the maturation cycles of the individual and his/her position within society (Alexander & Schouten 1989), and dressing, cutting or shaving of hair marks the state where the subject is “momentarily undefined, occupying the liminal space between the former self and the new identity” (Blocker 1999:87). The artist who uses hair accesses the transgressive potential of the liminal, that which falls between and outside of defining categories.

According to traditional psychoanalysis, woman who is both fundamentally lacking and monstrously excessive exists in a liminal state like that of the abject. Hair is similarly undefined, occupying an ambiguous position both inside and outside. Julia Kristeva’s work on abjection shows the psychic importance of the boundary between inside and outside (1982), making hair a powerful site for regulation because of its horrific ability to conjoin and collapse the two. The act of regulating boundary zones, both physical and psychic, brings illusions of coherency and a bounded body. Encompassed within the theory of the abject is the knowledge of the threat posed by the all-encompassing physicality of the maternal body from which the subject had to separate itself in order to accede to the Symbolic order. The psychic borders produced by this separation have to be policed in order to avoid the psychosis of undifferentiated identification. Kristeva explores the anxiety provoked by liminality, by looking at that which threatens the boundaries of the body (be that an individual, sexual, cultural or political corpus). In light of this, the social norms of depilation and hair ‘maintenance’ are considered as a cultural manifestation of a regulatory urge to maintain and fix borders. Coincidentally, practices of women’s hair removal became a norm in the USA in a time when other markers of sexual difference were being eroded; the cultural need to maintain the polarities of sexual difference increasingly imposed depilatory conventions on women’s bodies (Toerin & Wilkinson 2003:340).

Yet hair, already ‘dead’ when it emerges from the skin, can also become a sign of the abject itself: “[t]o find a scalp hair in one’s food or a pubic hair in one’s bath may cause acute revulsion.” (Firth 1973:287) Detached from the body, its inert materiality is reminiscent of the corpse – the ultimate realization of the abject (Kristeva 1982:4). Death is threatening because it is the state in which the abject takes over the body entirely and that anxiously patrolled boundary is obliterated. Death, as radically strange and unknown, is philosophically linked to the feminine (Bronfen 1992).

The ambiguous position of hair in relation to the feminine is borne out by its literary status as both a woman's 'crowning glory' and site of her shame⁴. Elizabeth Gitter, in her article on the cultural significance of hair in the Victorian era, demonstrates how descriptions of a woman's hair historically denote her sexuality and moral stature. There is a traditional metonymic link that moves from a woman's hair to her character and back (1984:941). In this instance hair's ambiguous status as both a woman's crowning glory and her marker of shame symbolizes the struggle to fix the woman's identity and desire. According to Gitter, a woman's hair often stands in for her voice "becoming a strange prosthesis for her absent tongue" (1984:938). In contemporary art, voicing feminine desire through excessive uncontrolled eruptions of hairiness is a method for resisting the silencing of a potentially chaotic 'other' space, whilst still occupying the realm designated by the Symbolic as feminine (and the attendant connection with excessive body)⁵.

Sigmund Freud privileged hair as a fetishistic material. By covering over and standing in for the mother's penis, hair is explicitly connected with the Oedipal complex and the separation from the plenitude of the maternal body (1959:201). Fetishism psychically enfolds hair – moving from the pubic area to the head in an upward displacement – in the Oedipal context, in emerging sexuality and significantly in the fundamentally 'lacking' maternal body. Freud touches upon three defining characteristics of hair, namely its ability to cover, to act as a form of clothing and conversely to render the subject more 'naked'⁶, and its relationship with the embodied, sexualized body. Freud's theory of the fetish holds that hair, whilst indicative of woman's lack-in-being (replacing the fantasized phallus), also ties women to the excessive body. Freud shows in *Medusa's Head* that the rampant multiplication of penis symbols (Medusa's many serpentine locks) indicate phallic lack, and he therefore produces a version of femininity situated precariously between

⁴ Interestingly, hair features less often and less effusively in early literary and mythological descriptions of men – with some notable exceptions (i.e. Samson and Cain).

⁵ Fournier points out the problems of 'giving voice' to the voiceless, the other, by showing that it reproduces the master/slave dialectic (2002:72). By voicing that which is resistant to verbalization, one risks the erasure of that other – rather than their exposure. However, Cixous argues that this body voice is an otherwise voice, always outside the structuration of the linguistic signifier and therefore not liable towards co-option by that system.

⁶ Ruth Barcan's study shows hair as a symbol of both "innocence (covering, clothing) and obscenity (brute nature), civilization and savagery" (2004:25).

the immaterial absence of lack and conversely an excessive materiality that anxiously produces an over-abundance of threatening phallic symbols.

In Hélène Cixous' seminal essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, the Medusa - a mythological figure that Freud employed to explain man's castration anxiety - is re-appropriated in order to signal an alternative model of feminine sexuality. Working from within the position of the patriarchally determined feminine sphere, Cixous' Medusa is both beautiful and laughing (1976:885). Cixous contests and transforms the threatening fearful spectre of the sexualized, phallic woman into a new empowered icon of an alternative femininity. This struggle against 'phallogocentrism'⁷ was to form the basis of her influential theory of *l'écriture féminine*.

3. *L'écriture féminine*

In the 1970s, Cixous theorized a new relationship with the structures of language that have kept women as the enigmatic cipher of man's desire, the inferior 'other', arranging the level of subjectivity available around that of the universalized masculine. Her writing served as a rallying call to challenge hierarchies of representation that reiterate outdated dualisms, and to rework and deconstruct injurious discourses into agentic explorations of feminine libidinal economies⁸ by concentrating upon the materiality of feminine embodiment. The theory of *l'écriture féminine*, although "never able to be theorized, enclosed, coded" (Cixous 1976:883), laid out a new relationship with language, that argued that "women must write through their bodies" to explore alternative, radically different ways of expressing the self in order to combat 'phallogocentrism' (Cixous 1976:886). Whilst the idea of *l'écriture féminine* had many critics, writer Susan Suleiman has argued that *The*

⁷ 'Phallogocentrism' is a term coined by the French Feminists to refer to the symbolic system of logic that is underpinned by the centrality of the phallus – in effect a patriarchally determined social structure.

⁸ Cixous used the phrase 'libidinal economy' to escape the biological determinism of the categories of 'men' and 'women'. The notion of a libidinal economy is less restrictive than categorical statements of difference. She theorized that in contrast to the masculine libidinal economy that runs patriarchal society and emphasized logic, closure and the centrality of the phallus, the freedom of a feminine libidinal economy is needed in order to revolutionize society.

¹⁰ Kelly Oliver explains the problems associated with the categorization of these theorists under the rubric of 'French Feminists' – none being actually French, nor espousing the Feminist cause (1993:163-169). However their translation into English was and is attended by much interest in feminist circles. Expanding on this, Christine Delphy argues that the creation of the term 'French Feminists' could be construed as the displacement of the blame for the return to essentialism in American feminist circles (1995).

Laugh of the Medusa provides “the closest thing to an avant-garde manifesto written from an explicitly feminist perspective” (1990:17), sparking a new wave of feminist art in the late seventies and eighties.

L'écriture féminine should be seen as part of a broader project by these post-Lacanian philosophers – generally referred to in the English context as the French Feminists¹⁰ – to theorize the body's insertion into language with reference to the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother. For Hélène Cixous this was embodied in *l'écriture féminine*, similarly for Luce Irigaray this involved imagining a *parler femme* [talk to/between women], whilst Julia Kristeva, the third main protagonist of this ‘school’ of thought, argued that the revolutionary potential of ‘poetic language’ was deeply enmeshed in the maternal relationship. These theories reacted against the increasingly cerebral conception of language as absolutely separate from the libidinal drives (exemplified by Jacques Lacan's notion of the paternally signified Symbolic). Although their arguments are structured differently, in their need to create a conceptual framework for feminine subjectivity these women concentrated on the space that had traditionally been assigned to the feminine within Western philosophy – outlined by Cixous as “passivity”, “nature”, “night”, “mother”, “feeling”, “matter... upon which the movement treads, receptacle” (1977:64). Hélène Cixous argued that *l'écriture féminine's* revolutionary potential lay in its inscription of that which has been systematically excluded and reviled by masculine discourse, looking to the pre-linguistic maternal plenitude to ground a version of feminine sexuality that did not rely upon the phallus.

The French Feminists based their work on Lacan's ideas of a pre-Symbolic space – one not ruled by laws governing the linguistically enabled. And whilst this space can only be accessed retroactively through the mediation of the Symbolic, its putative presence forms the basis of the subject's unconscious. It is the “necessary ‘outside’” whose negation enables the system's centre (Butler 1999:16). This space is designated as feminine as it is diametrically opposed to the paternally signified Symbolic, and is embedded in the relationship with the mother. Maternity became a central theme for these theorists, who felt that this position had been sidelined by the role of the paternal term in the Oedipal scene. It was therefore necessary to investigate the time before the separation from the mother. Extrapolating Freudian

and Lacanian theory, the French Feminists argued that the materiality of the maternal form creates (and also exceeds) possibilities for conceptualization. The bond with the mother is before language, and exists in a space that is pre-sexual, but not un-gendered because it is “‘born’ in relation both to feminine sexual specificity and desire” and engages with “what will constitute, as sexual, elements of *jouissance*, trauma and inter-subjectivity” (Pollock 2004:26). This is the feminine space that *l’écriture féminine* meant women to access, thereby creating a feminine text. However, *l’écriture féminine* is defined by a contradiction: access to the discursive outside, the feminine, is foreclosed by the advent of the Symbolic, and yet in order to lay claim to the feminine, women have to traverse the boundaries of the Symbolic and bring into signification its antithesis. The feminine falls outside the control and understanding of the Symbolic. It is the fundamental foundation out of which the Symbolic grows and upon which the Symbolic depends.

Where Lacan asserts that “[t]here is no woman who is not” (cited in Shepherdson 2003:139), he makes clear that the Symbolic realm names ‘woman’ as a negative, without fully knowing that which it names (Shepherdson 2003:139). Something of ‘woman’ then escapes the law and cannot be brought under the control of the structure. This opens the possibility that actual women could have the potential for subversive interventions. The impossibility of philosophically resolving the position of ‘woman’ within the patriarchal system of representation lent credence to the notion of a feminine space outside of the functioning of discourse.

In Diana Fuss’s classic text, *Essentially speaking: feminism, nature and difference*, she argues that for Lacan and Derrida, woman as enigmatic excess, as truth, lack, other or *objet a* operates as the repository of a re-deployed essence (1989:13). Therefore for the French Feminists “to essentialize ‘woman’ can be a politically strategic gesture of displacement” (Fuss 1989:71), because “the dominant line of patriarchal thought since Aristotle is built on this central contradiction: woman has an essence and it is matter; or, to put it slightly differently, it is the essence of woman to have no essence” (Fuss 1989:72). To talk of ‘woman’ is to invoke this contradiction, to point to the absence of an adequate philosophy of femininity. Because ‘woman’ as a subject position is defined around the masculine, speaking from this position necessitates a relationship with the master narrative of masculinity – with the potential

for opposition. A tactical resumption of identity exposes the “failure of the signifier” and enables critical disidentificatory processes (Butler 1993:219).

Cixous invokes the imagined ‘woman’ that resists symbolization by remaining outside the category of ‘being’, while simultaneously she addresses the specificity of the experiences of actual women. Her work addresses a need to reconcile the two alienated spheres of the feminine, that which falls under the paternal law and that which escapes signification. “When I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.” (Cixous 1976:875-876). Woman (as universal subject) remains within the given ideological constraints of a signifier held in place by “force and violence” that “designate[s] that which cannot be classified” (Cixous cited in Conley 1991:129). When Cixous says “woman must write her self” (1976:875), she implicitly takes up Lacan’s challenge, arguing that women must believe in an identity (a self) and must create this identity by confronting their phallogocentric signifiers (‘woman’)¹².

Cixous argues that women are the privileged explorers of a discursive outside, because of their connection to the maternal function. It is in writing, in creative expression, that woman may speak with the mother: in so doing she re-births herself and her fantasized relationship with the maternal figure (Irigaray 2000b:249). This continuity supposedly creates an alternative discourse to the one imaged and imagined by a paternal genealogy, although the tendency of the masculine imaginary always to shape Symbolic representations inhibits getting in touch with drives that originate in the pre-discursive space of maternal origin. The intimate connection between a mother and her daughter means that “a woman is never far from ‘mother’... She writes in white ink.” (Cixous 1976:881).

¹² Cixous follows Derrida when she talks of writing as involving the “very possibility of change” (1976:879). “Strategic reasons... have motivated the choice of this word [writing] to designate ‘something’ which is no longer tied to writing in the traditional sense any more than it is to speech or to any other type of mark... [W]hat is at stake is precisely the attempt to put this concept into question and to transform it.” (Derrida cited in Kirby 1997:60) In light of this, the words ‘writing’, ‘écriture’, ‘text’ will be used expansively and applied to the visual arts and the idea of representation.

The French Feminists who are highly aware of the dangers of essentializing sexual difference adopt essentialism as a strategy in order to question philosophical traditions that use binary oppositions in order to keep women outside subjectivity. Nonetheless, their work does engage with a potentially problematic naturalization of the feminine libido as radically other to the masculine – implicitly more connected to the body, more continuous, tangible and mobile¹³. As Stephen Frosh has warned the result of the adoption of *l'écriture féminine* can produce

a picture of femininity that is not, in its detail, remarkably different from many conventional (male) images of women: inconsistent and intuitive, with a sexuality that is less clearly directed and more tactile than that of men. (1999:239)

Yet whilst Cixous' manifestos write of, and therefore could be said to reproduce, these dualisms, her proposal also allows for an ambiguous occupation of these injurious terms so that the materialization of sexuality may be brought into language. These "marks of femininity" (Frosh 1999:239), although often not far from those ordained by patriarchy, operate to strategically cite norms of sexual difference and thus mobilize and displace the "necessary error of identity" that determines a woman's relationship to representation¹⁴ (Butler 1993:229). A return to *l'écriture féminine* reconstructs sexual difference, in order to question the precepts that rely on fictions of identity to propagate and then to displace and subvert their effects. Post-colonial feminist Gayatri Spivak's response to a question on the proper use of strategic essentialism demonstrates the strength within this position and that of the French Feminists:

... [s]ince the moment of essentialising, universalizing, saying yes to the ontological 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

¹³ Each of the three has different ways of addressing the issue of sexual difference, with Kristeva's being arguably the least essentialist. In light of this, it might come as a surprise that it is Kristeva who has come under the most sophisticated theoretical critique. Judith Butler argues that Kristeva's apparently non-essentialist stance re-deployed essentialism: "the paternal law... is displaced by an equally univocal signifier, the principle of the maternal body" (1990:116).

¹⁴ The manifestation of an artist's sexual identity within his/her work is repeatedly sought after. Nandipha Mntambo, one of the artists under discussion, laughingly described the shock that some viewers sustained when they realized that the artist, whom they had been imagining was a man, was in fact a woman. She found this experience a profoundly interesting one, and one that shows the potential her work has to occupy an ambiguous space. (2006, pers. comm.)

we can rather than make the totally counter productive gesture of repudiating it... (cited in Kirby 1997: 155)

Countering the witch-hunt for essentialism, Spivak affirms the exploration of the ontological status of the female body within a self-consciously essentialist framework, like that of *l'écriture féminine*. However, the danger in returning to that position of supposed ontological stability is the possibility that doing so reinforces traditional hierarchies of sexual difference rather than effecting subversion.

The picture of femininity that emerged when *l'écriture féminine* was adopted by the English-speaking world initially echoed the problems of engaging with the subject position of 'woman'. American feminist artists, whose work involved the revalorization of feminine icons and mobilization around the female bodily experience, found the theories of *l'écriture féminine* especially stimulating and applicable to their projects in the late seventies and early eighties. Various methodologies were developed to reiterate the radical 'otherness' of the feminine sex and to create an alternative discourse of imaging based upon woman's erotogenicity. By representing the blind-spot of Western discourse, these feminists aimed to establish an alternative discourse of sexuality, challenging the exclusionary logic of the male gaze. However the work of the most famous proponent of feminist art in the seventies, Judy Chicago, solidified femininity around floral, vaginal imagery, encoding feminine sexuality within the lexicon of masculine designation.

Almost thirty years after Cixous conceived of *l'écriture féminine*, this sort of feminist avant-garde has disappeared amidst the reaction against this ostensibly essentialist feminist art in the eighties, which occurred alongside a critical move against feminist body art. In 1982, Mary Kelly, the anti-essentialist feminist art critic leading the offensive against embodied practices of art-making for women, asserted:

Most women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in the work have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look, or question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity. (cited in A. Jones 1998:24)

Art historian Amelia Jones points out that in predicating art on the artist's embodiment

male body artists begin from an assumption that their embodiment brings with it the potential for transcendence (the promise of penis-as-phallus), the female body artist must grapple with her assignment, within the visual logic of heterosexist patriarchy, to passive immanence (lacking body-image as phallic substitute). (1998:153)

In this task, the contemporary feminist artist who engages with the body needs to constantly re-engage with the injury of the image of a passive, supine female body as fecund receptacle without recourse to agency.

Yet, this dissertation argues that the ideals that Cixous envisioned are relevant for the work of contemporary artists whose reiterative return to the female body – in various guises – demonstrates ongoing concerns about the representation of femininity and the effect of the body’s sexualized materiality upon the forms produced. I contend that contemporary artists engaged in materially inscribing the multifaceted nature of female embodiment are articulating the complexity of the contemporary relationship between discourse and the body, whilst they desire to both affirm difference and escape discursive matrix by looking towards the revolutionary feminine.

4. Negotiating the material body with recourse to Judith Butler

In light of poststructuralist philosophy, negotiating the materiality of the sexed body has become an overriding concern within feminist theory, sparking what has been termed ‘materialist feminism’. Materialist feminisms, although highly divergent on many issues, concentrate upon deconstructing the ontological status of the crudescent body. The work of Judith Butler, a poststructuralist, feminist and queer theorist, which stems from the materialist feminist discourse, demonstrates the danger within the representation of the sexed body that relies too heavily on the ontological stability of material sexual difference.

Butler answers the fundamental question: “But what about the materiality of the body, *Judy?*”¹⁵ by demonstrating the materializing effects of discourse and convention.

Butler, who critiques the stance of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, initiates a discourse around sexual difference by emphasizing its fundamental theatricality, its discursive

¹⁵ Butler quotes this mocking and repressive question in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of ‘sex’*, showing that it acted as a catalyst for her subject (1993: ix, original italics).

production. Informed by the psychoanalytic tradition, her work has excited much interest and debate, achieving a cult-like status around the world¹⁶. Her radical questioning of the ontology of sexual difference dismisses any “illusion of a true body beyond the law” (1992:175) - variously the maternal body imagined by Irigaray and Cixous existing before and outside the cultural laws that bind bodies to specific historical organizations, or the sexed body upon which the discursive conventions of gender are produced¹⁷. Changing the pre-linguistic expressive ‘white ink’ to “a *paternal* causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality” (Butler 1992:173), Butler radically forecloses the belief in the maternal origin, upon which Cixous’ notion of a generative space within sexual difference depends¹⁸. Butler then takes the poststructuralist constructionism to its logical conclusion, and claims the sexed body emerges from reiterative performative citation¹⁹ thereof that installs and retroactively produces the materiality of the sexed body over time (1993:10-11). In effect “the corporeal body has disappeared behind the veil of language” (Salomonsen 2003:104).

Butler posits that in the reiterative application of the ‘necessary error of identity’ there are possibilities for displacing the power of the law – power produces the possibilities for its own undoing (1993:229). The performative interpellation of the law necessarily produces that which it names, as well as something that exceeds the confines of the law’s interpellation (1993:14). Butler posits citation, the subversive

¹⁶ Judith Butler’s work on the discursive performativity of sex has prompted websites, ‘fanzines’, dissertations and conferences – achieving the same cult-like status as Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (Matisons 1998:17).

¹⁷ Feminist theory has long been concerned with the separation of sex from gender – arguing that the one is natural and the other cultural. By separating the two categories, feminists hope to demonstrate the fundamental ways in which gender is produced upon a body marked as female, thus deconstructing the biological determinism of an essentially feminine identity. Butler takes this a step further, arguing that not only is gender socially produced but sex is itself the product of language (1990:9-10).

¹⁸ Cixous writes that “a woman is never far from ‘mother’... She writes in white ink.” (1976:881) For Cixous it is the mother who makes language, especially a ‘feminine’ language, possible. The mother-daughter relationship in its inter-subjective dynamic creates the possibilities for a loving return to the creative body. (1976:881-2).

¹⁹ For this notion of performative citation Butler relies upon J. L. Austin’s work on the performative in language and a Derridean concept of citationality to formulate her theories. Austin analyzes the role of specific linguistic performances that create that which they name. The performance of language is in itself actively productive (Austin 1975). Derrida shows that citation does not rely upon the original will of the speaker or performer, instead it is derivative and therefore potentially ungovernable (Butler 1993:13).

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari’s body-without-organs similarly de-materializes sex, however the effects of their theory on the feminist movement have been less profound than those of Judith Butler, because her work touches on the bedrock of feminist theory – the binary opposition between masculine and feminine.

performance of language, as the very purveyor of agency (1993:220). The space of action against the law (which Butler would therefore expand to include a wider definition than just the feminine) is produced within the paternal law – “the failure of identificatory phantasms constitutes the site of resistance to the law” (Butler 1993:105).

In keeping with the de-materialization of bodies that the popularity of virtual reality, cyber-sex and plastic surgery has led to, Butler’s claims are increasingly globally accessible²¹. Mass marketing of these phenomena means that more people are playing with identity, pushing the limits of their bodies. Her work is arguably more efficacious in theorizing the possibilities of subversion and resistance because of her theory of performativity, than that of Cixous and Irigaray. Their work, because it produces an-other discourse, an-other imaginary, is transposed into a utopian future tense (Robinson 2000:287). Similar to Kristeva’s criticism of the ideals of *l’écriture féminine*, Butler states: “the feminist resistance to the symbolic unwittingly *protects* the father’s law by celebrating feminine resistance to the less enduring and less efficacious domain of the imaginary.” (Butler 1993:106, original italics).

5. A post-feminist agenda

However, when post-feminist²³ Diane Davis compares the work of Judith Butler with that of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, she reveals the productive tension that binds their work. Davis, by conjoining the theories of the four, notes how all attempt to open up a ‘third space’, a space of being otherwise, contingent upon identity’s terms but unafraid to occupy these terms in order to exceed their signifying limits. Davis

²³ Davis defines herself as a post-feminist. It is hard to find a definition of this term and it seems to achieve a nominal coherence only when described and defined by critics, who feel that it undoes the achievements of the second wave feminists. However, Davis’ description, which is examined in more detail in the body of the text, asserts both the need to move away from a certain phallic mode of second wave feminist discourse and proposes post-feminism as a project that is informed by, and grows out of this movement but without its reductive equality. Instead, post-feminism, which grows out of a postmodern legacy, looks towards an as-yet-undefined ‘third space’ of being differently and revels in its inconsistencies and ambiguities.

moves between the French Feminists' opening up of the feminine as that excluded space of radical subversive potential – available to both sexes – and Butler's later work that opens up sex as a site of contingent performance. Thus Davis maps out a post-feminist programme that is unafraid to mobilize the terms of identity in order to assert their contingency, refusing "to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural" (Cixous 1976:875). Her essay links their work with the ideals of post-feminism, where the politics is "pulsional, equivocal, 'flirtational'" (1995:133). In her assertion of a post-feminist programme, Davis demonstrates the radical potential of the feminine-in-language – that space that mimes, hyperbolizes and laughs at language.

Poststructuralist philosophy, which links the seemingly divergent theories of Butler and the French Feminists, informs their pluralization of the feminist programme and their radical investigation of the Symbolic. Based upon the assumption that sexuality is the foundational site of the operations of the Symbolic, these theories meld Freudian and Lacanian theories into a potentially radical post-feminist programme. Whilst visual culture theorist Angela McRobbie defines post-feminism as the "active process whereby feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined" by what appears to be "a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (2004: 255), Davis terms post-feminism a "radically other, radically out of bounds" move against the phallogocentrism of second wave feminism (1995:129). Post-feminism moves away from the appropriation of phallic power that desires "only our fair share of the very thing that has oppressed us, the power of the Other" (Davis 1995:128), and, according to Davis, demands the removal of binaries and the engagement with an entirely new mobile concept of self: "a third position outside the dichotomy" of phallogocentrism and gynocentrism (1995:130). Thus post-feminism could provide a general rubric within which to place this exploration of materiality because it moves beyond the rigid political agenda of feminism and opens the way for a new engagement with the Symbolic²⁴.

²⁴ This theoretical terrain is not unproblematically applied to these artists' work. Following Penny Siopis' reservations around post-feminism (in Coombes 1997:128), we need to acknowledge that the issue of sex and gender is still deeply rooted in the political. Post-feminism, as it is read here, does not eschew the political, but it is less intent upon engaging in direct opposition to the paternally signified symbolic. Deeply concerned with the sexual nature of identity, post-feminism operates strategically in order to open a 'third space'.

6. Representing the sexed body

Yet there remain differences between the ideas of the French Feminists and those of Judith Butler. The divergent theories produce two versions of the sexed body – the former produced prior to the law, and the latter produced and materialized *only* by the performative interpellation of the law. Butler describes the materiality of the sexed body as the result of “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” so that the material bedrock of the body disappears (1999:43). By radically de-stabilizing the foundations of ‘sex’, Butler removes the possibilities for an ontologically pure body and displaces the phenomenology of embodied sexuality, arguably making the lived, material body disappear.

The return to that body as a site of identity, utilizing “this fictitious unity as a causal principle” (Foucault cited in Butler 1992:174) is arguably indicative of this anxious longing for a return to strategic essentialism. This dissertation will argue that several contemporary female artists manifest an interest in the physicality of the sexualized body in order to re-affirm the radical quality of the feminine. Their work returns, somewhat hopefully and often skeptically, to the ideas embodied in *l’écriture féminine* of a certain innate materiality of sexual difference, and this is perhaps indicative of a nostalgia generated by the innovations of Butler’s writing.

Simultaneously the ambiguities of the third space that *l’écriture féminine* opens allow artists to traverse from skepticism to a longing for a restored stability, a renewed physicality. Feminist Valérie Fournier argues that, “[t]he body, its mass of flesh, its sentience, pain, bleeding, provides a source of ‘reality’”, yet to return to this ‘real’, involves “the dissemblage and re-assemblage of bodies and ideas” (2002:69).

Bypassing Butler’s argument that “[t]he female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation” (1999:119), this investigation will show that artists return to the female body in search of a pre-discursive ‘real’, reassembling the ideas of philosophical traditions into new forms that echo the cultural constructions of lived bodies. It is the claim of this dissertation that currently artists are valorizing the proposals of the *écriture féminine* movement and this is distinguishable in a certain bodily aesthetic emerging within the art of South Africa.

South African art manifests a continued concern with notions of identity constructed and constrained by the particularized body. The terms of cultural production, having shifted “from the demands of combat to those of self-definition, from strategies of boycott and confrontation to those of critical engagement”, revisit the body to both critically deconstruct and simultaneously affirm the fictions of selfhood (Richards 1991:103). Art historian Liese van der Watt contends that the work of contemporary South African artists frequently coalesces around the body as the site for articulating a more complex and nuanced notion of identity (2004:49). And it is the female body that, as artist and writer Mgcineni ‘Pro’ Sobopha notes, provokes “the debates around politics of representation... [which] still reflect the unresolved tensions and conflicts that underpin artistic practice in South Africa” where the problem of speaking for ‘the other’ has elicited much passionate and vitriolic debate around the ethics of representation in the wake of *apartheid* (2005:121).

7. Outline of chapters

In 1997 Penny Siopis - who forms the focus of Chapter One - was amongst the artists singled out by art theorist Okwui Enwezor because of her anxious repetitive representations of the ‘other’, of black women (Atkinson & Breitz 1999:18). Enwezor argued that Siopis, along with a number of other white female artists, was appropriating, and therefore abusing, the bodies of black women, and silencing these women’s new-found freedom. The artists were accused of maintaining a fantasy of the black body as the eternal abject other (Atkinson & Breitz 1999:18)²⁵. Penny Siopis, internationally renowned since the eighties, was included in Sue Williamson’s seminal book on *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989) and has been a steadfast critic of racist discourse, so this attack was rather unexpected. Her work, which aimed to “place the presence of black women, as historical protagonists, in the frame, in the picture, on the historical stage” (Siopis 1999:255), insisted upon the legacy of identity divisions. However in light of *apartheid* abuses of personal rights, the possibility for inter-subjective explorations between women of different races was viewed as impossible, and merely reproductive of the madam/maid (extrapolated from the

²⁵ This critique and the accompanying debates on representational rights culminated in the creation of Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz’ *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (1999).

master/slave) dialectic. In Siopis' most recent work it is the constructions of whiteness, especially white femininity, that come under scrutiny. Effectively Siopis has moved her exploration of the position of the 'other' into one that explores the legacy of selfhood and sameness.

Siopis initially made her name with her 'cake paintings' – works that built up an excessively material surface of paint by applying it with icing nozzles (Figure 1). The conventional attributes of female sexuality, namely excess and physicality, are embodied by her earlier peachy pink abstractions and her latest depictions of traditional representations of femininity. I will argue that from the rampant materiality of this surface to her latest work, which uses cheaply bought hair extensions to exceed the picture surface, Siopis evinces her desire to manifest a material feminine.

For this artist hair, which first emerged within her oeuvre in the curling painted swirls of her eroticized cake paintings (Figure 1), is intimately connected with the feminine body as well as the relationship between mother and daughter. Simultaneously the endless negotiation with the constraining influence of society and social norms is reflected in Siopis' multifarious manifestations of this material, which build upon its ambiguous symbolism²⁶.

Siopis' recent work re-appropriates a methodology developed for her 'history paintings' of the late eighties. These large-scale paintings sought to highlight the untold stories of imperial oppression by collecting and reworking this canonical history (Figure 2). Lately it has been the representations of femininity that have constituted the common lexicon of the Western unconscious that have received her critical attention. Using historical images as primary sources, Siopis attempts to expose their underlying manipulation of feminine identity whilst rendering their constraining conventions visible. In analyzing these images it is important to take note of Siopis' familiarity with the language of psychoanalysis and most especially her intimate knowledge of Julia Kristeva's writing. Chapter One will utilize Kristeva's insistence that the maternal energies of the feminine space are present

²⁶ Additional works which prominently feature hair are *Hush-hush: Collaborators* (1994), and *Regina Mundi* (1994).

within language and constitute an essential dimension thereof in order to explain Siopis' relationship to the canons of art. Siopis seeks to expose the limitations of the language of painting whilst maintaining its importance and keeping a balance between elements of traditional constraint and eruptions of chaos.

In Chapter Two the focus shifts to the conceptual artist, Tracey Rose. Rose, an erstwhile pupil of Siopis²⁷, uses hair as a potent symbol for the politics of identity within a post-apartheid era. Born in 1972 and based in Johannesburg, Rose forms part of the last generation to have experienced the traumas of life within the apartheid regime. She was categorized as coloured within the logic of racial categorization and segregation, promulgated by South Africa's former government and her early work focused on deconstructing coloured identity in the wake of apartheid. The formational narratives of identity were framed for Rose by her position in-between, as not quite white and not quite black. Rose uses the notion of transition and liminality in her performances, which rely upon the presentation of her own racialized and sexualized body.

Reading Rose's investigation as a comment on the material embodiment of a 'technosubject' – a term coined by art historian Amelia Jones in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* – this chapter will show that Rose, like the postmodern body artists Jones discusses, is analogously concerned with the interventions of media and technology upon the subject and the implications of this for the relationship with the body. In her negotiation with the discursive matrix, Rose insists upon an intervention, between artist and viewer, of a mediating glass screen, thereby placing her work within the scopic economy of representation. I will demonstrate that although her manipulation of hair occurs behind this barrier, for the artist hair exists as a signifier of an essential, physical identity.

The contrast between earlier productions (done in the late nineties) and more recent work demonstrates Rose's development towards a more conceptually resolved practice. Chapter Two will highlight areas of apparent contradiction within the early work and explain the development into her latest productions. Contrasting theories concerning the fundamental materiality of identity lodged within the body will be

²⁷ Penny Siopis is a professor in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand.

employed in order to analyze the grounds upon which Rose places her own investigation. Hélène Cixous' reliance upon a foundational difference between the sexual economies will be juxtaposed with Judith Butler's performative identity. Where Rose initially pared down the materiality of the body in order to access the foundations of sexual and racial identity – an attempt necessarily frustrated by the inability to bring the pre-discursive foundation into symbolic representation – Cixous' attempt to access this same fundamental core will be used. For Rose the negotiation of identity politics was her original driving motivation, but when her recent work moved away from the strictures of these categories towards a less serious, more performative play, it is the writing of Judith Butler that is of relevance. In these pieces Rose additively multiplies the positions of identity, layering identities upon each other and in the process losing touch with a 'core' self.

The notion of interiority is also of concern to the third artist under discussion. Nandipha Mntambo, a young artist, works in the medium of cowhide in order to mould hairy torsos that are cast off her own body. For the presentation of these pieces, the foundational cast is removed so that the pelt floats unsupported in the gallery space. The interior of the body/self is therefore completely inaccessible to the viewer. Mntambo who was born in Swaziland and grew up in Johannesburg, is currently studying for her Masters degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town.

I will argue that Mntambo uses the rubric of 'body art' (with the accompanying insistence upon the transformational potential of the bodily confrontation) in order to force the viewer to acknowledge the impossibility of equality between self and other, between audience and viewer. The inability to access the other except through the self is reinforced in Mntambo's sculptures by their headless state, a position that disallows conventional communication and condemns them to the carnal. Mntambo refuses to engage with the transposition of the naked body into the cleansed nude, a process that usually entails a radical depilatory intervention²⁹. Instead the pelts are excessively

²⁹ In *Seeing through Clothes* Anne Hollander explores the various conventions governing the representation of a woman's pubic hair since antiquity. Whereas "female head hair – so silky and malleable – is a potential element of clothing, ... crisp, downy body hair makes common nakedness more secret, slightly more bestial and ignominious, and thus more provocative." (Hollander 1993:138) The pelts that Mntambo presents are rooted within the language of carnal physicality and rely upon the hirsute excess for their effect.

furry, covered in short dark hairs. This physicality echoes the abject process of their creation. In order to realize these artworks, Mntambo strips the pelts of fat and cures them by immersing the raw hide in toxic chemicals before hammering and nailing it onto the body-cast.

The tension between an excessive materiality of hair and the evocation of an absent body makes the sculptures especially powerful. Absence, decay and arrested death are part of the end product. The hollowness of the pelts invoke a tangible loss, the core of the body is gone. The ontological security of the relationship between the body and the self is rendered questionable. Highlighting the dialectical relationship between positive and negative forms, the pieces materialize a 'woman' that does not exist. In consequence the ambiguous and undecidable position of woman, as both the ethereal ghost and the excessive monster, becomes visible. This chapter proposes that Mntambo's investigation into the figure of woman allows for the possible creation of a sensible transcendental – a model that conflates the binary oppositions into a new radical feminine ideal. For Luce Irigaray, the sensible transcendental promises a new age of equality based in difference.

Mntambo's skepticism of the efficacy of feminism, which often demands confrontational presence and high visibility, means that these pieces are not just about women or blackness, but rather they embody the desire to engage with an alternative economy of imagery. This chapter will seek to elucidate Mntambo's desire for a more nuanced relationship with the politics of embodiment. Mntambo, who insists upon casting only from her own body or that of her mother, sidesteps the inevitable engagement with the 'other' in order to explore the 'same'. In so doing, Mntambo references a repeated call by the French Feminists for the creation and exploration of a female genealogy. They argue that, in contrast to the well-documented paternal line, the female genealogy has been neglected to the extent that no adequate representation thereof exists. This is a relationship that exists outside of phallogocentrism and therefore outside of the paternally determined Symbolic realm. Mntambo redresses this by referring only to her own body and that of her mother, exploring the realm of the same. That this form of representation should be inspired by a dream corresponds with the connection of dreams to the unconscious, a position also assigned to the lost realm of the mother. The reclamation of the unconscious

**underside of discourse and the manifold challenges involved in bringing the
unsignifiable into representation form the core of the discussion of this dissertation.**

Chapter One: Penny Siopis

1.1. Serpentine locks: an introduction

Penny Siopis explained the reiterative focus on hair in her work by referencing a childhood memory – a memory that she acknowledges is fictive, but is founded in actual events (Siopis 2005, pers. comm.). When still a young child, Siopis' mother had remarkably beautiful, long reddish hair. After breaking her arm, her mother was unable to care for her own hair, and consequently went to get it cut manageably short. Linked with this image of the hairdresser cutting away at her mother's plait, is the 'memory' of the same hairdresser snipping away at the base of a long plait of another young girl. As the girl's plait was cut away, a thin reed-like snake emerged from the middle of the plait. Siopis, who later found her mother's removed plait, has used it in a number of installations to signify both the link to the maternal figure and this childhood 'memory'³⁰.

Using this 'memory' as a starting point, this chapter will investigate the significance of hair for Penny Siopis. Starting with a Freudian reading based in his theories of fetishism, the symbolism of hair will be shown to be deeply embedded in traumatic separation from the maternal body. Siopis, a self-confirmed feminist, has found fecund material within Freudian texts for her own investigation into female sexuality, going so far as to hold an exhibition of her work in the Freud Museum in London in 2004. She utilizes the French Feminists' challenge to psychoanalytic phallogocentrism. She adopts their focus on the chaotic power of the maternal/feminine, insisting upon a tactile, embodied mode of art making which is manifested in the carnal nature of hair.

The focus of this chapter will be on Siopis' most recent solo exhibition, where siren-red fake hair and other commodities erupted from the surfaces of the paintings. Here Siopis' concern with asserting the feminine within the sphere of 'high art' is mediated by the representational copy. After an examination of the strategies employed in the

³⁰ In the interview Siopis insisted that this was not a dream, although it is likely that it was a retroactive construction of her imagination.

making of the selected artworks, I argue that the use of imitation hair confines the paintings into the masculine realm of mediation and representation.

Hélène Cixous' text, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, contests Freud's phallogocentrism and focuses upon the importance of developing alternative, positive images of femininity with which to identify, as well as re-examining the fundamental relationship between mother and daughter. In order to do so, they contest the importance of the castrating myth in psychoanalytic theory. The contestation of this division between mother and daughter becomes central to the re-establishment of a continuous, symbolizable 'maternal genealogy' envisioned by the French Feminists. They envision that the representation of the relationship between mother and daughter could create a new economy of images that has no place for the phallogocentric stratagems of traditional mother-son representations. Embedded within *l'écriture féminine* is the reliance upon the semantic link between mother (mater) and matter; this relationship provides the foundation for these theorists' desire to re-connect with the material body. Endeavors to recuperate the feminine often reify the carnality of the feminine. In this process, however, this semantic link is often immovably solidified.

Siopis's long standing interest in the work of Julia Kristeva will underpin the discussion around the relationship between the leading 'triumvirate' of the French Feminists. Kristeva's work on identifying the two heterogeneous drives within the Symbolic (namely her semiotic and symbolic modes) will inform my reading of Siopis' work. This chapter will demonstrate that the artist exploits the illusory stability of the Symbolic in order to insert an excessive femininity within its structures. Her concern with the oscillation between stability and movement whilst her oppositional stance towards the idea of *l'écriture féminine* will highlight the ambivalence which this idea has engendered. Examining the position of the creative woman within Kristeva's work reveals the problems inherent in the creation of an efficacious feminism.

1.2. A Freudian and a French Feminist interpretation

Siopis' story of the cut plait and the emerging snake, which lies at the heart of her fascination with hair, lends itself to a Freudian interpretation. Both hair and snakes

figure in his texts as stand-ins for the penis (phallus), often covering over the woman's castration or 'lack'³¹, whilst simultaneously foregrounding it. Although Freud's theory of the fetish has been generally debunked, it is interesting to note his use of hair as a privileged fetish: the proximity to the female genitalia means that pubic hair is the last thing that a child sees – before the traumatic sight of the mother's castration propels the (masculine) child into Oedipalised relations³². This highlights a relationship between the physical presence of pubic hair and the replete maternal body. Here the Freudian fetish puts material substitutes in the place of the phallic mother. In Freudian psychoanalyst Charles Berg's *The Unconscious Significance of Hair*, he elaborates on Freud's castration theory, postulating that the urge to repeatedly cut a woman's hair is a fetishistic reenactment of the fantasized original castration³³ (1951:61). The displacement of emotion onto surrounding objects in the fetish-attachment shows that in the witnessing of trauma "the body recoils even as it is drawn nearer. Focus is displaced to the surrounding objects which are subsequently and irrevocably invested with that moment." (Law 2003:26). Fascination and repulsion govern the relationship to trauma, a trauma that accompanies the disintegration of the illusory stability of the image of the (m)other. Thus Freud re-read the classic myth of the decapitated Medusa³⁴ as symbolic of the masculine fear of the castrated woman. Converting the excess of snakes upon her head into phallic deficit, Freud interprets the Medusa as a hyperbole of this threat. (1959:105-106)³⁵.

In reaction to Freud's designation of Medusa as the incarnation of the dangerous feminine construct, Hélène Cixous wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: "[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's

³¹ Lacan would designate woman as 'lacking the lack' because of his insistence of the unattainability and illusory nature of the phallus, which means that women are doubly bereft.

³² The threat of castration is initiated by the intervention of the prohibitive father into the mother-child dyad, however until the child sees this 'evidence' of castration it is unable to fully believe in the threat posed by the father. Upon the sight of the mother's castration, the child internalizes the punishing father figure – which becomes his 'superego' – ensuring his emergence as an ethical subject.

³³ In Freud's theory of sexual development, women are viewed as being always already castrated and their 'lack' (of penis) serves as confirmation of the threat of castration being posed by the father.

³⁴ A number of versions of this myth exist, in western and other civilisations. The most generally recognized account is that of Ovid. Medusa was decapitated by Perseus when Athena (his wife) discovered the sexual relationship between the two (it was then that "the Gorgon's lovely locks to loathsome snakes" were transformed (Ovid cited in Levine 1995:94). From the gap where her head was, sprang two sons (she is thus "voiceless but fertile" (Levine 1995:94)). Medusa's head gets attached to Athena's shield in order to frighten the goddess's foes, with any who gazed upon it turning to stone.

³⁵ Freud's essay 'Medusa's head' was first published posthumously in 1940, but is dated 1922 and is believed to be a study for a larger work (Strachey 1959:105).

beautiful and she's laughing." (1976:885). Cixous interprets the Medusa as an ingrained social narrative that has riveted women into phallogentric patterns of behaviour, denigrating their own sexuality so that it becomes symbolic of 'the lack'. Rather than remaining in this constrained subject-less position, Cixous imagines the possibilities of re-appropriating these myths, working the ingrained narratives of deficit into affirmative icons. She takes the Medusa's body as an example of a body that has been widely reviled and feared, and with her powerful image of the beautiful and laughing Medusa opens up the possibilities for a new economy of feminine icons. *L'écriture féminine* attempts to link constructs of femininity to create a cohesive feminine space that does not rely upon phallogentric models. The important bond between mother and daughter replaces the traditional emphasis on the intervention of the paternal term.

Castration anxiety is produced by the third term and dissolves the union between mother and child. It is central to psychoanalytic thought. The variety of explanations emerging from the French Feminist school for this movement from imbrications in the "asocial dyadic unit of mother and child" to a subject position marked by difference demonstrates the importance of this myth for the contestation of the psychoanalytic model (Elliott 1994:133), and its basis in bodily repression. Luce Irigaray adopts a strategically essentialist position when she definitively states that "no event makes us women" rather "by our lips we are women" (cited in Fuss 1989:61); she effectively denies the potency of the castrating myth. Margret Whitford, an expert on Irigaray, shows that Irigaray is talking about feminine specificity within the Symbolic, rather than prescribing innate characteristics of femininity (1991a:85). Whilst Hélène Cixous is careful to qualify her argument against the centrality of castration by saying "his sexuality is not as stable, as continuous, as the feminine sexuality of *jouissance*, of pleasure, which is organized by an absence of cuts" (cited in Conley 1991:157), Kristeva maps out the advent of the cuts of castration for both sexes. Their divergent ideas attempt to diversify the theoretical models for the attainment of feminine subjectivity.

When Luce Irigaray highlights the importance of the umbilical cord, as the living bond with the mother, and names the penis as a tertiary symbolization of that which "reconnects, gives life, feeds and recentres the bodies" (2000b:248), she appropriates

the link between mother and matter. Simultaneously she exaggerates and extends the position marked as feminine, by displacing the symbol of the penis as phallus. Strategically displacing the emphasis on the masculine, the umbilical cord is a powerful symbol of the relationship with the maternal, fecund body and its substantive role in the creation of the self. This symbolization seems a more appropriate interpretation of Siopis' story – visually similar, the umbilicus and the plait are both associated with the maternal figure. The umbilical cord, becoming exterior to the mother in the birthing process, is mimicked by hair growth which emerges, inert, from the body of the subject. Haircutting echoes that primary snipping that severs the bond with the maternal body, whilst the braid mimics the shape and form of that primary link.

Once definitively separated from the maternal embrace, the traumatic transition to the outside world marks the onset of individuation. The intervention of the third term, the cutting of the hair in this case, provokes the emergence of a tiny snake. Often symbolized as a devouring mouth, the womb's threatening aspect is uncovered by Siopis' tiny serpent. The close bond between mother and daughter, their identification with(in) each other, can be dangerous: "the opening of the mother, the opening to the mother, appears as threats of contagion, contamination, falling into sickness, madness, death." (Irigaray 2000b:246). Hidden within the braided hair, the snake only emerges in response to the trauma of cutting away at that symbol, of getting close to the source. To reinterpret the Medusa in light of Irigaray's work on the umbilical cord, one might – as Cixous does – view this icon as exemplary of the patriarchal view of rampant femininity, a femininity that nonetheless writhes about in search of that lost bond between mother and daughter, a bond that would re-connect decapitated head with the sacrificed body. Irigaray's work writes of the fecundity and (dangerous) generosity of the maternal figure rather than being focused on lack and absence.

As the viewer, one might not be privy to the personal implications of the plait for Siopis, however the artist leaves clues about the valorization of a maternal genealogy.

In *Charmed Lives* (Figure 3), an installation which features her mother's plait, the texture of the hair is picked up by the spill of dolls (some of whose hair loosely cascades and plays off against Siopis' mother's plait). Dolls are perhaps a more accessible symbol for the relationship between mother and child, symbolizing the continuation of the maternal genealogy. The girl indicates her desire for her own baby through the play with dolls, reconstituting and representing the foundational relationship between mother and daughter. Whilst Freud viewed the little girl's wish for a child as a displacement of penis envy, dolls operate as an expansion of that primary relationship, opening up a potential, creative space.

Opposing Freud's unitary 'fort-da' reiterative movement, Luce Irigaray proposes a more continuous model of movement for girls that is not based on the same anxiety for mastery and possession. Instead her bodily gestures are intimately bound up in a sensuous bond with the mother and if she speaks:

[t]his language corresponds to a rhythm and also to a melody. Sometimes it takes the form of tender or angry words addressed to a doll, sometimes it takes the form of silence. (Irigaray cited in Walker 1998:180)

Irigaray's relationship between mother and daughter foregrounds the identification between the two – an intimate awakening that allows for sensuous, haptic interaction. Irigaray's notion of the feminine permits no infraction of masculinity, the feminine is always outside the Symbolic. Once subsumed, directly represented within the Symbolic, femininity is only a specular illusion that says more about the masculine imagination than about the feminine (Butler 1993:37). It is only within the foundation of materiality that the feminine is really manifest in discourse (Butler 1993:38).

1.3. Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic

Whilst mechanisms for the recuperation of the "constitutive outside" (Butler 1993:3), the uniquely feminine space, might be viewed as the proper aim of a psychoanalytic feminism, the possibilities for reversal, the translation of the outside in, are severely limited by the positing of this outside as almost inaccessible, necessarily deferred. In an effort to facilitate this conceptual recuperation, Kristeva critiques the exteriority of the feminine and imagines a new relationship between the maternal body's creative elements and the repression of the Symbolic contract. Kristeva reworks Lacan's

Oedipal structure, theorizing the body into language through her identification of the opposition of ‘semiotic’ drive processes against symbolic stasis which are “two modalities of what is... the same signifying process” (Kristeva 2002:34). Her writing introduces a workable theoretical way to conceptualize the body’s operation within text through swift oscillation between the two modalities, effectively bringing the maternal figure into language. The dialectical tension between the two elements is productive of language, the semiotic coming from the maternal ‘chora’³⁷ and the channeling of primary processes, whilst the symbolic (predicated upon the former) is heterogeneous to it and is “the element of signification that structures the possibility of taking a position or making a judgment”³⁸ (Oliver 1993:10). The symbolic element constrains the semiotic by attempting to impose logic and order upon it. Kristeva replaced Lacan’s ‘real’ with the more fluid and changeable ‘semiotic’ because “the notion of the semiotic allows us to speak of the real without simply saying it’s an emptiness or a blank” and produces a subject-in-process³⁹ (in Lechte and Margaroni 2004:13). Kristeva’s semiotic is thus based in the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother, and emerges into the Symbolic in the nonsensical expressions of laughter and the rhythms and tones of poetry and music, which are unaccounted for within the rigidity of Symbolic structuring. The oscillation and antagonism between the two

³⁷ Kristeva reappropriates the ‘chora’ from Plato’s *Timeaus* to denote the generative space of the semiotic, and “although our theoretical description of the chora is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spaciality, and temporality.” (Kristeva 2002:35). Judith Butler challenges Kristeva’s conflation of the ‘chora’ with the feminine/maternal (1993:41). This use of the chora reiterates the idea of the maternal body as the unsymbolizable receptacle waiting for masculine meaning to be inscribed upon it (1992:174). Thus it is further naturalizing the connection that is made between woman (maternal receptacle) and the inert body.

³⁸ I am following on the distinction Kelly Oliver notes between what Kristeva refers to as *le symbolique* or *symbolique* (which is the symbolic element that opposes the semiotic that I have discussed above) and *l’ordre symbolique* or *la dimension symbolique* which refers to the Symbolic realm. (Oliver 1993:9-10). The Symbolic is a term that Lacan developed to signify the cultural framework structured by language and representation, which is predicated on masculinity and the reiteration of patriarchal structures. By differentiating between the social realm of the Symbolic, which Kristeva feels is not inaccessible to women, and the symbolic elements that exist in tension with the semiotic within the Symbolic, Kristeva opens up the possibilities for the emergence of femininity within cultural practices. Simultaneously however Kristeva draws attention to the difficulties therein.

³⁹ The notion of the subject-in-process or on-trial is very important to Kristeva’s project because it shows the dynamism and changeability of subjectivity that is locked in the oscillation between heterogeneous psychic modalities, always incapable of fully absorbing the motility of the semiotic. The limitations and excesses of the exchanges mark the subject as on-trial and in-process – never the fully realized, solidified subject of the Enlightenment philosophers.

modalities of semiotic and symbolic provide the very possibilities for change and creativity⁴⁰.

The power of expression emerges from the repudiation of the maternal sphere, and the silenced, abjected maternal chora is the precondition for rational speech. This process of rejection, which Kristeva outlines in *Powers of Horror; an essay on abjection* (1981) is never complete, the precondition of the abject (the pre-oedipal relation with the maternal body) is its indeterminability and its inevitable return ⁴¹(Walker 1998:64). The abject is present in the semiotic drives, and the subject's bitter struggle to contain and repress the voracity of the semiotic stems from a fundamental longing for distance from the all-powerful mother – paradoxically, writing and creative expression allows the subject to replace the mother whilst preserving the necessary distance to prevent dissolution into the maternal body (Walker 1998:66).

The semiotic inserts the body into language, making the body the precondition for the speaking subject and the possibility for its destruction. Kristeva's assertion that "language is not divorced from the body, 'word' and 'flesh' can meet at any moment" implies that language and the body are mutually constitutive (Kristeva cited in Ruthof 2000:16). Unlike Cixous, for whom the goal is to insert body into language – allowing the body to remain *supplementary* to language - Kristeva insists that the two are inseparably connected, with language founded *in* the body (Ruthof 2000:112-114). This slight shift in emphasis is important to understand the fundamental role that, according to Kristeva, the body plays in language. The body's role as constitutive outside to language shows that the continual return to the body in the creative arts is enacting the dialectical tension of the abject space, occupying liminality to allow the feminine sphere of the pre-oedipal maternal body to return.

The revolutionary possibilities that lie in the semiotic immediately bring to mind Cixous' theory of the radical potential of women's carnal laughter (embodied by her

⁴⁰ Maria Margaroni emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic elements as productively antagonistic rather than as a stasis of contradiction. (Lechte and Margaroni 2004:17).

⁴¹ Death is the final and definitive confrontation with the border, it is the decisive return to the abject. Thus, the corpse is the embodiment of abjection, threatening the subject's ultimate dissolution into an unbounded state of non-identity (Kristeva 1981:4).

⁴³ Artist Joan Key in her essay 'Models of painting practice' criticizes a feminist tendency to vilify painting, most especially any painting of the female body (1995:153-4).

image of the laughing Medusa). However Kristeva has important qualifications to make about the revolutionary potential of the semiotic: her work on identifying the semiotic drives and the symbolic structures that contain them re-conceptualizes the structures of society to include the excess within any representation, even though the methods of systematic recuperation themselves re-direct the energy and excess of the semiotic into maintaining the structures of society. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva claims the artistic avant-garde is an example of the struggle to evade the hold of the symbolic element. Thus, the implicitly masculine realm of artistic canons (representative of the symbolic element) are locked in a dialectical tension with the avant-garde, the feminine semiotic, that which pits logic and laws against irrationality and inconclusivity. The creation of relevant artworks requires that the artist operate within the constraints of the Symbolic contract. Although the dialectical tension between the rigid structurations of the symbolic and the chaotic, bodily rhythms of the semiotic drives operates everywhere, it is with poetry and the creative arts that the semiotic element is allowed to embrace its excesses and release its revolutionary disruption into language.

When Kristeva introduces the abject, the avant-garde and poetic language, she, in fact, denies the expression of a feminine 'avant-garde', because of the tenuous position of women within the paternally signified Symbolic. It is only really men, secure within the Symbolic system, who can reengage with the revolutionary potential of the maternal semiotic drives. Effectively Kristeva re-inscribes the traditional binaries that position women on the side of passivity. Because females are not able to psychically remove themselves from the mother, they remain in a melancholic relationship with the mother, unable to properly abject and mourn the loss of the pre-Oedipal mother. From this tenuous position, access to the revolutionary power of the semiotic is fraught with danger for women, who are liable to lapse into psychosis in the process. Contrary to Hélène Cixous' insistence that it is women who are more able to access the revolutionary power of writing because of their marginal position and their ability to embrace bisexuality, Kristeva is highly suspicious of women's ability to transgress the hierarchies of representational power unless they subsume their feminine identity and embrace a masculine position. Reiterating the relationship between the semiotic and the mother, Kristeva shows that women would be transgressing two foundational

taboos (the incest and homosexuality taboos) when engaging with revolutionary language, instead of only one (like universal masculine subjects).

1.4. Siopis' relationship to the maternal semiotic

The insertion of the chaotic maternal into signification becomes a motivating factor for Penny Siopis' art. Her intention to express the feminine, bodily foundation that has been traumatically rent from the desiring subject has produced works that speak of tactility and sensuality. For Siopis, illogical, haptic instantiation necessitates the viewer's disengagement with disembodied, perceptive, cerebral modes and rather close and intimate, associative participation. In Siopis's art, we engage with the position marked out for women within the Symbolic. Siopis is able to investigate the historical system of sexuality by using Kristeva's system of heterogeneous drives (semiotic and symbolic). Thus, hierarchical binaries are visibly dealt with.

The binaries that we seek to avoid – or evade – so often surreptitiously and insidiously ensnare us, making it difficult to imagine other worlds, worlds which we can create without reducing difference to serial equivalence (pluralism), but also without being hampered by a regressive paralysis that risks becoming the historical legacy of how 'difference' has been articulated in the past, and the continuing unhappy material effects of this articulation. (Siopis 1999:260).

Siopis argues for the continued relevance of the historical legacy of opposing binaries, the critique of which is necessary in order to ensure that the process is not repeated in the future. Simultaneously she asserts that there is "no way of investigating 'self' without at the same time marking an 'other'" (Siopis 1999:255).

Siopis' *écriture* is one which is deeply concerned with processes that mark the interaction of the individual with 'other', yet in her recent work it has been the historic construction of self that has come under scrutiny. The reiterative return of the plait talks of the need to constantly re-negotiate the dissolution of the Imaginary, like Kristeva's feminine writers whose melancholic relationship with the mother means that they are unable to fully relinquish the phallic mother. Freud demonstrated that psychic repressions reiteratively return to mark their suppression and silence, similarly the return to the materiality of *l'écriture* stakes the claim of the silenced maternal/feminine. Despite highlighting the corporeality of the art work, Siopis is

nevertheless highly aware of the structures within which the work operates, structures that seek to disembody viewers, constraining their interaction. She constantly negotiates the boundaries between the semiotic chaos of materiality and the constraints of a disembodied realm of representation.

Siopis has worked with both installation and painting throughout her career. Importantly “in an installation, the entire body is called on to participate through its senses – sight, of course, but also hearing, touch, sometimes smell” (Kristeva 2002:423) – installation provokes an embodied engagement. Installation, as Kristeva writes, operates outside of the purely optic realm, inviting the viewer into an interaction with the piece that calls on those senses more associated with intimacy, in Riegl’s terms, a ‘haptic’ mode of experiencing the artwork. The haptic inserts into symbolic structures another realm of signification and by inviting the materiality of the semiotic drive to manifest visually and spatially, Siopis is representing a feminine sphere of art making, alluding to the unrepresentability of feminine sexuality within cultural codes that keep femininity in a perpetual state of unknowable *jouissance*. Whilst the realm of three-dimensionality and temporality evokes the immediacy of the abjected maternal chora, it also represents the materiality of the drives. Siopis evokes the physicality of the embodied state, and the primary connection with the maternal feminine.

1.5. Painting and the Tradition

Almost parallel to Kristeva’s ambivalent relationship with the structures of psychoanalytic discourse is Siopis’ insistence on adopting the traditions of the Western canon – especially evident in her early ‘History paintings’ and in her most recent exhibition *Passions and Panics* at the Goodman Gallery. Evident in both these series is the re-appropriation of the work of the Western masters so that it articulates a new relationship with the forms of the colonial centre. Whilst one might question the naturalization of the relationship between painting and masculinity, as has been done by some feminist writers, inherent in the medium is an identification with its history within Western art, where it has featured as the medium *par excellence* of the (implicitly white, heterosexual male) artistic genius⁴³. In an article on the relationship between artists and painting, Siopis writes that “a troubled cultural history is...

integral to the practice. Using this history ...makes [contemporary painting] so rich” (2005:28). Dogmatically two-dimensional, the painting surface requires the artist to concede to its symbolic structuring rules. Within these structuring rules, the female artist has to constantly acknowledge the historical positioning of woman as object of the ‘gaze’, because it has become naturalized in the genre.

...[P]ainting is privileged in modernist discourse as *the* most ambitious and significant art form because of its combination of body and trace, which secure by metonymy the presence of the artist. These inscribe a subjectivity whose value is, by visual inference and cultural naming, masculinity. (Pollock cited in Key 1995:153)

Adopting painting, thus engenders what could be termed a bi-sexual identification for the female artist, who identifies both with the position of painter and with the position of the supine subject.

Writing on her engagement with illusionism, Siopis says “I loved the broad tradition of illusionism, but hated its phallogocentric inscriptions. I needed to make this ambivalence obvious, to mark the mode as self-consciously artificial.” (Siopis 1999:249). Thus her relationship with painting is a “mix of cool distance and overheated intimacy” (Siopis cited in Nuttal 2005:36), seemingly taking on the necessity of a dual engagement with the medium. Siopis’ assertion that she needs “to assert Eros over Thanatos, even though I know they are metaphorically joined at the hip” (cited in Mbembe 2005:128) is demonstrative of her concern with stasis of the structure and the need to name it in order to affirm its contingency upon the sensuality of bodily drives.

1.6. Hair in Siopis’ *Passions and Panics* show (2004)

Siopis’ latest solo exhibition *Passions and Panics* made dramatic reference to hair in a number of works, using material hair to overflow the pictorial surface. Where the previous work that used hair had focused on her mother’s organic, disintegrating plait, the hair in these works is clearly plastic, cheaply bought ‘extensions’. Replacing the emphasis on the organic, the original and inimical, these cheap commodities show that the artist doesn’t return to the notion of the ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ body. The viewer becomes aware of the necessary intercession of the artful representation when

attempting to return to the prior utopian state. Siopis theatricalizes here what Judith Butler has argued: any return to the maternal/feminine is always mediated by the workings of the Symbolic (1992:175). The desire for the return to that essentially illusory state interrupts the smooth surface of recognized signification, insisting upon a relationship with excessive materiality. Programmatically obeying Irigaray's injunction to "[jam] the theoretical machinery itself, [to suspend] its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal" (1991b:126), Siopis succeeds in wresting the model of femininity away from the economy of smooth reproduction and thus attempts to utilize the "disruptive excess... on the feminine side [of discourse]" (Irigaray 1991b:126). She exceeds the surface of the original masculine production with hair in order to emphasize the oft-ignored logic of two-dimensional representation. Yet her work doesn't argue for an engagement with the maternally connoted outside, but attempts to bring that outside in, to represent the unseeable by utilizing the copy, the imitation hair. She plays with mimesis.

Siopis talks of the "emotional resonance" of "this freighting of patent artificiality, this aesthetic and economic cheapness", that in their generalization "goes against the grain of the sensuous particularity of some 'genuine' authentic model" (cited in Smith 2004:126). Her attack against the 'original', the 'authentic' or the 'one' - a pattern essentially phallogocentric - is sustained through her mimesis of traditional postures, her use of the 'canon' and the reification of the artificiality of the hair. Embodying the promptings of the semiotic excess that cannot be captured within the frame of symbolic logic has come here in a simulation of another type of symbolism, a copy, and through the juxtaposition of these two signifying mediums Siopis' work embodies a simulacrum of embodiment.

The interplay between structure and chaotic materiality in Siopis' paintings assumes the traditions of painting whilst exceeding the fundamental two-dimensionality of the traditional laws of perspective painting. Upsetting the skin of the painting, the actual hair transgresses the boundary between inside and out - and thus highlighting the normativity of the unquestioned border.

The redemption of painting... requires... that painting go through the body, to penetrate its interiority and to display that. But such a penetration cannot happen without a cutting, a tearing, a wounding, of painting's skin. (Phelan 1997:35)

The limits of painting, which usually cannot portray interiority, are torn asunder by the blood-red wound of hair emerging from its puckered skin.

Lacan's description of feminine *jouissance* outside the Symbolic, of woman as 'not-all' with something escaping the structuring rules of the Symbolic, sets up a spatial metaphor of borders and boundaries, which constructs the feminine in a state of liminality. The anthropologist C. R. Hallpike's thesis, put forward just prior to the hippy era, that "long hair is associated with being outside society and that the cutting of hair symbolizes re-entering society, or living under a particular disciplinary regime within society" bears out the claim that this hair pushes against the structures of symbolic control (1969:260). The oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic, which Oliver describes as a play between paternal and maternal identifications within Kristeva's own work, reconstructs the tensions of the border.

Sharp tonal distinctions between red and white dominated the palette in the exhibition. The hair is always red – a societal preference that psychoanalyst Charles Berg attributes to "the closer resemblance of a head-top of this colour to the glans penis or vulva" (1951:68). Symbolic of sexuality the saturated redness of the hair links this image with others of seduction and vice. Elaborating on the theme of red hair, art historian Virginia M. Allen writes that Pre-Raphaelite Gabriel Rossetti's obsession with red flowing locks, especially prominent in his depiction of *Lady Lilith*, emerged "as a symbol of the destructive power of the femme fatale... the New Woman, free of male control..." (1984:286). Siopis's use of red hair similarly represents the dynamic power of feminine sexuality, outside of symbolic control yet within its representational schema. This is visually overpowering with the saturated tones of the hair dominating the surrounding visual elements. Linked with the maternal body, and her memory of her mother's luscious red hair, these vibrant locks move towards a more forceful assertion of sexuality.

1.7. *Blush: Rouge* (2004)

Western myths of femininity often reiterate a connection between sexuality, shame and hair. The biblical example of Mary Magdalene shows how the shame of her prostitution was symbolically displaced onto her hair, which was often represented as

long, luscious and seductive⁴⁴. The ambivalent principle that governs women's hair is demonstrated by the focus of prohibitory attention upon Mary Magdalene's hair, and, through its use to dry Jesus' feet, the site of her redemption into Christianity.

In Siopis' *Blush: Rouge* (Figure 4), an image of a woman caught in the web of her own knotted hair references another foundational story of femininity within Judeo-Christian mythology. In my reading *Blush: Rouge* depicts the shameful figure of Eve, alone and in a posture of absolute dejection. Positioned against a white-washed background, the saturated red of the figure stands out in sharp relief. Because material hair covers over the face of the figure, it becomes a protective 'fig leaf' by hiding her face from our gaze. The net of hair forms a protective layering that allows her to be unidentified except by her sex (signified by the silhouette of her breast); she acts as a stand-in for the female sex, with no individuality. Her loss of face has also removed her subjectivity – in so far as identity is read through facial features.

Saturated red tones sharply delineate the posture of the shamed female body against the whiteness of the background. This use of 'hot' colour signifies for Siopis the emotional states that we connect very directly with the body... I am driven by life and energy in the face of counter-pressure to balance, or return to, stasis or inertia. (in Smith 2004:128).

The relationship between the whiteness of the background, which alternately pools or splatters over more impure shades of pinks and reds, and the darkly saturated red of the body signifies the oscillation between the semiotic bodily bloody colours and the coolly disembodied whiteness of a static symbolic element, which "can be read... as ground positively blanked out, as if information has been covered over." (Siopis cited in Smith 2004:141). With this tension, Siopis moves against the designation of the female as always blank, a readily inscribed surface; instead this is a mobile, fluid, sticky surface which pools and accommodates the marks and stains. By asserting the interaction between mark and surface, Siopis escapes the designation of the maternal body as the encompassing blank, non-generative, silent, encompassing womb.

⁴⁴ Titian's *Mary Magdalene* (1830-1835) aptly demonstrates this with the obviously penitent Mary swathed in her sumptuously red hair. The long hair remains as the reminder of Mary Magdalene's carnal sins as it curls around her body both covering and revealing her nakedness.

In the pooled, deep red paint of the body, trite sayings of apology, guilt and sympathy are printed with kitsch rubber stamps available from craft shops. The subject's entire body apologizes for her very existence – both textually and posturally. Siopis' intention to "speak 'the unspeakable'" (cited in Mdanda 2004:21) - from an individual and collective perspective - allows the unequal relationship between language and the female body to come to the fore. As reactions to the trauma of sexuality brought about by the expulsion from the real (Eve's quintessential trauma), these commodified expressions attest to the inadequacy of language to deal with trauma and shame. Language is produced to cover trauma and loss. The text's inability to encompass her shame is manifested through the juxtaposition of the text of trauma with the mark of a traumatized body, a juxtaposition of text and materiality which returns to Kristeva's theory of heterogeneity within language, necessarily including both materiality and signage to create meaningful expression (Watkin 2003:89-90). *Blush: Rouge's* significance lies in this dynamic interaction between systems of meaning. Again exploiting the energy of this interaction, Siopis has layered physical hair upon the image in defiance of the fundamental two-dimensionality of the traditional laws of perspective painting.

What Siopis achieves by this manifest artificiality is to reveal the signifying processes involved in returning to the site of materiality that – though it might be outside the Symbolic – is never separable from acts that capture it within the codes of representation and mimesis. The painting's call to materiality within the signifying codes of 'high art' shows up the highly imbricated relationship of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the 'flesh of the world' where the referent and the signified demonstrate their 'chiasmic' interdependency (Butler 1993:69). This chiasmus that Siopis evokes returns to the origins of the maternal representation within Judeo-Christian mythology, where the feminine, generative surface of the world's flesh creates the signifying possibilities of the symbolic referent. Resuscitating the image of Eve, Siopis demonstrates her lack of identity, her deprivation of identity and her inability to access the transcendental signifier of the deity (Kristeva 2002:36) – in keeping with her role as ambivalent, maternal receptacle.

Siopis melds the poses of Masaccio's iconic fleeing couple in *Expulsion from Paradise* (Figure 5), effectively positioning Eve as the originator and victim of all sin.

“The weakened posture of the humiliated sinner” (Manca 2001:58) in Masaccio’s original is echoed in Siopis’ painting by the unseeing, stumbling silhouette of Eve. The stark silhouette of redness against white holds the female form in place, locks her into the form. Irigaray argues that a

woman cannot be gathered into one volume, except on pain of being removed from her jouissance, which demands that she remains open to nothing that can be said, but which contrives the non-closure of her edges, the non-suturing of her lips. (1991f:66)

The symbolic control enacted by the white background represents the mechanisms by which woman is constructed as a homogenous concept. Defined against the negative space of the background, the undifferentiated surface of the silhouetted body threatens an “indefinite overflowing in which many a becoming could be inscribed” (Irigaray 1991f:55) in its spills and pools of luminescent red paint and excessive matted red hair. Threatening a becoming through excess, through spillage, through overflow the figure is contained by the controlling mechanisms of the law.

1.8. The form and function of shame

Shame has become an increasingly important theme in Siopis’ latest work, with two series in the *Passions and Panics* exhibition bearing directly upon this idea. In *Blush: Rouge*, Siopis explores the notion of shaming as a precondition for femininity within Western cultural codes – especially Judeo-Christian myths of femininity. When Butler asserts that “sexuality is regulated through the shaming of gender” (1993:283), she bears out Cixous’ contention that “we’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty” (1976:885). Thus shame, as socially produced, is embroiled in gender regulation that attempts to disembody the subject, and, although generally applicable, has been deployed most virulently in inculcating and homogenizing those that threaten the stability of heterosexual phallogocentrism. Siopis’ citation of this abject body critiques the power of the (paternal) law to interpolate and reproduce bodies. For Cixous, in the story of Eve one sees that “the fate of the so-called feminine economy is at stake” (cited in Blyth and Sellers 2004:30): because the ‘feminine economy’ risks the self for pleasure, and through the shaming process of expulsion from paradise the masculine law establishes its inexorable control.

Siopis' Catholic upbringing lurks in the background through this reference to the 'original sin' of Eve. Frederic Regard points out that the story of Eve's fall corresponds with psychoanalytic accounts of castration – in both the eyes are opened to nakedness (with accompanying realization of the sexed self as implicated by shameful knowledge) (2004:179). As the biblical representative of womanhood (prior to Mary), Eve's 'transgressions' have stood undisputed as the rationale for misogynist practices. Sin has thereby been displaced upon femininity and women are designated to experience themselves as "embodying the anti-ideal" (Pattison 2000:77), fixed within the body of abjection. Shame engulfs the body of the shamed – tellingly described by a patient as "this black vomit in me" (cited in Pattison 2000:76); yet sociologist Pattison also notes its function in preventing "total merger with others whilst it also stops others taking over or devouring the self" thus providing "a defensive shelter for the inner life of the person" (2000:79).

Siopis explores the relationship between femininity and shame, and questions the demarcation of acceptable femininity. She demonstrates the boundaries that hold this construction in place and the compulsion to exceed these restrictions – symbolized by the eruption of hair. In so doing, Siopis questions the relevance of Kristeva's 'subject of abjection' (who is always implicitly male) for women: the subject of abjection is able to define the boundary between the clean and the abject outside of himself, an experience that locates his subjectivity away from the embodied maternal spectre. Conversely Kristeva's melancholic female is unable to fix that boundary away from herself because of her identification with the maternal figure (as a person of the same sex); she is therefore unable to fully separate, and then mourn the figure of the mother. Instead, the incorporated figure of the mother, both part and not part of the subject, becomes the internalized abject. This 'black vomit in me' is "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside" (Kristeva 1982:1). Thus woman is perhaps more appropriately conceptualized as the subject of shame, rather than the subject of abjection – where shame is socially and abjection psychically produced.

For Siopis the reddish blush signifies the physiological presentation of shame upon the body of the shamed and links trauma with sexuality. An easily read embodiment

of shame, the blush is always metonymically linked with femininity. Operating as a desirable signal of sexual availability the blush upholds a tradition that connects the shameful with women. The unpredictability and immediacy of the blush writes shame upon the body, effectively wrenching away the security of anonymity.

Siopis' painted figure symbolically embodies the abject space of the maternal metaphor, which is "a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences." (Rich cited in Walker 1998:151). Siopis resolves the struggle within representations of the maternal body by incorporating the vulnerability and the danger of the feminine space, without allowing the wound of femininity to seep outside the structures of the posture. The congealed paint holds the figure in the position metaphorically assigned to Eve, that of shame. Caught in the web of her own unkempt hair, she is assigned to the position of pure negativity, captured in "the vile logic of anti-love" (Cixous 1977:68). The curly, reddish hair is tangled and unkempt – evoking a 'natural' and pre-lapsarian state unmediated by the demands of simulating 'femininity'. However the manifestly artificial nature of the hair disallows the notion of a pre-lapsarian body, definitively positioning femininity within the realm of symbolic language.

1.9. *Blush: Scarlet* (2005)

In another work in the same series, *Blush: Scarlet* (Figure 6; Figure 7) Siopis has adopted the traditional supine posture of the female subject, reminiscent of Fuseli's popular image of *The Nightmare* (Figure 8). Against a dense skin of dried white paint that drips and pools on the paper, Siopis has sketchily captured Fuseli's tormented dreamer, albeit with modifications. She has left out the monsters surrounding the dreamer and has transformed the darkness of the setting with the supportive bed and curtain into dense, matt whiteness. The absence of the monsters leaves the sleeper, supposedly without the threat of scopis desire, to her abandoned state of *jouissance*.

The most notable feature of this work is the Rapunzel-like luxuriant, luscious red hair that flows and swirls down from the sleeping figure's head going beyond the borders of the paper's edge (Figure 6). In Siopis' painting the hair, again cheaply bought and 'fake', is excessive and serves to accentuate the sleeper's abandonment in repose. The

red hair, linked with traditional images of seduction and vice, initiates an oppositional dynamic between saturated redness and modulations of fading creamy white.

Where *Blush: Rouge* showed the abject maternal origin, *Blush: Scarlet* concentrates upon the young woman, as the sexualized object of desire. *Scarlet* embodies the radical alterability and unknowability of the other. The fascination with the sleeping woman is the desire to look at and know the *jouissance*, the radical alterability, of the other – something that is hinted at in the inaccessibility of sleep to the dictates of representation. Sleep shares with *jouissance* the characteristics of “inaccessibility, obscurity and opacity” (Lacan cited in Braunstein 2003:104). The sleeping woman represents the primordial, unconstrained *jouissance* of woman that exists outside of the shaming structures of femininity.

And where in *Rouge*, Siopis followed Masaccio’s famed ability to solidly ground his figures; in *Scarlet* she has adopted Fuseli’s more restrained visual language. The paint is laid on thinly and only slight modulations in tone secure the form. By adopting the conventions of Fuseli’s visual language where diaphanous overlaying produce form, Siopis references the manner in which the “horrors and distortions” (Myrone 2001:55) of his work were covered over in the restraint of the physical surface of the paint. In contrast to Siopis’ love of physicality within painting, Fuseli’s famed disgust at richly painted pictures points to an attempt to safeguard the arts from the incursion of the body’s materiality. Demonstrating this, he writes of the destructive power of paint and colour which

overwhelms the forms of infancy, the milky germ of life; and the defined lines of manhood and beauty with lumpy pulp; when the dresser of the graces it becomes the handmaid of deformity, and with their spoils decks her limbs – shakes hands with meanness, or haunts the recesses of loathsomeness and horror (cited in Myrone 2001:54-55).

Anxiously maintaining the separation between the threatening spectre of the monstrous materiality of the maternal body and the infant birthed into the masculine world where man is “the best mother, the second one, the one who gives the second birth” (Cixous 1977:66), Fuseli strives to overcome the threat of the emasculating powers of paint as raw matter by controlled manipulation.

Abruptly breaking away from Fuseli's visual language, Siopis uses the siren-red hair strategically and erupts through the paint's "vile crust" (Fuseli cited in Myrone 2001:55) by pooling white paint across the background to reiterate the importance of the foundational link to the excessive female body (from which the child erupts). Emanating from the sleeper herself, the crust of paint spills over and leaks across the picture surface. The puckered skin of white paint like the skin on the surface of hot milk recalls that most "archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva 1982:2) which balks at incorporating the nauseating, congealed membrane. In this work, Siopis brings into signification some element of the feminine, reclaiming that excessive construction within the language of the Symbolic.

1.10. Conclusion

In Siopis' latest works, the artist articulates a position within the dictates of femininity that does not concede to its inherent constraints. By occupying and hyperbolizing the terms of femininity, the inadequacy and excess of this construct is exposed. Images that have framed the representation of femininity within the Western tradition show the process whereby they leak into lived corporeality. Representation overflows into materiality. Her insistence upon using hair that is not painted, or mediated through a screen, demonstrates Siopis' concern with engaging materiality, the physical seduction of texture and presence. However Siopis' use of patently artificial hair extensions points to the necessity for working within the constraints of symbolic representation, even whilst asserting the semiotic energy of the feminine. Evoking the close bond between mother and child, Siopis makes viewers aware of the corporeality of art-making, creating physical, tactile pieces.

In reaction to Cixous' desire that language cleave to materiality, Siopis insists upon the symbiotic relationship between language and materiality by overflowing the structure of the artwork with material excess. This position is in keeping with the artist's study of Julia Kristeva's work. Siopis asserts the feminine space within discourse, arguing for the interaction of the maternal origin with the paternal structures. Representation effectively contains the materiality of hair and cuts off the connection with the maternal origin, and in so doing the revolutionary feminine space is tamed. The series tests the position of the semiotic, the feminine in language, and

re-absorbs it into the language of the Symbolic. Her work focuses on the construction of the self, an identity position historically defined by the productions of femininity and whiteness. This work is predicated upon the historical material it caricatures and it is therefore locked into a complex and often ambivalent relationship with that source. This could be indicative of what Peggy Phelan has remarked: “white women’s relation to the Symbolic is riven with ambivalence... Hysterical identifications limit white women’s ability to convert their mourning into militancy.” (1997:150). In these artworks, Siopis has adopted the paternal language of painting (hysterically imitating the masculine artist) and attempted to exceed the inherent limitations of this language from within. Siopis is ambivalently motivated by her identification with this visual lexicon and the desire to convert this tradition into a militant feminist revolution. This fundamental ambivalence renders her *Blush* series strategically incoherent and the revolutionary feminine is encompassed within the representational lexicon of the Symbolic.

Chapter Two: Tracey Rose

2.1. 'Kroes' politics: an introduction

In South Africa, the infamous 'pencil test' highlighted the importance of hair in discourses of scientific racism. *Apartheid* practices of racial classification on the basis of physical difference enforced the status of hair as an inescapable determiner of identity. The purveyors of these practices relied upon 'nature' to determine the 'bodies that matter'⁴⁷, instituting a relationship with the material upon grounds of injury and inequity⁴⁸. Even today in post-*apartheid* times hair is a politically and emotively loaded substance. This has been exploited by several contemporary artists who access its ongoing resonance and emotive power.

Hair makes bodies legible. Artworks that use hair often reveal the fallibility of any simplistic reading of the material of the body by contrasting hair's essential 'natural' status with its inevitable discursive construction. It is a fictive signifier of essential identity because it is a natural substance that is always already discursively determined. Inevitably, hair adds to the constructionist argument, and its ability to be easily transformed shows it is possible to play with the terms upon which the subject is recognized.

Tracey Rose investigates the connection between hair and identity. In her work of the late nineties, she demonstrated the metonymic, injurious link between hair and race. Arguably her most critically acclaimed works emerged during this time - aggressive deconstructive performances highlighting the anger of living a liminal identity within the injurious legacies of racially divisive mentalities, or what Okwui Enwezor called "the existential melancholy of her place as a 'coloured' woman, neither black nor white" (2004:35). Coloured identity has a complex history in South Africa, receiving oscillating status over the centuries.

⁴⁷ This is taken from Judith Butler's book *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive Limits of Sex* (1993).

⁴⁸ For a look at the significance of this practice see Kellner (1999) and Erasmus (2000).

This chapter will focus on two works produced by Rose in the late nineties, namely *Untitled* video of 1996 (Figure 9), showing Rose shaving all the hair from her body, and *Span II* (Figure 10), a piece in 1997, which finds Rose perched on an upturned television screen within a glass box knotting together the same, previously shaved off hair. While these two pieces are the primary focus, a third, later work, done in 2002, *Ciao Bella*, (Figure 11) will be briefly explained first because it is only by realizing where the first two lead that they can be fully appreciated, at least within the context of the aims of my dissertation. My discussion of Rose's work seeks to establish the personal significance of the material for this artist, which is not inconsiderable, as gleaned from the following extract from a poem by the artist:

I can remember a time having been envious of my mother's hair.
I too wanted to coax the kinks out of my own – I had none
My cousins had them
Coloured hair is strange: a fusion of black and white but not quite.
Not black enough to be shamefully treated not white enough to be pampered.
Status and beauty effected by your crowning glory...
-blessed that I was with 'gladde hare' little did I know that later I would be
further blessed with it in abundance much to my naked embarrassment [sic]. It
was then at puberty that I knew I was supposed to be a man.
(Rose 1999:211)

Hair links ideas of childhood, home and family to one's origins and as such is far more than a chance bodily excrement but a visible, highly charged, emotive and complex signifier. The centrality of pre-determined and determining racial identity to Rose's project meant returning to a site of a personal physical struggle in order to contest the discourses that framed her. In the artworks that focused on hair, Rose demonstrated that hair is a physical substance that constitutes subjects within a historically determined matrix of power, with the power to both bind and sever relations between bodies. This legacy impacted upon Rose to the extent that she questions her relationship with the maternal/feminine and her link to her mother's identity. Hair separates Rose from her mother; they are not permitted to partake in the same self-defining rituals. In contrast to Penny Siopis, for whom hair signaled the fundamental connection to the maternal figure, Rose's relationship with the material

and maternal is conflicted by the genetic physical differences that impact the body-image in a specific manner within the South African context.

The chosen reference works, namely *Untitled* and *Span II*, demonstrate how Rose placed her own body at the centre of her practice in order to question the foundations of identity and discrimination founded upon difference. A parallel will be drawn between feminist art historian, Amelia Jones' notion of post-modern 'body art' and Rose's work, both, in my view, questioning the position of body orientated art in a society absorbed by technology. Alongside the re-emergence of body art in the nineties in the USA, Rose explored identity within the technologically determined body. Jones demonstrates that 'body art' need not rely upon the physical interaction between artist and viewer, instead the intervention of technology can lead to new modes of engagement that utilize the innovations of the technological screen. New media pervaded high art in the nineties, especially in the representation of the dispersed, particularized postmodern subject who had become increasingly alienated from the materiality of his/her body. "We are enworlded via the envelopment of our bodies in space, the touch of our hands on a keyboard, the stroke of our gaze on the video screen." (A. Jones 1998:239). Following Donna Haraway's landmark text, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, this move envisioned new ways of conceiving of the body, especially allowing a "disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" to replace the individual (Haraway cited in A. Jones 1998:214).

However, whilst Jones' postmodern body artists express a thoroughly dispersed subject, Rose – in these two works – saw a complex relationship between technology and the subject. She explored the interaction between nature and culture, between essential identity and constructionism. I will argue that Rose retained a modicum of faith in the materiality of an inescapable identity, and in the fact that there are essential differences between people, most notably, visible physical signs like hair. Throughout this chapter, the role of the feminine and its relationship with the maternal will be investigated. Identity is founded in ideas of difference, especially sexual difference. This is produced by distancing from the maternal and the identification with the power of the phallus. Seemingly grounded in the fleshy 'truth' of the body, her work investigates the point at which the body is comprehended as a sexual entity and thus recognized discursively. Rose plays with creating a feminine text by

oscillating from the abjection of the carnal maternal to the reinstatement thereof. She pares down the material that constitutes her body discursively in order to access the feminine (that which escapes culture and language) and re-connect with the pre-discursive source. However it seems to me that Rose was unable to fully abject the feminine or to bring the realm of the feminine/maternal into signification, and her frustration led her to move away from the feminine and rather embrace a Butlerian performative. In the video of *Ciao Bella* of 2002, Rose dresses up as numerous characters including the infamous queen Marie Antoinette (Figure 12). By hyperbolically playing with the narratives of identity, Rose revels in the performative nature of the poststructuralist critique of essential identity. This video, with performances that resemble the excesses of drag, demonstrates that Rose effectively moved into a conceptual cul-de-sac with her two pieces of the nineties and the only way out was to utilize the power of citationality (the belief that discourse will always both exceed and fail to control that which it interpolates). It is only the understanding of this move on Rose's part that allows proper discussion of the first works and the reason that *Ciao Bella* is introduced prior to the others.

This chapter will demonstrate that the artist tries to 'write her body'⁴⁹ into the domain of high art, but her underlying distrust of the discursive outside, of that which escapes the confines of language, means that she is not fully engaged with the return to *l'écriture féminine*; instead she presages her later work on performativity (evident in the *Ciao Bella* video). I argue that Rose's work shows a profound ambivalence to the ideals of *l'écriture féminine*.

2.2. Judith Butler and the matter of sex

Butler's radical de-materialization of sexual difference, whereby even the matter that makes the socially recognized body is produced discursively, becomes increasingly relevant to Rose's work as her visual language matures into works like *Ciao Bella*. Performativity is the active production of the subject, through and within discourse, thus

...acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying

⁴⁹ Writing the body is the central injunction of Cixous' feminine text.

absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as cause... [I]f ... reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body... (Butler 1999:173)

Whilst Butler's argument recognizes the organic body, she refuses to allow it the monumental status it has traditionally been accorded. In fact, Butler questions the traditional conflation of materiality and femininity, which in merging forms "a materiality prior to and formative of any notion of the empirical" (1993:17) throwing into doubt the efficacy of a constitutive outside.

The contention that Butler's first book *Gender Trouble* "dissolves the material world into so many immaterial creatures of discourse" (Kaufman-Osborn 1997:660), has resulted in Butler's writing being read as weakening the experiential 'truth' of the body. As Timothy Kaufman-Osborn elucidates, "the concept of 'matter' matters because it responds to our persistent desire to acknowledge the palpable reality of that which is shaped to significant form *in* (as opposed to *by*) discourse" (1997:663, original italics). Returning to the work of the materiality by 'writing the body' is a project that seeks to retain the relationship between the extra-discursive and the material. The materiality of identity is most fiercely contested in the debate around the 'truth' of sexual difference. Thus the work of nineties 'body artists', as identified by Amelia Jones, demonstrate a fascination with sex as a defining category, reflecting contemporary theoretical debates.

Rose performs a variety of personas in *Ciao Bella*; she effectively layers identities upon each other and thus hyperbolizes the post-modern performative identity. The particularized body of the artist is disguised by the multiplicity of covers, the layers of artificial material that obscure the body, that repository of fleshy evidence. The juxtaposition of harsh, clashing tones echoes the incoherent array of stereotypes embodied and exaggerated by the artist. The artist subverts narratives of race, gender and class by actively embodying them and by exposing their underlying logic.

MAQEI (Figure 11), the queenly Marie Antoinette character, embodies the absurd excess of narratives of aristocratic femininity. Rose plays this role in 'white-face' –

the carnevalesque disguise black minstrels adopted to parody their white overlords - and is bewigged with masses of cascading blonde curls. The patently fake yellow hair is augmented by red ribbons, fish and a tiny curling serpent (Figure 12). Here the hair takes up multiple narratives about femininity (including sinful Eve and her serpent). These are narratives that have constituted the perception of the feminine and this hyperbolic citation questions these mythologies. In this instance using hair to cover over the artist's own particularized body/self, Rose creates a surfeit of masks, muddying the integrity of the Cartesian concept of self. The notion of an original, 'natural' body is lost in the profusion and the feminine space, outside language, is rendered inaccessible.

This work, and its underlying suspicion of that which cannot be represented, contrasts with Rose's early work. Initially, Rose looked beyond the discursively determined surface of the body and investigated the transformational possibilities of reductively paring down the body to its foundational components, rather than additively obscuring the 'true body'. Instead of Butler's incitement to drag performance, Rose examined Cixous' statements that "her flesh speaks true" (1976:882) and that "it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech" (1976:881). These assertions call upon women to 'write their bodies' into discourse in order to bring the feminine into language. However, in Rose's adoption thereof, the fundamental ambiguity of the *écriture féminine* project (namely to bring into language that which cannot be represented) restrained her production. Not theoretically resolved, these works should be viewed as investigations in a continuum with her later work. Her early work betrays a fundamental ambivalence towards identity, vacillating between upholding a constructivist and an essentialist paradigm, a position later resolved in her attack on the stability of the body/self relationship.

2.3. Dealing with depilation: *Untitled* (1996)

In Rose's *Untitled* video (Figure 9) bodily depilation, a traditionally feminine occupation, removes the excesses of significant matter obscuring the body, thus laying bare the foundation of the particularized material body. The video features fuzzy surveillance-type footage of the artist shaving off all her hair in what seems to be a cramped public toilet. Exiting the room, Rose leaves her discarded hair in an

object pile upon the floor. The video is filmed from an extremely high vantage point such that the subject is foreshortened, literally diminished and distorted by the eye of the spectator. This work was produced during a time of radical political and social transition and in it Rose highlights the implications of discourses of racial hegemony on individual subjects – especially those already positioned on its margins. But it is the more personal significance of this move to abject the material body that bears upon this dissertation.

In her statements and her poetry, Rose shows that the role of straight versus *kroes* [curly] hair in determining cultural capital within the coloured community is significant for her (Rose 1999:211; in Williamson: online). By abnegating the position assigned to her within the communities' codes, which disconnects her body from that of her mother (whose hair was of a different texture to her own), and discarding the substance that determines an injurious identity based in signs of racial difference, Rose opens up a space for the emergence of a subject not determined by the maternal relationship.

I contend that the shaving of the head, a ritual often denoting mourning or captivity (Firth 1973:289), is an action that allows Rose to abject and to mourn the materiality of the maternal connection. This is a process women are often unable to partake in because they are unable to recognize and abject the lost object (the maternal figure). This determines the melancholic status of womanhood. Rose is only able to nominally achieve this because of her initial dislocation from the space of the mother (which is encapsulated by the rituals of 'good hair'). Zmitri Erasmus enumerates the various steps and processes that go into the creation of 'good' hair, showing the pivotal role that hair care has had in the creation of a female community which is based on a mutual desire to transform and transcend the material sign of oppression (2000). In Rose's untitled poem (cited earlier) she writes of her own sense of exclusion because she could never take part in the ritual of "coaxing the kinks" from the hair because her own was not *kroes* (1999:211). Discourses of racial hierarchy formed the foundation of Rose's investigation into subjectivity and difference, but this experience is informed by the maternal relationship.

⁵² This ambivalence is demonstrated in Rose's poetry, a statement of dis-identification from her position as a woman: "It was then at puberty that I knew I was supposed to be a man" (1999:211).

Rose transposes the intimacy of the ritualistic space of the kitchen or bathroom into the public sphere. She insists upon the enclosed nature of the private (signaled by the tiny bathroom) and its imperviousness to external influence, yet the transposition nullifies the supposed privacy, the intimacy of the private sphere. The private, which has traditionally been associated with the feminine sphere, is moved into the public realm, traditionally masculine. In this work, Rose confuses the traditional hold of these binaries upon spaces and bodies.

Rose explains this *Untitled* video as being about “both demasculating and defeminising my body, shaving off the masculine and feminine hair. This sort of de-sexualisation carries with it a certain kind of violence.” (cited in Sobopha 2005:128). Rose’s separation of hair into categories of masculine and feminine is revealing in its use of conventions around ‘sexed hair’. Challenging these designations of feminine and masculine matter, Rose exposes the processes that use natural substances to solidify sexual difference and lock bodies into damaging identities.

An interesting contrast to this work is performance-based artist Ana Mendieta’s *Facial hair transplant* of 1972 (Figure 13), where she attaches beard hair to her face. A cheaply bought commodity, the beard positions the artist on the interstices of sexual difference, neither one nor the other. Additive rather than subtractive, Mendieta’s documented performance attests to the need felt by this artist to escape the binary division of the sexes, by recourse to one of the most visible sites of sexual difference. Mendieta’s art was profoundly motivated by her historical displacement, a sense of identity in a state of transition. It is interesting to note that both Mendieta and Rose experienced racism during childhood. This seems in part to have motivated their interrogation of identity.

More confrontational and violent than Mendieta’s playful piece, Rose’s video lays bare the nature of the sexual body. Rose reduces her body to the fundamentals of sexuality by re-staging the production of absence and lack (echoing the fundamental ‘lack’ of femininity and the initiation into language that is preceded by the recognition of lack and absence – Lacan’s castration complex in effect). Because the body only enters the Symbolic after this recognition of what is missing (the lack), Rose performs

an ambiguous movement from the fullness of the 'real' state of lacking lack in touch with the maternal/feminine, to the alienation of the maternal, lack and a compensatory subject status. The piece highlights that any position within discourse is determined by stripping away the original plenitude and the multiplicity of identifications (signified by the shaving of all the 'masculine and feminine hair'). Thus the piece demonstrates the ambiguity of the gendered body which requires intervention to achieve subject status but is always already sexed.

The ambivalence with which Rose views her status as female⁵² makes her emergence from the liminal state of the bathroom scene a very conflicted one. If we take hair as a symbol of the link to the mother, an umbilical cord connecting the two bodies, then this piece demonstrates Rose's forcible dislocation from the maternal figure. In this piece, Rose seems intent upon removing her body from the realm of the feminine/maternal, rejecting the materiality of that connection.

By staging a violent reduction of the sexualized body, Rose lays bare the foundations of psychic individuation, questions the assumptions of hetero-normative sexuality and opens the discussion of bisexuality that is pivotal to the work of Cixous and Kristeva. For both theorists, it is women who are able to access bisexuality more easily than men. The social imperative to transfer the incestuous bond with the mother into a heterosexually based desire for the father mobilizes feminine sexual orientation, creating a sexuality of more pliancy and greater motility⁵³. This bisexual tendency becomes pivotal to these two theorists in explaining the position of women within the Symbolic and the potential for change that women are able to activate. Whilst Kristeva is clear about the possible consequences of this – psychosis, depression, suicide – Cixous takes a more positive view arguing that it is through this bisexuality that women are able to upset the focus on a unitary centralization of power. "Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self of the presence – variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female – of both sexes, nonexclusion" (Cixous 1976:884) allows woman to take her form from "encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between" (Cixous

⁵³ This reading of feminine sexuality is based in Freudian theory. See Freud's essay 'Some physical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes' (1961) for an explanation of feminine sexual development. These theories form the basis of later ideas around feminine sexuality, especially those espoused by Jacques Lacan and continued by the French Feminists.

1976:883). Cixous' argument for the possibilities of *l'écriture féminine* rests upon the ability to identify across the formational boundaries of selfhood, challenging the fixity of identity's terms. In keeping with Cixous' contestation of phallogocentrism and its underlying reliance on a system of exclusionary logic, she seemingly contradicts herself by arguing for non-erasure of difference.

They [women] have it in them to affirm the difference, *their* difference, such that nothing can destroy that difference, rather that it can be affirmed, affirmed to the point of strangeness. So much so that when sexual difference, when the preservation or dissolution of sexual difference, is touched on, the whole problem of destroying the strange, destroying all the forms of racism, all exclusions ...through History, is also touched on. (Cixous 1981:50, original italics)

In Cixous' elusiveness she demonstrates the importance of investigating the relationship with sexual difference, overcoming its limitations and celebrating its transformational possibilities.

Similarly, Rose experiments with the foundations of identity as masculine and feminine, which emerge from a space of non-exclusion. She reduces the body to its constitutive parts in order to abject the maternal and enter the subjective economy on an equal footing (something women cannot achieve without identifying with the masculine). However Rose's piece only affirms the fundamental role of the body in creating difference, because the depilated product is unambiguously feminine. The material, depilated body forms a testament to the foundation of the individual as woman. However, this body *does* disavow the materiality of the maternal and looks for identity elsewhere. Her rounded, voluptuous body plays with the representation of the female body.

Through the transformation filmed by the camera, Rose had wanted to make herself "unattractive and unappealing. But what was disconcerting was that [she] suddenly became attractive to a whole different group of people." (cited in Williamson 2001:online). Rose concludes that "[p]erhaps there was not enough of a sense of penance and flagellation in the work" (cited in Williamson 2001: online). The pain of sentient flesh might have accessed the feminine space, the underside of masculine discourse, which is available only through the painfully strange, the uncanny other.

This is not achieved in this work because the Symbolic recuperation of the 'semiotic' energy is immediate.

In her use of the terms 'penance' and 'flagellation' Rose references her Christian heritage, whilst evoking the foundational function of shame and pain within that dogma. Self-flagellation was used to transcend the earthly materiality of the flesh, by asserting the domination of the will and spirit over the experiential sensations of the body. Implicitly enforcing the binary between flesh and spirit, this sort of penance would figure within this tradition of psychoanalysis as the need to separate from the promises of the plenitude of the maternal body.

Rose attempts to re-imagine the emergence of the subject without recourse to the signifying processes of sex which rely on physical signs of difference, whilst she actually demonstrates the inevitable failure of the attempt to escape the foundations of encultured sexual difference. The work demarcates the limits within the performance of sex, historical limitations that Judith Butler articulates in her writings on the performativity of sex. Butler's position explores the possibilities within the limitations of sexual difference and stresses that sex is a normalized practice of citationality. For Rose, who could not discard the trappings of her feminine identity and quash the materiality of her sex, the performance reiterated the discursive matrix that persistently holds onto our bodies. The failure of this work to achieve its aim of de-sexualization lays the foundation for Rose's later move towards performativity.

In dramatizing the transition between inside and out, signified by Rose's entrance and exit, she demonstrates the agency of a position in which something can escape the law (represented by the eye of the video camera). The unknowable outside (the feminine) is played against a position of limited agency inside the scopic regime. Rose's dematerialization of the desirable, sexed body (indicated by the ritual of shaving) within the confines of the cramped space of the toilet room fails to secure a counter-identity. Rose's work plays feminine flesh against masculine screen. Ultimately it serves to protect both viewer and artist from the overflow of abject materiality. However the connotations of surveillance mean that this ostensible 'security' video implicates the eyes of the spectator. Temporally, Rose's work could be read as a reference to

apartheid surveillance and accompanying racial categorization⁵⁴, whilst also highlighting the contemporary moment where the threatening spectre of the re-enfranchised ‘other’ has resulted in a booming security industry and the increasing infringement of the right to privacy. Surveillance secures the image of the ‘other’ without the accompanying reciprocal gaze. However the frustrations of an awkwardly fixed bird’s eye view along with the fuzzy quality of the image mean that the voyeur’s desires are discouraged. The ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of the female body is both acknowledged and displaced into the more widely recognized arena of the incursions upon the general population’s privacy. In utilizing the technologies of surveillance, Rose removes direct engagement between viewer and artist. The television screen barricades interaction between the two and highlights the underlying dislocation between bodies which are prevented from direct communication. This insistence upon containment situates Rose’s images of self within the ‘technophenomenology’ of Amelia Jones’ postmodern body art (1998:205).

2.4. Skinhead glory: *Span II* (1997)

The work that followed on from this video was exhibited at the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, entitled *Span I and II* (Figure 10), and featured Rose “in all her shaved glory” (Jones 2003:12) seated upon an overturned television set working on the pile of hair at her feet. Knotting the hair became “a cleansing act, coming out” (Rose cited in Williamson 2001: Online) because of the agentic re-working of the abject and the position of abjection. Outside the confines of the glass box in which she was seated, Rose employed a prisoner to carve into the walls memories of her childhood. In re-working the caged, displayed body into a resistant site, Rose ambiguously positions herself on the borderline of liberatory discourses about embodiment. Where in *Untitled* she attempts to escape the subjugation of race and sexuality and in the process loses touch with the carnality of the physical maternal, *Span II* combines the two agendas more successfully. In so doing the connection with the maternal/feminine is affirmed rather than being cut off.

⁵⁴ In 1950 the Apartheid government passed the Immorality Act whereby sexual relations were forbidden between whites and non-whites. Effectively intruding upon the privacy of the subject, this law legitimized the *apartheid* surveillance mechanisms and is among the most infamous of the *apartheid* legislature. This act was only repealed in 1985. (‘Immorality Act’: online).

This is achieved through the caress, through touch. And in re-working the substance that initially separated her body from that of her mother, the substance which in a process of mourning she had rendered abject, Rose acknowledges a renewed link to the maternal. Touch forms part of a feminine economy, subverting the primacy of sight. Appropriately, bell hooks points out,

[f]or black bodies, the fear has not been losing touch with our carnality and physicality, but how to be in touch with our bodies in a way that is liberatory, that does not confine us to racist/sexist paradigms of subjugated embodiment. (hooks cited in Golden 1994:130)

Rose's work tackles the position of 'subjugated embodiment' taking hair – as a secondary site of racist classification – and touching, working through hair in order to imagine a site of sensuous femininity that is not relegated to domestic obscurity. In this, Rose, whose sense of disconnection from the maternal genealogy was evident in *Untitled*, goes back to the space of feminine domesticity and affirms the material element of identity.

The seated pose Rose adopts for this piece calls to mind the representations of femininity made by emerging avant-garde female artists in the nineteenth century – images that often articulated a powerful sense of respectable, domestic femininity from the position of an intimate insider. Artists like Mary Cassatt identified closely with their subjects and represented a very different version of femininity from that of their masculine counter-parts (Figure 14). Rose assimilates this position of genteel labour to identify with the genealogy of women within the confines of the house, only to upturn its suppositions of respectability and containment with her bald nakedness. And instead of allowing the private to remain uncontaminated by the world of man, Rose uses the television screen to mediate the image of herself, to re-impose and make strange the lens of representation. A close-up shot of her busy hands on the upturned television, upon which Rose is seated, plays with the stereotype of the dutiful mother. This piece is predicated upon the gaze of the spectator; the feminine/maternal is doubly contained. The glass box holds the viewers at bay, whilst the television performs a double containment of the point at which artist touches the carnal material. The discursive screen is acknowledged. Mediating her body through the glass cage and through the television lens, Rose shows us the distancing inherent in sight and in the operation of the Symbolic. The transformative effects of the

physical interaction between bodies does not occur, and the split between the discursive and the carnal maternal is reinforced.

2.5. Combating techno-subjectivity

Jointly the *Untitled* video and the *Span* series powerfully engage with the limits of symbolically determined sexuality. The confines of identity politics, which seek to re-appropriate any deviation from the positions that define appropriate subjectivity, are graphically represented. By keeping herself on the other side of the screen, and placing a barrier between artist and spectator, Rose reinforces a material experience in a time dominated by technologies of sight. The 'liveness' of the performance, its presence in the moment, is subjugated to the incursions of television, and the impossibility of escaping the ontology of recording. Contrary to performance theorists' insistence upon the authenticity and independence of live performance, performance theorist Philip Auslander, author of *Liveness*, demonstrates, live performance and the aesthetically debased conventions of television are closely related and symbiotic (1999). Rose's persistent awareness of the televised image, even in an ostensibly live performance, speaks to the importance of this medium in contemporary culture. The television screen is the purveyor of mass culture, and has become the medium through which knowledge and the contemporary world-view is transmitted and promulgated.

The screened image, which could represent Lacan's mirror, is increasingly influential in framing our understanding of ourselves and our community. Fascinated by seeing ourselves reflected as coherent subjects, we start believing in the physicality of the image and our own consistent body image. Rose ruptures the stability of that reflection by employing techniques that highlight the invasive nature of the received image. The image on the television screen in *Span II* confirms her concern with the effects of repetitive inundation (performativity and citation), which naturalize and solidify images that reinforce the traditional philosophical binaries. The close-up of herself nude, which appears to revel in her fleshy contours, announces a greater solidity and materiality than is evoked by Rose's restrained physical presence. Yet the image's status is mediated, upturned and televised so that the image should be less

solid and stable. Our perception of the carnality of her physical body is constituted by the recorded image rather than the flesh.

The failure of Rose's work to cohere the self speaks to the de-centered, alienated nature of contemporary subjectivity, existing without a fixed, coherent body, and thus losing the Cartesian certainty. The radical political changes that occurred in South Africa in the nineties coincided with this global trend towards taking on a cyber identity. Thus while people in South Africa could at last define themselves in terms other than race they were simultaneously faced with a loss of reliance on a stable body/self relationship. In this way as Rose re-negotiates the experience of the self as material, she is also taking cognizance of the trend towards a cyber identity that denies the presence of the body in the self, which Amelia Jones refers to as the contemporary 'technosubjects' (1998:203). Rather than the integration envisioned by Maurice Merleau-Ponty whereby the chiasmic intertwining of self and other constitutes the "flesh-of-the-world", Jones' technophenomenological subject assumes "a structure of engagement with the *materiality of things* in which we recognize *what it subjectively feels like to be objectively embodied*' in a highly technologized world" (A. Jones 1998:239, original italics). Rose erects and re-erects that barrier of flesh as impermeable, as hard, flat and fixed, disrupting the smooth, constitutive transition between signifier and signified by the sleek membrane of the glass. Through the video lens, the television screen and the glass cage, the skin that separates viewer from artist and artwork is only made visible (and thus negotiable) by its limits – the edges confine and affirm the barrier. The smooth interaction between viewer and viewed is interrupted and in this interruption the viewer is granted the space for contemplation and interpretation, for disengagement from the piece presented. Rose highlights the separation between signifier and signified by allowing the viewer the distance necessary for interpretation, and not over-determining the viewer's experience. This distance simultaneously sanitizes the gallery space, insisting upon the mediation of discourse and the Symbolic.

Highlighting the necessary fantasy of the materiality of the image, Butler writes of the solidifying effects of that interplay between the signifier and the signified. For Butler this is the point at which the body comes to matter, materializing the effects of the historically based signifier. She demonstrates the ruse of any constitutive "prior

authority” (Butler 1993:109), which is itself constituted by citation. Rose re-produces the interplay between the phantasmagorical authority and the physical subject, maintaining the disjuncture between the two. Her work often defies simplistic interpretation, inviting critics to return and reassess the work. Existing in this unfixed state, the work constitutes the artist’s body in process, under trial – materializing rather than materialized. This displacement of the stable Cartesian subject displaces the barriers of sexual difference, whilst the insertion of the screen, the fixed glass barrier intimates the space for play. Simultaneously the glass barrier defines the barricade between inside and outside, between observer and observed and between that which is fixed and that which is unfixable (and thus outside the discursive production of the poststructuralist paradigm). Although mediation obviously occurs in live performance, Rose emphasizes mediation by insistently referring back to the glass screen. And attempting to deconstruct the specific nature of gendered identity Rose plays with the superficial signifiers of identity - only to come to a core point, to touch upon the feminine.

2.6. Conclusion

Always engaging with the inside, combating for a position within discourse, Rose exposes a system of sexuality that produces cages within cages, mocking the attempts to escape. Just as the ostensibly free prisoner in *Span I* is positioned outside the cages of representation that bind the artist, so discourse produces versions of repression that are no less binding for their invisibility. Rose produces a series of works that negotiate the limits of Symbolic control. She oscillates from a position that disidentifies the feminine from the maternal, seeking to free her body from the constraints of the historically determined nature of femininity in the *Untitled* video, to a position that re-engages with a feminine libidinal economy in *Span II*. However, in her assertion of the feminine she remains locked within the discursive. Tied to a politically enforced identity, Rose is unable to break away from the control of the Symbolic. And this failure to touch upon the formative outside, to bring this within signification, results in Rose’s move towards performativity which severs any belief in the power of the feminine/maternal. Instead, Rose asserts the effect of a drag-like citation and reiterative performance for the enactment of agency.

She engages with the ideals of the *écriture féminine* movement only obliquely, exploring the possibilities of bringing the outside of language and identity inside, making its work visible. Rose's work is similar to that of the nineties body artist, as outlined by Amelia Jones. Yet because what motivates her investigation into the body is the material effects of identity upon the subject, her work retains the belief in the importance of the contestation of materiality. Her more recent work, like the *Ciao Bella* series, employs the device of mounting multiple masquerades which disavow an essence within identity. Whilst Rose seems to have given up the attempt to access this linguistic exterior by turning to the multiple constructions of identity that belie a core self, the next artist under discussion has not been so circumspect.

Chapter Three: Nandipha Mntambo

3.1. Bovine bodies: an introduction

Nandipha Mntambo relies upon the metaphoric link between cows and women in her presentation of cow hides moulded upon cast torsos of her own body. A young South African artist, Mntambo preserves the uncomfortable juxtaposition of cow and woman by using these two categories inter-changeably - categories which have been conflated often and injuriously in order to naturalize the supposed animalism of women. In South Africa, the favoured currency of cows and retention of the practice of *lobola* [bride-price] in our traditional agrarian culture maintains the conventions of women's role as reproductive vessel, the protective womb around the (implicitly male) foetus⁵⁵. The exchange between father and prospective groom positions woman as a commodity, not a subject⁵⁶. Appropriating the feminine commodity, the artist accesses the discursive power of the woman/womb commodity/cow links. The slur 'you cow', directed only against women, attests to the injurious connotations of this link, reinforcing woman's position on the side of nature in traditional binary equations. Mntambo risks entrenching these traditional assumptions in her conflation of cow and woman, and yet in unambiguously citing them she challenges their continual unquestioned repetition.

The elegant sculptures emerge from an all too real, fleshy and bloody process. Thus we see the artist, who buys uncured hides, cutting through the layers of fat, battling against the maggots and eager flies, and finally immersing the hides in toxic chemicals. The hides are shaped upon the plaster casts before being fixed in place with resin, thus arresting death and disallowing disintegration of the body. The formative cast is removed in the final presentation, and the hides envelop an empty space. The production highlights the importance of ritual, which takes place in the ambiguous period before symbolic resolution and recuperation.

⁵⁵ In personal communications Mntambo has indicated her unhappiness with critics reading her work as purely a comment on *lobola* practices within traditional communities in South Africa. I have not therefore pursued this line of investigation further. Instead my investigation points to the multifarious ways in which her work can be read.

⁵⁶ In *Women on the Market*, Luce Irigaray has used this tradition of bride-price and dowry in her Marxist analysis of patriarchy.

Mntambo describes the dream that initiated her engagement with the material: “a whole lot of cows – all I remember of it is a whole lot of hides left over” (2006, pers. comm). Inspired by the artist’s dreams but not merely a literal representation thereof, the sculptures allude to the unstructured realm of the unconscious. They are able to retain an element of undecideability in the dynamic interplay between cow and woman and the mysterious absence of the formative cast. The pieces are thus similar to a dream which conceals the “navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown” (Freud cited in Sheperdson 2003:119).

This chapter will argue that these sculptures thereby reach into that which cannot ever be fully captured within the representational schema of the Symbolic – namely death and the feminine sex (Cixous 1976:885). Whilst death and the feminine sex are obsessively over-represented in mass culture, their incapacity to be adequately defined is a product of their relationship with the discursive outside. This chapter will investigate Mntambo’s relationship with the ideals of the *écriture féminine* movement, in order to open up the possibilities for a critical return to this theory for young artists. I will briefly investigate the traditional characteristics of femininity, namely carnality and ethereality, in order to prove that Mntambo’s sculptures successfully combine these contradictions. In addition, I will show that their excessive hairiness allows them a unique expressive power that is reliant upon the originary carnal connection to the maternal body. And by a thorough examination of the works themselves, I will argue that Mntambo moves towards the realization of the feminine transcendental – a construct whose absence has condemned women to a state of dereliction.

Mntambo’s work opens the patriarchal relationship to discursive binaries by hyperbolically invoking a great many of its traditional precepts: femininity, carnal matter, death and the abject are all encompassed within her sculptures. It alludes to the possibilities for the occupation of all that ‘the feminine’ implies – the chaotic eruption of carnal energies, venturing into the unconscious, the dream-space, the merging of bodies through seemingly seamless morphological identification. *L’écriture féminine* was motivated by a desire for the critical re-appraisal of the terms upon which ‘woman’ comes to take her meaning, countering the phallogocentrism of the Symbolic by the critical installation of the feminine.

Moving away from the ‘technophenomenology’ that fascinates an artist like Tracey Rose, Mntambo returns to the materiality of body-text. ‘Writing the body’⁵⁷ upholds the relationship between the extra-discursive and the material. Mntambo distances herself and her specific identity from the piece by absencing her own body, and yet allows the viewer an unmediated interaction with the physicality of matter. Her particularized black body is hinted at by reiteratively using dark hides and moulding them to imitate her shape but the pieces are ambiguous invocations of a persona that cannot be fully captured within the representational schema.

Central to the theory of *l’écriture féminine* is the valorization of the mother-daughter relationship and its representation. And the sculptures, which evoke both death and the attendant rituals, could be read as investigating the original ‘matricide’ upon which Luce Irigaray posits the foundation of the Symbolic order. By symbolically killing the original object, the mother, the child is able to accede to the Symbolic order. For Irigaray, this matricide, by the female child, cannot be mourned, because the identification of daughter with mother means that the child is unable to separate sufficiently to perceive the loss⁵⁸. The female child is thus never able to fully relinquish the attachment to the maternal figure, and consequently only nominally accedes to the order of the Symbolic. The subjectivity of women is predicated upon this melancholic refusal of loss. Because there is not sufficient distance between the two terms (mother and daughter), Irigaray contends that the maternal genealogy cannot be represented (Whitford 1991b:73-4).

The representational collapse of the two positions the mother/daughter relationship outside the Symbolic, and calls for a mediatory term (Irigaray 2000a:231). In contrast to the patriarch, who has built his genealogy directly upon a relationship with the divine, women do not have recourse to this transcendent, interventionary term. Theorising the need for a feminine ‘sensible transcendental’, a third term which is both transcendent (of the divine) and immanently sensible, Irigaray speaks of the need

⁵⁷ This is the programmatic application of Cixous’ *écriture féminine* theory and comes from her seminal essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

⁵⁸ Freud’s seminal essay *Mourning and Melancholia* sets out the necessary requirements for the process of mourning to take place. In contrast to melancholia, the mourner should be able to perceive the loss of the object/person. This allows the mourner the ability to distinguish between him/herself and the loss – it does not engulf his/her entire being.

to create “a place for the ‘other’ as feminine” (1991c:137). Irigaray contends that this would open the maternal genealogy to representation and thus avert its deadly closeness.

Significantly Mntambo states:

I began working with my own body because it is what I most identify with...
Only recently [have] I begun working with my mother’s body: I am an extension of her and identify with her body in that it may be what mine looks like when I am her age. (2006, pers. comm).

Whilst this statement could be read as reinforcing the seamless maternal genealogy, in the insertion of a mediating cow-hide Mntambo implicitly distances the representations of their bodies from their actual bodies and from each other’s bodies. This chapter will argue that the hide operates as an immanently physical structure that is separate from the bodies it appropriates: it is situated as the feminine sensible transcendental. When Mntambo intimately links her body, and her identity, with that of her mother, she denies the power of the castrating myth – the relationship with the other as masculine – and opens the possibilities for talk as/between women by recourse to the material support of the hide.

Following Cixous, Mntambo caricatures the position of the hysterical, carnal, incoherent, decapitated feminine construct of masculine imaginary, whilst she relinquishes its hold upon her body/self. However my reading of Mntambo’s work is deliberately utopian. Thus I argue that the opened, womb-like hide envisions a space in which identificatory play is not deadly and allows for a space for an empathetic relationship between women to develop by inserting a mediation that takes on the curves and irregularities of the physical body, rather than the smooth surface of the techno-phenomenological screen. This chapter will read this manifestation of an excessively hairy, physical surface as a significant expression of the feminine text that incorporates all its complexity and ambiguity.

Simultaneously this chapter will demonstrate that Mntambo’s work is more nuanced, less occupied with strategies of confrontation than the seventies feminists, and takes the feminine text into the realm of ‘post-body’ art. The artist negotiates the politics of identity, intent upon fixing visibility, and makes use of the potential of the

‘unmarked’ position theorized by Peggy Phelan (1993). The sculptures resist the demands of visibility in their “enactment of invocation and disappearance” which oscillates between allowing viewers “a consolidated fleshy form and an eroding, decomposing formlessness” (Phelan 1997:4). This ambiguous play between materialism and transcendent ethereality is central to my interpretation of the work.

3.2. Decapitated, ‘hirsute divas’⁵⁹: the challenge to phallogocentrism

Hélène Cixous challenges Freud’s theory of castration – which effectively situates women outside the Symbolic – in her essay *Castration or Decapitation* (1981). Freud posited that the threat of castration that faces the male child causes the child to repress and internalize the punishing super-ego, which forms the basis of the subject’s ethical development. In consequence: “for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men.” (1961:257). Taking up the challenge of the castrating myth involved the creation of an alternative mythology for women, one that incorporated an analogous character building threat, Cixous compared the imagined threat of castration with the threat of decapitation:

Women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don’t actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* – lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons. (1981:42-43, original italics)

Cixous shows that within the Symbolic there is no subject position available for women. By replacing castration with decapitation, Cixous demonstrates the fallibility of these phallogocentric mythologies and creates a new paradigm of feminine subjectivity. A disruptive excess of the feminine allows a possibility to escape this position of injury within the Symbolic just as her theory of decapitation disrupts the castrating myth. An interpretive key to Mntambo’s work is the graphic analogy of the patriarchal legacy.

⁵⁹ This is taken from the title of Kim Gurney’s article on Nandipha Mntambo (2005:51).

By repeatedly employing a headless female form, Mntambo actualizes the threat of decapitation in her sculptures. The perils of feminine subjectivity are made manifest. Rather than being silenced through absence, the lack of head insistently demands attention and acts as the return of the repressed. The head is the public marker of subjectivity and is the conventional site upon which attention in interaction is focused. Positioned metaphorically in opposition to the body, the head represents the realm of masculine intellect. In this case its absence means that the 'lower' realm of the body receives attention. And instead of veiling, covering over a lack, these pieces insist upon an absence, an absence at the centre of woman. The denigrated and excessive female body reveals its hollow core. The absence of voice, intellect and subject status positions woman in another symbolic economy.

Victorian convention held that the muted woman was able to find expression through the power of her hair, which replaced her absent voice and became a metaphoric prosthetic tongue (Gitter 1984:938). In Mntambo's work, the furry torsos enact a furious, excessive bodily speech – compensating for the silenced, decapitated head. Mitigating against the conventions of femininity that have bound women, the sculptures exploit the 'unsightly' and 'unclean' nature of bodily hair. These images recuperate the sexual appeal of female body hair, and mutate its propensity to signal masculinity. For Mntambo, the hirsute bodies materialize an alternative economy of images of femininity, contesting normative notions of feminine beauty.

Hyperbolizing the abject spectre of the unseemly woman allows the artist to define and then contest the rigid forms that hold onto women's bodies. Whilst "people often comment on the fact that [she has] very little hair on [her] body" (Mntambo 2005:n.p.), the hairless female body is inarguably evidence of a "tamed femininity"⁶⁰ (Toerin & Wilkinson 2003:341). The hairless body without any "messy eruptions of tufts" also denies women the cultural associations of hair with strength and virility, effectively women are kept in an "adolescent state of relative powerlessness" (Toerin & Wilkinson 2003:341). Mntambo's sculptures are an attempt to regain the cultural associations of hairiness with power.

⁶⁰ Lesbian activist photographer, Zanele Muholi contests these norms of femininity with her sympathetic images of black lesbian women, often sporting sprouts of chest hair or the dark fuzz of leg hair. Her work will be discussed later in this dissertation.

A material ritually purged from women's bodies, hair – especially bodily hair - forms a residue, an excess of physical matter. Ruth Barcan highlights the conceptual ambiguity of body hair, an ambiguity that results in its conceptual 'dirtiness':

[o]n the head, hair is an important part of our individual and social identity. On the face and body, it can function culturally as both a necessary supplement to the pitifully denuded human body and an 'unnecessary' protuberance – excessive, needing itself to be covered, trimmed or removed. (Barcan 2004:25).

Increasingly culturally invisible, female body hair is removed, covered over in an attempt to align with the construct of femininity. "'Too much' body hair 'masculinizes' women, especially if it is in the 'wrong' places: armpits, face or legs" (Barcan 2004:144). Mntambo plays with these cultural taboos, bringing these unspoken conventions into sight. Embracing an image of femininity that is reliant upon the excessive body as well as the ethereal, fading ghost, Mntambo's sculptures re-create this ambivalent, divisive construction of woman and subject it to renewed scrutiny. Her investigation is, however, not predicated on the same revolutionary ideals of the seventies feminist project with its insistence on the need for equality between the sexes. Instead, the sculptures create an intimate space in which to toy with the ambiguity of these discursive conventions, without the promise of resolution or a programmatic injunction to change.

3.3. Refusing techno-subjectivity

I contend that whilst a move away from the ideals of the *écriture féminine* movement in the nineties saw artists, like Tracey Rose, negotiating the 'technophenomenology' of the postmodern subject, more recent production, like that of Mntambo, has foregrounded a physical interaction between bodies. The presentation of stark unmediated materiality carries with it an implicit denial of the modern cyber mentality. Analogously whilst Donna Haraway was able to imagine femininity within the cybernetic world⁶³, Luce Irigaray's suspicions of modern technocracy lead her to state: "the hierarchy of the technological universe is still on the whole very traditional" (1991g:196) and thus the attempt to realize women as proper subjects might have to occur "despite, and sometimes against, the current reign of technocracy

⁶³ I am here referring to her landmark feminist text *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991).

and its often abstract, cold... and weak rationality” (1991g:193). Countermanding the technological extension of the subject into “a kind of prosthetic God” (Freud cited in A. Jones 1998:205), this body-orientated art engages with the relationship between self and body in order to explore an alternative conception of feminine identity.

This is not a matter of women outbidding technology, even if they can, but of their discovering forgotten, misrecognised gestures, and also verbal gestures other than those of mothering, shedding a different light on corporeal generation in the strict sense. (Irigaray 1991e:152)

Where Tracey Rose’s work aligns well with the ideals of other body artists of the nineties by exploring the dispersed, fragmented body/self of the postmodern subject through technological intervention, Mntambo’s corporeality does not insert any mediation between it and the viewer. But like body art, Mntambo’s sculptures propose “the art ‘object’ as a site where reception and production come together: a site of intersubjectivity.” (A. Jones 1998:14). The sculptures invite the viewer to metaphorically place themselves into the evacuated space. The rampant physicality of the pelt invites a close, haptic, embodied response, and its absent core flaunts “the body itself as loss or lack: that is, as fundamentally lacking in the self-sufficiency... that would guarantee its plenitude as an unmediated repository of selfhood” (A. Jones 1998:34).

Simultaneously, the absence of Mntambo’s particularized presence goes against what Amelia Jones has outlined as an important factor in body orientated art’s strategic effectiveness:

the more exaggeratedly narcissistic and particularized this body is – that is, the more it surfaces and even exaggerates its nonuniversality in relation to the audience – the more strongly it has the potential to challenge the assumption of normativity built into modernist models of artistic evaluation... (A. Jones 1998:9)

Mntambo masks her particularized identity, leaving only vague clues in the form and colour of the pelt. This does not allow viewers to hold onto the artist’s identity.

Mntambo, in not fleshing out the particulars of her embodied identity, does not risk the fetishization of her self, yet she does reveal certain affiliations with certain constructions of race and gender in the reiterative use of dark pelts that mould to her form. She is not willing to engage with the politics of identity positions, or with the

militancy of feminism and this unwillingness to engage with a struggle mentality indicates a different agenda from that of the body artist. Thus Mntambo's sculptures redefine the position of the body within the gallery context, a contemplative space that traditionally legitimizes certain relationships between bodies. In this I would like to posit that Mntambo's work is indicative of a 'post-body' art⁶⁴. It revisits the material body in order to explore its ambiguous status as the bridge between the discursive and the extra-discursive and goes against a tide of disembodied technologically advanced artistic practise. Her sculptures contest the constraints that hold onto the socially recognized body and intentionally operate in an ambiguous relationship with the artist's identity. Retaining a separate identity, away from the artist's particularized embodiment, the sculptures simultaneously insist upon the intimate relationship between themselves and their absented core – not only in terms of form but also in terms of colour. Instead of a glass screen, the excessive tactility of the hairy pelt appropriates the function of representational mediator between artist and viewer.

Returning to the body - the material entity that cyberspace seeks to supersede - is an enterprise that is haunted by disappearance, by the erasure of the materiality of sexual difference and by a longing for the weighty essence of identity. By going back to the bodily bedrock of the feminine form, Mntambo re-negotiates the legacy of the feminine identity that is predicated upon the maternal form. Her sculptures take on the aspect of uncanny apparitions, made apparent by the sharp contrast between the physicality of the hide and the de-materialization of the rounded form in missing innards and head.

3.4. Contesting Freud's unknowable 'dark continent'

Dark and hairy, the hides ambiguously enfold a negative space. Mntambo revels in "the thought that anyone can occupy that space, viewers of my work can 'step into' the shapes that are left empty and occupy the space I once did" (Mntambo 2006, pers. comm), and allows her absent body to be taken over by the other, occupied and

⁶⁴ This use of the prefix 'post' to denote a position still deeply informed by the suffix, and yet unwilling to retain the fixity of that position is adopted from the writing of curator Thelma Golden. She describes a 'post-black' position which was "characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labelled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (2001:14); similarly a post-body artist is defined by his/her interest in the body and the attempt to move beyond prevalent concepts of body art.

supplanted. Haunting the margins, affecting the outline, her body remains present only as a ghost. She reenacts the gift of the body “adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, from which she can emerge without annihilating herself: because she’s a giver” (Cixous 1976:888). The pelts provoke anxiety because of their refusal to resolve their form, their inability to capture and hold onto the mysterious and vital interior of the body.

Skin lacks the depth, the interiority, we want it to give us. If skin would give us this depth we might actually have proof that we do have such interiority, that the precarious feelings, dreams, phantasms, inner speech that we call subjectivity is real, that it can be embodied, enclosed in skin’s own form. But this is precisely what skin, as surface covering, cannot offer us. (Phelan 1997:41)

The sculptures explicitly render this desire for interiority absurd by showing the inability for skin to confine the unconscious within its boundaries. They force us to consider what is missing from any representation of surface.

Mntambo uses the psychically enforced boundedness of the body to refute its implicit exclusions, extrapolating on Mary Douglas’ work on deciphering the symbology of the body. Douglas shows that

[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious... The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. (cited in Barcan 2004:146).

These hides exceed conventional symbology of the female form, as “the very openness of their [women’s] bodies, of their flesh, of their genitals makes the question of boundaries difficult” (Irigaray 1991a:112). By subverting the conventional function of skin (as boundary) these hides are open to the invasion of the other. The hide is rendered conventionally obsolete because the functionality of the membrane as divisor is removed. The effect of its undecideable presence, the sense of obscurity, lies in the erasure of function caused by its disembowelment and the loss of the cast.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological model, whereby sight and vision are intertwined to create the flesh of the world, opens the evacuated, obsolete hide to “‘a reciprocal insertion and intertwining’ of the seeing body in the visible body: we are both subject and object simultaneously, and our ‘flesh’ merges with the flesh that is the world” (A.

Jones 1998:41). Reminding viewers of the possibilities for merging, the reciprocity of the interaction between self and other, the hides simultaneously contest Merleau-Ponty's gender blindness by embodying the maternal feminine: "a maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction... placental tissue" (Irigaray cited in A. Jones 1998:42). The pelts produce an enveloping shroud, without its own form to dictate its shape. It becomes a receptacle for the impression of a lost body.

In *Mourning Sex*, performance theorist Peggy Phelan continues her interest in invisibility by investigating the possibilities for accessing the substance of a lost body. She argues that

the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can. Or at least the hollow of the outline might allow us to understand more deeply why we long to hold bodies that are gone. (1997:3)

Phelan reveals the complexity of our relationship with that which is outside of the substantive. Although we long to touch the lost object, the process of bringing it back into representation could remove some of its import, thus Phelan argues that the 'affective outline', that which borders upon the lost body, could be a more successful medium because of its suggestive quality. Being largely undefined, its allusiveness and ambiguity could guarantee a more authentic and stimulating relationship to that which falls outside of representation, to loss and death: "it is the corpse, a material entity inhabiting the symbolic order yet unamenable to categorization, that effectively collapses the border between the symbolic and the organic" (Zimmerman 2005:104). Because Mntambo's sculptures refuse to give up the identity of their formational body, they are able to signify far beyond the limits of that particularized identity and touch upon the primary traumas of loss.

Whilst predicated upon the lost referent - Mntambo's body - the sculptures invoke a desire for the return of identity lodged within the body, for primary tactile interaction between indistinguishable terms. Seductively touching, amorously embracing the invisible, these hollow husks rely upon our continued fascination with the extra-discursive, the body before prohibition. In the complex negotiation of the threshold of the Symbolic, where the privileging of sight and presence complicates the effectiveness of the unformed and invisible, the artist substantiates an 'unmarked'

position. For Phelan, there is power in remaining unmarked (1993:6) – a position usually afforded the invisible universal of the white male form which inhabits identity categories so fully that his identity needs no remark. In keeping with this, Mntambo states

[m]y work is not engaged in the discourse of race or gender. Yes, I am a ‘black’ woman artist creating work in the medium of cowhide... but the work I make doesn’t have a ‘race’ or ‘gender’... When I began working as an artist, I allowed for myself to be positioned by others. I found myself being placed in the boxes of ‘black’ ‘female’ ‘South African’ and felt trapped because it seemed as though I would or could never proceed beyond these labels... (Mntambo 2006, pers. comm).

Mntambo avoids the dangers of excess visibility – fixity, surveillance, voyeurism, fetishism (Phelan 1993:6). Her work is a complex negotiation of the terms of representation that struggles against the fictive stability of identity. Mntambo creates and affirms her position as “a contemporary African woman” (Mntambo 2004:32), by contesting the terms of identity politics, by insisting upon an ambiguous space that permits her to move beyond the categories of race, gender and nationalism, without erasing their formative role. Bordering on the unknown and invisible, the sculptures allude to a loss that is not easy to pinpoint – perhaps the loss of the substantive relationship with the body, perhaps the loss of identity incurred by technocratic society, perhaps the original loss of the primary object: the maternal figure.

The hides touch upon the void of death and absence, with their dematerialized substantive core. Thus they shape themselves upon what is lost and demonstrate the foundational importance of the denigrated and abject maternal infrastructure. Phelan elucidates the desire to search for the body’s interior, for that which falls outside the scope of sight and understanding in order to contain the unknown spectre of death and to discover the identity of the lost object: “[s]kinned alive, our bodies are sentenced to find a form that might hold our love, a form that might hold our deaths.” (Phelan 1997:42). Mntambo’s sculptures create a potential lodge for both love and death. The process of death is halted by the skinning, curing process. The sculptures in their liminal state arrest the complete absorption of the body into the realm of death. In Elizabeth Bronfen’s book charting the connection between death, femininity and the aesthetic, she shows that “the body caught in the process of dematerialization is a

privileged moment of connection between the world and language... given the fact that language is always in danger of losing its referential capacity” (1992:55). Whilst connecting the physical and the discursive, the sculptures render death in feminine form, arresting the bestial feminine corpse in order to bring the silenced outside of death into materiality.

Althusser demonstrates the chiasmic relationship between the visible and the invisible when he writes that

[t]he invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision.

The invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion – but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure... this

other space is the first space in person, which is only defined by the

denigration of what it excludes from its own limits. (cited in Walker 1998:48)

Just as invisible is defined by visible, so is the self defined in opposition to the ‘other’. These oppositions define the subject who is admitted into the Symbolic, however “to define this Other which seems so self-evident” is difficult once the phantasmagorical nature of otherness is admitted (Irigaray 1991d:181). In Irigaray’s critique of Emmanuel Levinas who dealt extensively with the relationship between self and other, she argues that because the feminine is not admitted into this relation (which is situated in paternal genealogy) except in the act of love, the physical connection between bodies (Irigaray 1991d:188). In order for women to access the ethical – which emerges in the relationship between self and other – and the divine, they need to take on the carnal. The feminine text implicitly takes up this challenge.

Mntambo is very clear that her reiterative use of a dark female form is based on her refusal to appropriate the body of the ‘other’. This unwillingness, based in a sophisticated understanding of the problems of representation in South Africa, carries with it an implicit problematization of the terms of identity. Identity emerges within the Symbolic in the interaction between self and other, the recognition of the self in the other. By resisting the terms upon which identity is conventionally formulated, Mntambo repudiates the loss, “the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on the other for self-seeing, self-being” (Phelan 1993:13), in effect the loss

of an unproblematic Symbolic identity. Instead, Mntambo's sculptures take on the carnal aspect of the feminine and explore the bonds between women.

The only other body she is willing to cast off is that of her mother, whose identity forms an extension of her own. Mntambo states that "I am an extension of her and identify with her body in that it may be what mine looks like when I am her age" (Mntambo 2006, pers. comm). Implicitly, Mntambo adopts a strategic position that denies the power of the castrating myth, which moves the child from the identification with the mother into the position of always already castrated within the paternal economy of the Symbolic. Linking her body with her mother's, she focuses on the creation of a new economy of exchange, rather than scopophilic confrontation, between bodies. In the relation to her mother's body, Mntambo attempts to "provide a place for the 'other' as feminine" (Irigaray 1991c:137). She defines herself around this maternal figure.

Hyperbolically representing Freud's 'dark continent', Mntambo exposes the repressed underside of the Symbolic – the radical otherness of beasts, of dark skins and of female anatomies. She materializes the screen upon which the projections of racist patriarchy are written. As the French Feminists contest, this protective, encompassing cave/womb enables the economy of representation, and allows this script to be superimposed upon its body. In this imposition, the material form of the maternal body is effaced, written over. Mntambo's hides are effectively embodying that screen. And whilst both dead and disemboweled, the hide forms a highly physical, sensual screen that disinters the maternal feminine from its conceptual grave – the non-space marked out for woman within the Symbolic.

3.5. Working towards a feminine transcendental

In *Balandzeli (the followers)* (Figure 15; Figure 16) Mntambo hangs a row of cow hides moulded upon female torsos. Vertically aligned, the five figures copy the stance of the one before. All cast off the same model – a cast of the artist's own body – their repetition articulates a mode of imitation mired in stasis and the endless replication of the same. The title registers an indictment of this reiteration: *'followers'* implies the inability to lead, to innovate and move beyond the original. The repetition

talks to the reproduction within the maternal genealogy, where mother gives birth to the child of the same sex. This cycle can occur without the intervention of another body (unlike the masculine). The relationship between women is thus more intimate, they grow out of each other. However this intimacy can be dangerous, locking women outside of subjectivity.

When Michelle Boulous Walker writes that “[r]epetition as reproduction is thus the embodiment of circularity, stasis and sameness”, she shows that “Freud bequeaths us a theory and practice that situates the mother’s body in the static realm of the same.” (1998:165). Mntambo’s sense of intimacy with regard to her mother’s body is indicative of their close relationship. The sense in which they almost seamlessly extend out of each other demonstrates the circularity of the relation. There are grave dangers involved in the exploration of the same.

Instead of a return to the maternal figure that is the boy’s desire (illustrated by the ‘fort-da’ game), the girl will endlessly produce herself as this site, the place to explore the relationship with the maternal figure.

They want, without end, without a model, the presumed wanting of the one who walks in wanting – a model without a model, an example whose paradigm they erase. They want to seize that which already exists so as to bring it back to an invisible source – their source? – a place from whence they might create, create themselves *ex nihilo*?... Woman must ... beget anew the maternal within her, give birth within herself to mother and daughter in a never completed progression. (Irigaray 1991a:109, original italics)

Mntambo has literally wrapped her own body in the flesh of the other: forcing, stretching and nailing the two together so that they come to resemble the same. Irigaray elucidates the dangers of this meeting, this incorporation of the mother without the requisite acknowledgement of her as a woman:

[t]he daughter-woman tries to re-wrap herself in the desiring flesh of the other, clothes herself in it again and again, heedless of her own birth and of her own retouching. She makes for herself protective gestures, without knowing from whence she obtains what shelters her, helps her. (1991a:110)

Mntambo’s work runs the gamut of this over-identification, this dangerous submersion into the body of the (m)other, yet in my appraisal of Mntambo’s work,

she has successfully avoided this danger by absenting the formational cast, and thus retaining a sense of separate identity. She is “unafraid of any other place, of any same” (Cixous 1976:890) because she is able to “merge with [anonymity] without annihilating herself” (Cixous 1976:888). The hides, although morphing into the artist’s body, are distinct. In their exploration of the same body, each figure articulates a different aspect of that model, dictated both by the individual hides used in the sculpture and the areas of the cast around which each pelt wraps itself. *Balandzeli (the followers)* has the ability to repeat the ‘same’ whilst concealing the origin.

In effect they supplement the relationship between artist and viewer, between daughter and mother. Derrida, in his writing on the logic of the supplement in Western society, notes that “the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self.” (cited in A. Jones 1998:35, original italics). For Derrida, there is no way to access the pre-linguistic space because the mediation of the supplement (representing the abstracted linguistic signifier) stands in for the original.

Through the sequence of supplements there emerges a law: that of an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary... (Derrida cited in Copeland 1990:36)

Mntambo dramatizes the intervention of the intermediary with her proliferation of bodily supplements, which defer and mediate the presence of the artist’s own body. Simultaneously the hides operate apart from this supplementary role as separate entities, as furry pelts, and in this they achieve a separate status, away from their imbrications in the artist’s identity. Analogously, Mntambo comments on her relationship with her mother: “We are part of each other but also separate” (Mntambo 2006, pers. comm). The body of the one supplements the body of the other, marking it as repeatable and split. Mntambo used this unresolved process of the splitting of identity, as daughter/woman, by hyperbolically insisting upon a mediating

supplementarity – the hide. In so doing, the melancholic position of being “neither-one-nor-the-other” (Cixous cited in Conley 1991:136) is successfully avoided.

When Irigaray asserts that “mimetic appropriations by women are still the most terrible thing of all because it is practiced without any feminine ideality or model” (1991a:110), she calls for a relationship with a feminine sensible transcendental or third term. In the close relationship between women, the lack of a conventional ‘other’ for women means that her relationship with the transcendental term, the divine, is absent. The sensible transcendental is both immanent and transcendent, overcoming the “split between material and ideal, body and spirit... and their assignment to women and men respectively” (Whitford 1991b:117).

The third term in the transference becomes the limits not only of the body but also of the mucous⁶⁶, not only the walls but also the experience of the most extraordinary intimacy: a communication or communion which respects the life of the other whilst tasting the strangeness of his/her desire... The outer limits of interpretation, beyond which the risk of aggression is at its most implacable. (Irigaray 1991a:114).

Bounding the relationship between the two terms (mother and daughter/self and other/artist and viewer), Mntambo’s hides insert a pause, an interval between the seamless transference of identity. Their excessive materiality, their furry presence guarantees an alternative boundary – instead of the closing of the one body from the other – the hides mediate between two bodies, retaining the enigma of the relationship between two: “moving from inside to outside, like a body already become flesh, offering itself or putting itself forward as the site in which the analytic scene takes place” (Irigaray 1991a:116).

A piece that appears to offer itself as a potential transcendental model is *Deity* (Figure 17), a crouching figure on all fours. However, in this early piece Mntambo disallows this with a loose conglomeration of bones that is lashed to the neck of the figure (Figure 18). Incongruously attached in the place of the absent voice-box, these bones could be read as a muffling, choking intervention. Just as hysterics, the hyperbole of

⁶⁶ For Irigaray, the mucous represents the porous threshold between bodies, the residue, the excess not spoken of (1991:113). Mucous “never retouches itself carnally in the transference” (Irigaray 1991:113) and is thus without identity, unaware of itself.

femininity⁶⁷, “are pushed to the point of choking” trying to speak, to express their desires (Cixous 1981:49), so this *Deity* struggles against this muffler of its undecipherable bodily language. Its gesture of abject compliance crouched on all fours, echoes a position made (in)famous by British pop artist Allan Jones’ tables (Figure 19). Hyperbolically misogynist, Jones’ sculptures make women the supporting legs of the glass-topped table. Bringing to light the idea of woman as passive infrastructure for masculine delectation, the success of these pieces is ensured by the fact that

women’s bodies, through their use, consumption and circulation – provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain the unknown ‘infrastructure’ of the elaboration of that social life and culture (Irigaray 2000d:212)

Mntambo’s sculpture, which echoes this position, removes the highly symbolic superstructure of glass placed upon the back of Jones’ sculptures. In so doing, the piece points to the possibilities of evading the functionality of the feminine form, and thus reconsidering woman’s relationship with the transcendental term.

Connecting *Deity* to the next piece is the linguistic slide between idol and *Idle* (Figure 20). In *Idle* (2004), Mntambo frames three pairs of crossed legs in dark, furry cow hide and places them equidistant upon three white chairs. Clearly demonstrating the anxiety of female interaction through the strained rigidity and repetition of the pose, Mntambo produces a version of femininity based on repression. Exposing the limits of female identity within phallogentric logic and the impossibility of an intersubjective feminine relationship within these constraints, Mntambo’s legs modestly conform to the dictates of social convention. Refusing to engage with each other, they face outwards – putting on a united combative front. Defying the hairless ideal of femininity, they cite a certain feminist stance that calls upon women to ‘throw out the razors’ in order to throw off repression. The stance is revealed as imposed and contrived by the rigid conformity of the crossed legs which despite their ‘masculine’ furriness are unable to relax in order to comfortably inhabit a social space.

⁶⁷ When Hélène Cixous was writing her theory of *l’écriture féminine* feminists were becoming increasingly interested in deconstructing the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria, exposing it as a patriarchally imposed construction of femininity. Cixous was highly influential in arguing for the destructive potential of the hysteric. Yet in utilizing the hysteric as the ‘Absolute Woman’ and the forbearer of her new generation of poetically expressive women (Cixous 1981:47), Cixous demonstrates reliance upon the patriarchal canon of the feminine.

There is a considerable shift in Mntambo's oeuvre from the early pieces which were mired by a more political agenda. It is only in Mntambo's most recent works that the potential for the mediation of the feminine transcendental has been more fully realized. This development allows these works to escape all rigid classifications. Not immediately recognizable as based on the human form, these are less prescribed pieces. While they retain the power of dreams to transcend the limitations of Symbolic embodiment, *Purge* (Figure 21) and *Stepping into self* (Figure 22) incorporate the trappings of identity, only to insist upon the ability to transcend, abject and reform these very snares.

The dark hide of *Purge* floats across the gallery space on its back, appearing either laid out, asleep, dead or entranced. To purge is to get rid of, empty out, exorcise and to go beyond that which ties one down; and the hide appears to rise above the trappings of life – represented by the strings of bones and beads that hang from its underside. Referencing an entrapping excess, *Purge* forms part of a ritualistic re-imagining of the meaning of the dark female form. Unequivocally occupying these terms, this shell subverts the hyperbolic emphasis on pigmentation of the epidermis endemic in discourses of racism, which makes one segment of the body stand in for the whole identity. Mntambo exaggerates the inevitable inadequacy of identity itself, where the violence involved in identity's work marks off the subject's clean and proper body, and simultaneously posits an abject outside. Purging affords the artist the opportunity to let go, not to hold onto the loss of identity. Connecting the 'sensible' (the tactility of the hairy body and its accoutrement) with the 'transcendent' (by positing the possibility of rising above these), *Purge* allows a meeting of immanence and transcendence within the feminine contained in the supplementary form of the hide.

Stepping into self shows the crouching female form again – this time without *Deity's* choking necklace. Referencing the process of transference whereby the evacuated space is opened up for the body/self of the viewer, *Stepping into self* revels in the tactility of this affective space. The fragile aspect of this construction is exposed by the delicate bridge between shoulder and buttocks. As it silkily flows from the form, the brown pelt gathers and pools at the figure's knees, like a ball gown. *Stepping into*

self appears to promise the resolution of identity's work – ostensibly the 'self' will reassert its claim upon the subject, dictating her form – and yet in positing a process of 'stepping' Mntambo inevitably defers attainment of the self identity. As in Lacan's Mirror Stage, Mntambo reproduces a situation whereby the subject is divided between the tactile mirror – the coherent form affirming identity yet always away from the self – and the eyes of the embodied viewer. Unlike the earlier works which were concerned with the feminine trapped within a masculine imaginary, this piece is especially dexterous in opening up a new symbolic economy. As the mirror affirms the coherent body/self of the viewer, Mntambo's most recent sculptures provide the necessary distance for the mother/daughter affirmatively to become embodied, formed by the structure of the imprint left by the previous inhabitant of the hide – the artist herself.

Just as the process of 'stepping' into body/self is never resolved – 'stepping' being in the present continuous – the hide refuses to collapse and merge with the identity of its occupant, but retains its ambivalent position of 'becoming'. "Becomings are liminal in that they are neither this nor that, nor the relationship between the two, but the in-between, the threshold, the border." (Jones 2004: 131). Here the hide borders upon the identity of the cow and the woman hinting at the process of identity being never fully resolved involving as it does the constant work of 'becoming self'.

3.6. Conclusion

'Writing the feminine' means occupying and recuperating the silences of the feminine body by exploring that 'dark continent'. The occupation of silence does not necessitate speech in any conventional sense; instead the *parler femme* creates the space for the interaction between women, for a feminine expressiveness that is in touch with the female body. Concluding the investigation into the use of hair in the work of contemporary South African artists, Mntambo provides the perfect counterpart to Tracey Rose's negotiation of the mediated identity within postmodern society. She moves away from the impermeable masculine screen of technocracy, with the chiasmic intertwining of flesh occurring with recourse to a tactile, organic mediator. Excessively materialist, Mntambo's sculptures are testaments to a new economy of feminine images. The hides insert themselves between the viewer and

the artist, creating the space for a sympathetic interaction without the deadly collapse of the mother-daughter genealogy that Luce Irigaray warns of. In consequence they open up the feminine space, allowing the ambiguity of the extra-linguistic to be brought within touching distance. Just as the real “appears to slide from substance to dissolution” (Butler 1993:198), Mntambo’s sculptures present both the solidity of the carnal and the void of the insubstantial transcendent. In this they are highly successful expressions of the feminine. They use the language of physicality and the material in order to go beyond that into an uncertain dream-like place, which is outside of the physical.

Not confronting the viewer with the excess of identity, inherent in any presentation of the embodied subject with his/her particularized body, Mntambo’s sculptures rely on metaphors and allusions in order to present the body to the viewer. In the insistence upon metaphoric allusion and the evacuation of the substantive form, they refuse to buy into the current economy of visibility politics. Instead they are testaments to a sophisticated negotiation of the gallery context, which historically privileges a certain relationship to embodiment, and they point to the possibilities for a post-body art to emerge. Orientated towards the body, yet refusing to fully occupy the terms upon which the socially recognized body is produced, this art is not as militant as the seventies project, nor as concerned with technological intervention. Instead it insists upon the materiality of the embodied experience and asks for a return to the primary object – the maternal body – in order to represent the chiasmic intertwining of the self with the first ‘other’.

Conclusion

This dissertation has investigated the use of hair as a symbol within artworks, arguing that this has been prompted by the desire for a return to the material body. By desiring this return, contemporary artists engage with the legacies of Western philosophy that privilege the binary terms of masculinity, originality, paternity and disembodied intellect. Hair is a material with a unique relationship with the body and its appearance; because of this it has featured in psychoanalytic discourse in a variety of guises. It is ambiguously positioned, both inside and out, both natural and cultural, and is therefore a substance uniquely capable of accessing the potential of a transitional zone, a liminal space. Hair also has the ability to transgress the boundaries between masculine and feminine because it can represent both categories. The subversion of the strict hierarchies of Western thought has fascinated various theorists, including the French Feminists and the poststructuralist Judith Butler. For the French Feminists the ‘third space’ – the subversive space outside of language - is uniquely feminine, and is intimately connected with the primary experiences of the child in relation to the mother.

In contrast to the maternally connoted feminine space promulgated by Cixous, Judith Butler’s ‘third space’ is one necessarily within language and might appear to destroy the intimacy of the relationship between the self and the body. Judith Butler’s highly popular work, by interrogating the status of the materially sexed body, has produced frenzy within and without the academy. By displacing the status of a differential experience of sexed bodies, she succeeds in questioning the status of materiality itself. The connections between materiality and the fantasy of the mother – as incarnation of matter – suggests that motherhood (and therefore the feminine) needs to be reconsidered.

The notion of *l’écriture féminine* is an attempt to access the revolutionary pre-oedipal energy by embracing the ambiguities and illogic of language, by exploiting the discursive construction of ‘woman’ in order to assert a different economy outside of phallogocentrism. Working from within the constraints of psychoanalysis, the French Feminists attempted to theorize the relationship between language and the body with recourse to the role of the maternal figure in bringing the child into

language. The feminine text was aimed at the reclamation of the feminine, in order to render this ontological anomaly accessible within language. Inherently, however, this theory of the feminine text is highly contradictory. *L'écriture féminine* talks of a space outside language from within language, arguing that this pre-discursive realm can be accessed, can be brought into representation by women (or bisexual subjects) who are always already on the margins of the Symbolic. In order to 'write' a feminine text, this extra-linguistic language needs to be brought within the reach of phallogocentrism. This is at the heart of the ambiguity of *l'écriture féminine* and the reason that it was eventually abandoned by the seventies feminist artists.

Although *l'écriture féminine* has received stern criticism for its supposed biological essentialism and inherent ambiguity, it does allow artists to engage productively with the material specificity of the female body and its undecideable position within philosophical texts. Effectively the theory of *l'écriture féminine* allows artists to explore the specificity of feminine sexuality without insisting upon the rigid political demands of a deliberately feminist programme. Instead, *l'écriture féminine*, in its contemporary manifestations within the arts, opens a post-feminist agenda that is undeterred by the centrality of the phallus. Post-feminism also liberates the practitioner from the need to insist upon gynocentrism, and instead engages with the feminine space, attempting to redefine and appropriate the radical potential of this position outside language.

It is this conceptual challenge that has been re-claimed by contemporary South African artists Penny Siopis, Tracey Rose and Nandipha Mntambo. These three artists explore the limits of signification, they negotiate the interaction between semiotic and symbolic, between movement and stasis, and they devise new ways of touching upon the invisible, the constitutive outside. All the artists under discussion negotiate the requirements of expression and language in order to explore the feminine underside of the Symbolic, with varying degrees of success. Consciously or unconsciously these artists use hair to signal the engagement with the material body and its relationship with discursive intervention (tapping into its status as both natural and cultural). The ability to traverse the limits of materiality, to assert the primacy of the engagement with the maternal and to rely upon the essential feminine identity,

whilst simultaneously escaping the implicit limitations of identity politics is what their reclamation of the feminine encapsulates.

In their different approaches each of these three artists plays with the notion of the feminine. The more analytically conscious work of Penny Siopis seduces the viewer by playing with the traditional representations of women, whilst it attempts to exceed the symbolic limitations of these illustrations. The works explore the tension between the two heterogeneous modes of the semiotic and symbolic, of constraint and excess. Penny Siopis points the way to the revolutionary potential of the feminine *within* language. For Siopis, the position of woman within representation is vital for the understanding of their position within philosophy.

Siopis cherishes her association of hair with the maternal, the original source of life and language. However, her sophisticated understanding of the power of the Symbolic produces expressions of the 'semiotic' that are tamed by their mediation through mechanical reproduction. The manifestly fake hair is rooted in the language of simulation and dislocation from the origin.

Tracey Rose's more confrontational work indicts the political construction of identity that disengages the subject from the physical nature of embodiment. She engages with the historical legacy of racist paradigms that lock subjugated subjects into a destructive relationship with their bodies. For Rose, the racial significance of hair separates her body from that of her mother. She uses it to re-work a position of injury into one of agency but is unable to do this with recourse to the discursive outside.

Rose peels away constitutive layers of the body in order to assess the material foundation of identity, the core self. In this the intervention of language, of the discursive screen, disallows Rose to escape into the realm of a third space. Inevitably her work, which attempted to both subvert the language of identity and escape the hold of sexual difference, was frustrated by the impossibility of reconciling the two. The feminine, that space outside Symbolic identity, is touched upon but Rose is unable to fully exploit it. Her work is constrained by the reliance upon the work of language and the position of the techno-subject. In Rose's later work, the attempt to engage with the outside of language is abandoned, and the work instead turns to

Judith Butler's work on performativity in order to investigate the potential for agency within the language of the Symbolic. In this endeavor, hair covers over and masks the surface of the particularized body. It is a signal of the excess produced by the performance of identity.

Nandipha Mntambo's work successfully reclaims the feminine, through its insistence upon a feminine sensible transcendental. Her work which is both highly physical and very allusive effectively touches upon the invisible outside, and exploits the traditional binaries of mind and body by conflating them into the feminine sensible transcendental. Mntambo escapes the reign of the Symbolic by using the characteristics of dreams to reveal their core message only by allusion and metaphor; her work re-defines the position of the body by amorously exploring its contours and only presenting it through substitution and supplementarity. Mntambo uses hair to signal material excess and the carnal nature of embodiment.

For all three artists, their bond with the maternal figure has featured in their reclamation of the feminine space. This is a relationship that precedes the advent of the Symbolic, originating outside of representation in the realm of the feminine. With varying degrees of success, they lay claim to the feminine by returning to the carnality of the maternal.

Afterword

Following on from the body of the dissertation will be a short concluding investigation to highlight possibilities for furthering this research by looking at another artist who moves away from the connection to the maternal/feminine but still utilizes the potency of the feminine text. Certain exclusions have underpinned my investigation into the contemporary application of the theory of *l'écriture féminine*; including the fact that this dissertation has not challenged the link between a feminine text and heterosexual women as its privileged representatives. This afterword will look at an instance where an artist outside of the confines of heterosexual identity has approached the materiality of identity – with recourse to hair as a material and symbol.

Lesbian activist photographer, Zanele Muholi, explores the position of black lesbians within South Africa. Her work is often disturbingly confrontational. Venturing into the intimate spaces of female camaraderie (rather than maternal genealogy), she questions the many wounding representations of lesbians by displaying sympathetic and fearless photographs of people actively injured by patriarchal society. In displaying the hidden struggle of these women for survival in a heteronormative culture she does not shy away from the disturbing closeness of the abject feminine, refusing to sanitize the image. The result is images that, although always mediated by the photographic print, are disturbingly material. Muholi's work presents an opportunity to explore the relationship with the material feminine in the context of the heterosexual matrix that underpins the philosophy of sexual difference. It accesses the power of representation for these women doubly dispossessed by heterosexual parameters.

The persistence of the practice of 'curative rape', referred to by Muholi in her images⁶⁴, speaks to the anxiety around these misnomers within the structure of sexuality. Her practice takes account of various aspects of this identity position. She investigates the relationship between lesbianism and femininity, exposing the mythology of the feminine woman. In this her images represent the relationship

⁶⁴ The photographs *Hate Crime Survivor II* (Figure 23) and *Aftermath* (Figure 24) show the trauma suffered by the victims of these violent crimes.

between women – allowing space for the intimacy of the homosexual relationship to find representation. Muholi confrontationally inserts her photographic practice into the public domain, disrupting the flow of conventional images of femininity.

In opening up the representation of the feminine space, Muholi repudiates the proper disengaged eye of the artist/photographer. Instead, her own personal bond with these women is patent. The intimate interactions between bodies show a material existence of a sexuality not sanctified within current cultural codes. She focuses in on the minutiae of her subject's bodies. Photography is a medium predicated upon the disengaged lens, a medium that falsely unifies the incoherent and disjunctive bodies. Like the mirror, the photograph is a medium deeply embedded within codes of narcissism, producing an image of the other which coalesces self-identity through the transference of codes of self-seeing into codes of self-knowing.

In *Bra* (Figure 25) Muholi presents an image of a woman's hairy chest. With the head, lower body and much of the arms ruthlessly cropped, the focus centers upon the dark curls unabashedly emerging from the woman's cleavage. The breasts are encased in a lacy yet capacious white bra adorned by a tiny bow at the cleavage. Yet the hairy eruptions signal the onset of an alternative version of femininity. The hairy chest transgresses the normative image of femininity that insists upon a hairless bodily ideal. "Hair on the chest, normally an attribute of men, may be held to connote strength and sexual vigour, but also tends to have an association of lack of refinement." (Firth 1973:259). The photograph shows up the aesthetic regulations that bind the morphology of 'the body beautiful' into an unhealthy combination of woman and child by reveling in its opposite. Consumer culture silences those who live outside these ideals, by constantly expanding its repertoire of the shameful and the abject. The chest hair encroaches upon the masculine preserve, sidestepping the expected morphology of the female body. The photographer seems to suggest that just as these hairs appropriate the domain of traditional masculinity, the social realm of the masculine needs to come under scrutiny. By highlighting the illusory nature of the fixed sexualized body image, Muholi effectively opens up an ambiguous domain. Allowing the categories of identity to overflow into each other and escape the designations that fixedly define 'woman' within a heterosexual matrix, she politicizes the terms of identity.

Dada (Figure 26), another image in the same series, shows a woman strapping on a dildo here hyperbolizing the threat of the masculine female. Extremely confrontational, the image is again cropped at the shoulders, effectively decapitating the woman. Denied the subjectivity of a head, the focus on the body is immediate. The silky, drooping breasts connote maternity with their fullness – an association that is seemingly contradicted by the hard, black leather strap and large, gleaming cream dildo. Peeping from behind the dildo, the soft curls of pubic hair stand out against the hard, manufactured quality of the strap-on. The contrast between the two highlights the ambiguous position of the lesbian woman. Assuming an identity that is not philosophically recognized, the figure combines the materiality of the feminine with the activity of the disembodied, phallic masculine. The dildo, as the symbolization of the penis (phallus), displays the continuation of the heterosexual sexual relation into the lesbian relationship. And whilst it could be read as exposing the lack within this relation, by displaying the transferability of the penis/phallus this image also takes away the potency of the myth of the phallus as an exclusive masculine preserve (Butler 1993:87). Effectively unveiling and occupying the central myth of masculinity, the image shows up the illusory nature of phallic desire and opens the way for a multiplication of the positions of power. This is indicative of the move towards a post-feminist agenda, where the iconography of phallogocentrism no longer holds its privileged position but is instead subversively transferred and appropriated at will (Davis 1995:128-130). The title, *Dada*, speaks to the position and function of the paternal term in the homosexual relationship between mother and daughter. Also referring to the nonsensical, performative nature of the art movement of the same name, Muholi flippantly evokes the performative nature of morphology which moulds bodies according to identificatory phantasms. Taking on the sign of masculine ‘having the phallus’ (rather than ‘being the phallus’), the figure insists upon the multiplication and fragmentation of supposedly stable identity positions.

In *not butch, but my legs are* (Figure 27) the photographer looks down upon her slippered feet between which rests a morning mug of coffee. The dark crinkly leg hairs weave around the knees and calves, creating a dark aureole. The patchy light glistens upon the intertwined hairs, making them the focal point of the image. A conventionally policed body would be shamed by this hirsute ‘masculinity’, and the

eruption of hair from the subject's legs is unambiguously recorded. The photographer seems to suggest that this profusion of short, dark hairs is analogous with the engagement with a carnal materiality. The viewer is invited to feel the crinkly resistance of the covering of hair, to touch upon an ambivalent state of embodiment.

Muholi's tactic of ruthless cropping, particularly of the head of the subject, means that the stubbly hair stands in for interaction and the viewer is forced to engage with the carnal embodiment of the figures, the physicality of their presence. These images, which defy the heterosexual matrix of the Symbolic, open the discourse of the feminine text to a new economy of images. Muholi works only with the photographic lens, thus disallowing the materiality of existence to seep into the gallery space. Therefore the work is contained within the two-dimensional – the subversion of which seemed to underpin the previous artists' work.

Maintaining a dialectical tension between the materiality of the embodied subject of the photograph and the containing power of the photographic print, Muholi uses hair to re-assert the tactile bond between women, the *rapprochement* between the two that is nonetheless outside of the Symbolic economy. Hair comes to stand for the excess of the female body without the connection (evident in the previous artists' work) to the maternal figure. This absence points to a different type of feminine, a feminine that relates to the self as other without the traditional alliance with the maternal that underpins the feminine. The feminine which is the pre-discursive space that is engendered by the rhythms of the maternal body escapes from that foundational link into the realm of the sexual caress of the photographic lens. This could more appropriately be argued to be the interpellation of the 'third space' that encapsulates both the masculine and the feminine, rather than that of the feminine/maternal. And it is possible that this third space is able to more successfully move beyond both gynocentricism and phallogocentricism to embrace post-feminism's revolution.

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Appendix: Images



Figure 1: Penny Siopis, *Embellishments* (detail)
1982, oil and found objects on canvas, 150 X 202 cm
Collection: University of the Witwatersrand



Figure 2: Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument: 'A History Painting'*
1988, oil and collage on board, 200 X 180 cm
Collection: William Humphries Art Gallery, Kimberley



Figure 3: Penny Siopis, *Charmed Lives*
Details of installation at the Museum of African Art, New York,
1998, mixed media



Figure 4: Penny Siopis, *Blush: Rouge*
2005, mixed media



Figure 5: Masaccio, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*
1425-28, fresco



Figure 6: Penny Siopis, *Blush: Scarlet* (detail)
2005, oil, mixed media and found object on paper, 100 X 140 cm



Figure 7: Penny Siopis, *Blush: Scarlet*
2005, oil, mixed media and found object on paper, 100 X 140 cm



Figure 8: Henri Fuseli, *The Nightmare*
1781-2, oil on canvas, 127 X 102 cm
Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit



Figure 9: Tracey Rose, *Untitled*
1996, Video stills



**Figure 10: Tracey Rose, *Span I and Span II*
1997, performance and video installation**



**Figure 11: Tracey Rose, *MAQEI*,
2002, lambda print**



Figure 12: Tracey Rose, *Ms Cast: MAQEII from Ciao Bella*, 2001, photograph



Figure 13: Ana Mendieta, *Facial Hair Transplant* 1972, Colour photograph documenting performance at the University of Iowa



**Figure 14: Mary Cassatt, *Tea*
1880, Oil on canvas
Collection: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**



**Figure 15: Nandipha Mntambo, *Balanzeli (the followers)*
2004, Cow hide, resin and waxed cord
1370 x 3600 x 700mm**



Figure 16: Nandipha Mntambo, *Balanzeli (the followers)*
2004, Cow hide, resin and waxed cord
1370 x 3600 x 700mm



Figure 17: Nandipha Mntambo, *Deity*
2004, Cowhide, resin, bone, bronze and waxed chord
600 x 1140 x 470 mm



Figure 18: Nandipha Mntambo, *Deity* (detail)
2004, Cowhide, resin, bone, bronze and waxed chord
600 x 1140 x 470 mm



Figure 19: Allan Jones, *Table Sculpture*
1969, Painted fiberglass, leather and hair, life-size
Ludwig Forum fur Internationale Kunst, Aachen.



Figure 20: Nandipha Mntambo, *Idle*
2004, Cowhide, resin, plastic and steel
900 x 470 x 590 mm



Figure 21: Nandipha Mntambo, *Purge*
2005, Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, bones, beads and waxed chord,
1540 x 1160 x 940 mm



Figure 22: Nandipha Mntambo, *Purge* (left), and *Stepping into Self* (right) 2005

**Left: Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, bones, beads and waxed chord
1540 x 1160 x 940 mm**

**Right: Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh and waxed chord
740 x 116 x 920 mm**



Figure 23: Zanele Muholi, *Hate crime survivor II* 2004, photograph



**Figure 24: Zanele Muholi, *Aftermath*
2004, photograph**



**Figure 25: Zanele Muholi, *Bra*
2003, lambda print
50 X 50 cm**



Figure 26: Zanele Muholi, *Dada*
2003, photograph



Figure 27: Zanele Muholi, *not butch but my legs are*
2005, photograph